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Managing the hurt: narratives of mothers
living apart from their children



Siobhan Beckwith

**MANAGING THE HURT – NARRATIVES OF
MOTHERS LIVING APART FROM THEIR
CHILDREN**

SIOBHAN BECKWITH

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of MSc by Research

The University of Huddersfield

November 2015

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Abstract

This study examines the way mothers apart from their children are able to construct their mothering identities in the absence of children in their everyday lives. Following eight in depth interviews two narratives were constructed – of ‘incompleteness’ and ‘reflection’ both of which allow mothers to construct stories allowing them to maintain a ‘good mother’ narrative. Recognition was given to the co-constructed nature of narrative interviews and elements of community based participatory research were threaded into the study design. Two readings of the Listening guide were employed to analyse transcript alongside reflective writing explored in the context of Doucets’ metaphor of ‘gossamer walls’. “Franks” illness narratives of ‘chaos’ and ‘restitution’ were adapted to account for separation as a critical life event. This study demonstrates the multiple facets to mothers’ separation from children. This study reinforces the value of reflexivity within social research and the insight and contribution workers and community members are able to offer towards generating new knowledge. This study makes recommendations for future research and practice calling for more stories of mothers apart. The telling, hearing and learning from more stories can support new less limiting narratives to evolve with implications for knowledge and practice.

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Dedication

To Finn and Rufus whose eyes sparkle with the love of a good story.

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Thanks finally to my own family who have lived through this with me – Jason for believing and sustaining me with beautiful food, to Finn who knows what it is to be completely absorbed and Rufus whose enthusiasm knows no bounds.

Gold from the stone

Oil from the Earth

I yearned for my home

From the time of my birth

Lemn Sissay (2000)

List of terms

Adoption

The legal process of changing the status of a child so that she/he becomes a member of a new family. An adoption order transfers all parental rights and responsibilities to the adoptive parents in order that the child be afforded the same rights as if they had been born to the adoptive parents such as inheritance.

CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service)

An independent organisation taking responsibility to represent the interests of children and young people within family court proceedings established by the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act in 2000. CAFCASS have a responsibility to make recommendations to court.

Co-creation/co-production

Co-production- often used interchangeably with co-creation -aims for services to be delivered in equal and reciprocal relationships between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Central to this is the aim to recognise people who use services as hidden resources.

Contact

A legal term which encompasses contact between children and their parent or guardian in a number of situations: Where a child who lives with one parent to be able to see, visit or stay with the other parent; Where a child is in the care of the local authority or subject to a care order and arrangements are made in order that the child be able to see their parents. The term contact may also be used for

arrangements allowing links to be maintained between children and other family members such as grandparents or siblings.

Domestic Abuse/Violence

A term used to cover controlling, threatening, degrading, violent and coercive behaviours by a partner or ex-partner more often perpetrated by men to women. This can include sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, physical, financial, on-line abuse or stalking.

Fostering

The arrangement in which children who cannot live with their own parents are cared for by carers approved for the purpose. Foster care can be short term until they can be returned to their home or until a permanent placement is found for the child or on a longer term basis until the child reaches 18.

Letterbox

A form of indirect contact usually between birth relatives and the adoptive parent(s) allowing links to be maintained between a child and their birth family. The process involves an exchange of letters between birth family members and the adoptive parents mediated by the local authority 'letterbox team'. Indirect contact may also take the form of photographs, telephone calls or electronic communication.

Long term fostering

Looked after child

This term relates to any child who is in the care of a local authority and for whom plans and reviews are put in place.

Special Guardianship Order

A order which family courts can grant to non-parents of a child(ren) to be able to offer a secure, long term placement for the child. Unlike with adoption an SGO (Special Guardianship Order) does not terminate the legal relationship between the child and their parents.

Supervised contact

Contact time with children may be supervised by the local authority (or individual appointed by the local authority) where there have been concerns of significant harm.

Permanency

The process in which a stable, safe, home environment is found in which a child can grow up. This is usually in the context of adoption or long-term foster care but can also include a special guardianship order, a residence order or a child returning home to their parent(s).

The list of terms are intended to give a basic explanation of some of the terms I have used, many of which are used within social care. The descriptions have been adopted or adapted from a number of sources including the following:

Boyle, D. & Harris, M. (2009) *The Challenge of Co-production: How equal partnerships between professionals and the public are crucial to improving public services.*

New Economics Foundation. Retrieved from

http://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/312ac8ce93a00d5973_3im6i6t0e.pdf

Harris, J., & White, V. (2013). *A dictionary of social work and social care* (First edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Women's aid. (2015). *What is domestic abuse?* Retrieved from
<http://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse-2/>

Introduction

Living apart from children has long been seen to impact on women's wellbeing (Kielty, 2007; Lockwood, 2013; Neil, 2004, 2007, 2012; Schofield, Moldestad, Hojer, Ward, Skilbred, Young and Havik, 2010). It is not possible to know how many mothers live apart from their children in the UK as this shifts with circumstance. Current UK statistics about children in care in the UK give a sense that numbers are high. In the year ending March 31st 2013 4,692 children were adopted from care and 92,727 children were looked after (BAAF, 2014). Within this chapter I shall outline the scope, context and findings of this study. I have worked in women's mental health for over 15 years specialising in working with mothers living apart from their children (hereafter abbreviated to 'mothers apart') for over 8 years. My commitment to feminist principles as a woman, worker and activist provides a background for this research taking an interest in "the interplay between public, social knowledge and private and personal lived experience" (Miller et al, 2012, p. 5) as a feminist researcher. I am committed to co-creation having been privileged to have a paid role allowing me to indulge my activist spirit, creating opportunities for women to take part in campaigns including those against gender violence. The term 'co-creation' is often used interchangeably with that of 'co-production' (see 1.1.3), for the purpose of this study I shall use the term co-creation. The New Economics Foundation define the challenge of embedding 'co-production' within services as:

recognis[ing] the hidden assets that public service clients represent, and make public services into engines that can release those assets into the

neighbourhoods around them – and to do so even when public sector budgets are severely constrained whilst avoiding people becoming cynical about the role and motivation of the state. (Stephens, Ryans-Collins and Boyle, 2008, p. 14).

Mirroring this model I have threaded elements of community-based participatory research into this study.

I have known mothers apart within my friendship group, my family, my work and my community and have heard and told many stories by and about mothers apart both prior to and during my 14 years working within a women's organisation. Threaded through these stories are relationships with family members, community, professionals and institutions. We hear much about mothering – what does and does not constitute 'good mothering' (Arendell, 2000). We rarely hear stories told by mothers apart themselves. My pursuit has not been to check the credibility of stories – I leave this to judges and social care professionals. This study is less about stories participants tell and more about their relationship with their stories.

In examining the literature about mothering and mothering apart I explored work about living apart in the context of adoption (Neil, 2004, 2007, 2012), foster care (Schofield et al 2010; Wells 2010), divorce (Kielty, 2007) and imprisonment (Lockwood, 2013). This study is gender specific to women's experience of living apart from children yet broad to include women apart for any reason where support had been sought recognising the specific impact separation had on their wellbeing.

I interviewed eight women using a largely unstructured interview format allowing them to select the stories they told within the general framework of the study. In order to place women's stories at the heart of the research, I chose to employ two readings of the listening guide (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008) as well as keeping a reflective journal throughout the process.

I presented preliminary findings to a focus group with five women (some of whom had also been interview participants) followed by an audio-recorded discussion — capturing feedback and generating further material to weave into my findings and from which I sought suggestions for dissemination.

I acknowledge the analysis of women's stories is mine (Letherby, 2002) and have therefore sought to 'make myself vulnerable' (Stanley and Wise, 1993) by situating my role within the study. I wrote reflexively throughout the study as a means of setting the context of the research and making explicit privilege and power dynamics inherent within research relationships. I recognise power exists on many levels and was clear not to characterise participants as 'uniformly passive or powerless' (Letherby, 2002, Finlay, 2008). I include elements of my own biography using reflexivity as a means of being transparent about motivations, decisions, considerations and limitations. I drew on Doucet's metaphor of 'gossamer walls' to examine research relationships beginning between myself and my subjectivity, between myself and participants, myself and research audience/ then proposing a fourth wall through which participants may communicate directly with the audience.

Working with the data I have constructed two narratives within which, I argue, enabled participants to tell their own stories. The 'incomplete' and 'reflective' narratives can be seen as falling under the seemingly inescapable overarching 'good mother' narrative through which women are able to construct stories of valid and acceptable mothering (see figure 1).

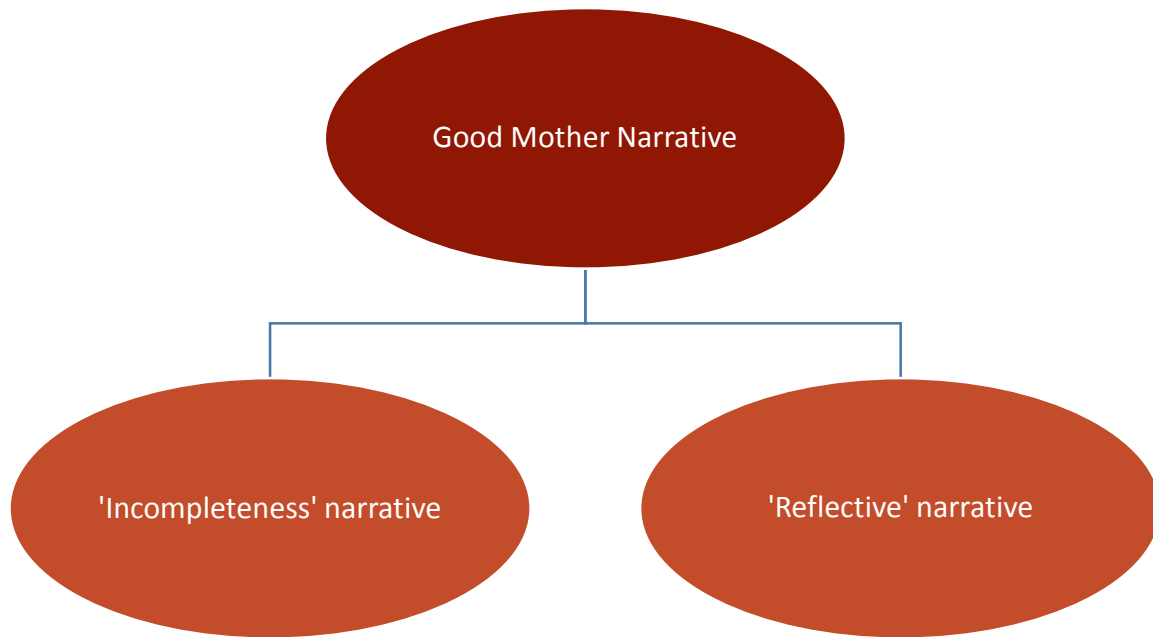


Figure 1: diagram of narratives

Firstly, the 'incompleteness' narrative allows women to articulate the sense of having 'bits missing' as a result of separation from their children. These stories were very much situated in relation to their own stories of what a 'good mother' is and does. I drew extensively on Frank's (2013) narrative work on illness, replacing illness with the separation as a critical life event. Secondly, the 'reflective' narrative gives space for mothers to reassess, consider and perhaps learn from their experiences both prior to and post separation. These narratives exist in relation to each other; incomplete mothers reconsider their existing 'good mother' narratives as a means of reconstructing new good mother narratives. Some mothers were 'reflexive' as I have been as part of this study (see reflexivity section, see section 2.2.1)

A simple explanation might read like this: a woman has always believed that a 'good mother' has her children in her care. Things go wrong and she finds herself living apart from her children. Despite separation she is a mother who does the best she can for her

children. She is forced to re-examine her belief about good mothers and reflects that she is a good mother even when absent from her child's everyday life. Her previous definition of good mothering was inadequate and inflexible. In the words of Frank "The destination and map I had used to navigate before were no longer useful" (Frank, 2013, p. 1).

Through my discussion I call for more stories to be told by and heard about mothers apart. I relate participants' experiences to experiences of women generally, acknowledging the significance gender plays in society. I make no claims of representation, appreciating that "differences between women (and between men) are themselves theoretically and politically important as are commonalities between women and men" (Letherby, 2002, para. 4.1). There is much we do not know about the lives of mothers apart. Within social care their stories are often obscured by their children's stories (Schofield et al, 2010). Mothers apart, like mothers generally, tell stories which support them to maintain their status as a mother. The availability of more stories for, by and about mothers apart will create more opportunities for dialogue and new narratives allowing broader and more forgiving definitions of mothering.

Chapter one: Background to study

1.1.1 Context of this research

My study sits within the context of the organisation I work for in relationship with myself and the academic institution under whose auspices this study took place. To illustrate this I outline some elements of the model of working I adopt within my practice which has developed over time, often directed by ideas and sentiments of women who participate in the project and therefore also some of those participating in the research. I shall outline the relationship between the organisation I work for and the academic institution and my relationship with academic colleagues.

The Women's Organisation

The Women's Organisation comprises two formerly separate organisations which joined across two local authorities in 2008. The organisation has both a local and national profile which supports women to make positive choices in their lives through support around issues such as domestic abuse or mental health. Figure 2 illustrates how the project sits within the service and wider Women's Organisation:



Figure 2 Context of specialist project

1.1.2 The Women's Mental Health and Wellbeing Service

This service, funded primarily as a mental health provider, takes a holistic or 'whole woman' approach to providing services for women, recognising the impact abuse, discrimination, physical and mental ill-health, financial pressure, unemployment, relationship conflicts and other issues may have on women's wellbeing. Working across two towns in one local authority this support takes a collaborative approach to providing one-to-one support, counselling, drop-in, holistic therapies, counselling, group work and self-help groups. Specialist group work includes confidence building, relationships, eating distress, creative approaches, walking and for mothers apart.

Co-creation/production

The project is based on a model of co-creation, developing and supporting communities in a way which "points to ways in which we can rebuild and reinvigorate this core economy and realise its full potential, and how public services can play a part in making

it happen” (Stephens & Ryan-Collins 2008, p. 10). Taking a gender-specific approach, key characteristics of women-centred working are aligned with those of co-creation.

Women-centred approaches succeed by:

“Recognising people as assets; building on their existing capabilities; promoting mutuality and reciprocity; developing peer support networks; breaking down barriers between professionals and recipients; and facilitating rather than delivering”(Jones, 2014, p. 8).

1.1.3 The specialist project

I hold a paid role as project lead of a specialist project facilitating support for mothers apart within the women’s mental health and wellbeing service within a women’s organisation. The project grew as a response to a growing number of mothers apart being referred to the project struggling to engage fully with many of the services they were expected to. Beginning in 2008, it has grown from one fortnightly support group to delivering a suite of services across two towns within one local authority linking both locally and nationally to services. See appendix 1 for fuller description of the work of the specialist project.

Peer Involvement

The strand of work within the specialist project specifically encouraging co-creation is the ‘peer involvement’. The step from service user to volunteer can be a great one and so peer involvement allows women to be able to ‘give back’ while also using the service,

offering their time and have their skills and experiences recognised. For more information about the opportunities for Peer involvement please see appendix 2.

1.1.4 Community/academic partnership

This research has grown out of an established partnership between the specialist project and the University of Huddersfield with the first meeting in 2010 between a senior lecturer in social work and the specialist project. That year a group of mothers apart held the first presentation for social work students about their experiences of working with services. This has become an annual teaching fixture and has developed into a contracted consultancy arrangement in which mothers apart contribute to both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifying programmes in social work and to advanced practitioner safeguarding teaching.

Academic Colleagues

I drew on opportunities provided by this partnership to discuss my research with academic colleagues and those who have adapted similar methods to myself in researching the lives of women. Lockwood (2013) used the listening guide to explore the narratives of mothers separated from their children through imprisonment and Smith (2014) examined the narratives of women seeking asylum in the UK. Working alongside colleagues in the preparation for a conference I drew upon professional responses to mothers living with and without their children in the context of violence and abuse (Monk, Critchley, Beckwith and Katz, 2015, see appendix 3).

Having contextualised this study, with descriptions of relationships to my work, the academic partnership and models of working, I illustrate what exists and what has gone

before this study. The following section situates the study within existing literature about mothering and mothers apart in its various guises – as ‘non-resident’ mothers or ‘birth’ mothers.

1.2 Review of writing about mothering and mothering apart

1.2.1 Scope of research

Key articles in this literature search are relevant in different ways, each offering insights but none specifically covering this topic. This chapter explores this literature providing a context for this study and background to my own findings.

At an early stage in my literature search I identified challenges to defining the scope of my research, not least the population itself. This study is broad in that it examines mothers who are separated from their children for any reason and who have sought support for themselves around this issue. I found no research taking as broad a view to include mothers separated from their children for any reason in which the loss of the role of everyday mothering is central. No research was found to explore separation from children along the continuum where decisions for permanency may or may not have been reached and that is gender- and role-specific to include only biological mothers apart from their children as opposed to grandmothers or step parents. The work of Neil (2006, 2013) is relevant in its framing of the context and experience of birth relatives of adopted children. The work of Kielty (2007, 2008) and Babcock (1998) is invaluable in its examination of the 'non-resident mother' which, while mother specific, is exclusive to situations where children are living with fathers post-divorce.

I examine studies of mothering and motherhood – the dichotomy of the good/bad mother and other studies of mothers whose situation makes them atypical of the received ideas around 'normal' mothering. I shall refer to Cox (2012) and her

exploration of the reproductive autonomy of mothers who have lost more than one child to the care system in the UK. See appendix 4 for methods used in order to conduct the literature search

1.2.2 What do we mean by mothering?

Many studies make reference to difference in the way that separation from children is experienced by mothers and fathers (Babcock, 1998; Kielty, 2008; Neil, 2012) and this has been linked to the way the role and identity of mothering has been constructed (Babcock 1998, Kielty 2006, 2007, 2008).

Examining a decade's work around mothering Arendell (2000) describes how scholarly work around mothering "focuses on the person who does the relational and logistical work of child rearing... the social practices of nurturing and caring for dependent children. Mothering, thus involves dynamic activity and always evolving relationships" (Arendell, 2000, p. 1192)

As Kielty tells us "dominant cultural norms, which indicate that mothers should be co-resident with children, make the experience of non-resident motherhood a different psychosocial phenomenon from non-resident fatherhood" (Kielty, 2006, p. 74). In her study of women's experiences of infertility and involuntary childlessness Letherby asserts that women "without children represent the 'other' in a society that values parenthood" (Letherby, 2002, para. 2.4).

1.2.3 A tall order

Feminists have for a long time highlighted the expectations which place women under immense pressure to 'measure up'. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the role of mothering. Historically the notions of caring roles being a natural or instinctive

phenomenon have been called into question, favouring an examination of the wider circumstances which lead to expectations of women to take on these roles.

Miller's (2007) study of first time mothers describes how mothers prior to birth speak in terms of 'nature' and 'instinct' and later, following the birth, weave in the language of 'nurture' and 'learning' to varying degrees. Dominant narratives of the 'good mother,' in which a woman is expected to sacrifice her own needs to those of her children. (Hays, 1996; Jackson, 1994; Kielty, 2008, Montgomery, Tompkins, Forchuk and French, 2006; Schofield et al, 2010), are incredibly powerful.

Arendell (2000) discusses the intimate relationships required of mothering in which the mother's identity is formed by what she tries to do for her children. It is a role which requires skill and termed in North America as 'intensive mothering', but which has variations across cultures. As Wells describes, motherhood is "an ideology that declares mothering as emotionally-involving, time-consuming, and fulfilling" (Wells, 2010, p. 1).

Pulling together some of the points made by Arendell (2000), Wells states that:

Motherhood does require intensive emotional work but no single emotion dominates. Mothers experience both positive and negative feelings toward their children. Second, mothers receive limited social support for the mothering they do, and they must improvise - that is, they must find private solutions to the conflicts they experience between mothering and work. Third, mothers experience more distress than do fathers. (Wells, 2010, p. 2).

There is much current concern about the numbers of recurrent care proceedings which, prior to a study by Broadhurst, Harwin, Shaw & Alrouh (2014), had not begun to be quantified. Their study found that between 2007 and 2013 of 16,645 care proceedings with regards to 22,790 children and infants, the number of birth mothers was just 7,143.

They found that short spacing between care proceedings, the next usually precipitated by the birth of another infant, allows mothers little time to effect change.

Cox examines the relationship between the reproductive autonomy of mothers who have experienced 'repeat losses to care'. She usefully explored the historical role of the state in limiting the reproductive autonomy of groups who have been socially excluded and framed this in what was coined by Plummer (2003 cited in Cox 2012, p. 548) as 'intimate citizenship' - the way in which the right to family life as affirmed by the European Convention on Human Rights is balanced with the rights of the child to safety. Taking case examples she demonstrates the ways in which different institutions as provided by state, voluntary and faith sectors, have been used as a solution to the issue of reproduction of these marginalised women.

Cox acknowledges that court-imposed contraception is not the solution for repeat care proceedings but advocates for scrutiny of the brutality of some child protection procedures:

[E]qually profound questions ought to be raised about the kind of state intervention that routinely removes child after child from a mother but is not able to assist that mother to develop her parenting and other personal capacities.

Permanent adoptions resulting from repeat care proceedings allow the state to limit marginalised women's reproductive autonomy just as surely as court imposed contraception. (Cox, 2012. p. 556).

Similarly where children are in foster care, for parents, "the loss is both ambiguous and stigmatised; legally, but not practically they continue to be parents and their grief is complicated by the likelihood that public blame has been attached to them for the loss" (Schofield et al, 2010. p. 4).

Katz (2015) recognises that 'mother blaming' can occur when a unilateral approach is taken within the field of domestic abuse locating the mother as an active player within the family in comparison to the passive role occupied by the child. She advocates for a more sophisticated analysis of mother-child relationships where domestic abuse is present in which the child's agency has the opportunity to be regarded in broader terms. Describing the way in which mothering and womanhood are synonymous despite early feminist challenges to the dominant view of motherhood being an essential ingredient of successful womanhood. Santora and Hays (1998) present the experiences of mothers who lived apart from their children. Having had children with whom they no longer live they are seen as unsuccessful because they no longer conform to the standard resident mother model. They note the negative gender-specific social attitudes towards mothers apart: "Implied in such attitudes is the assumption that fathers who relinquish are normal, while mothers who do so are not." (Santora and Hays, 1998, p. 54)

1.2.4 Calls for more stories

Featherstone (1999) argues for a fuller examination of who mothers are rather than limiting examination of them by professionals solely in their mothering role and the impact their action or inaction has on their child's welfare. "Lost in this approach is any understanding of mothers as women or people who may have alternate identities to that of mother' which 'may be central to not only mothers' general well-being but also to their children's" (Featherstone, 1999, p. 44).

Arendell (2000) advocates for a fuller examination of mothering through mothers' voices and experiences which look at the political, social and economic contexts of the lives of women who perform mothering activities. "Through such work, drawing on a variety of methods, we will attain not only a fuller, richer, and deeper understanding of mothering

but, also, more generally, of practices of caring and ethics of care” (Arendell, 2002, p. 1202).

1.2.5 Non-resident mothers

Wells studied the experiences of mothers whose children are in foster care in North America, finding themselves unable to perform the conventional role of mothering. Wells concluded that her mother apart status:

calls into question her ability to conform to cultural expectations of mothers;
exposes her to stigmatising experiences within the child welfare system; may engender shame and associated rage and self-defeating behaviour and undermines a sense of personal control, a dominant if illusory goal. (Wells, 2010, p. 1).

Kielty’s work (2007, 2008) explores the experiences of non-resident mothers whose children live with their fathers after the breakdown of their parents’ relationship and who fall outside the social norm of ‘devoted mother’. Ebaugh (1988, cited in Kielty, 2007, p.32) claims that “The general stereotype of a mother without custody seems to be someone who doesn’t care about her children and puts herself before them.”

Kielty (2008) examines the differences between mothers who ‘voluntarily’ select to be non-resident and those who do so involuntarily. She suggests that the way the former are able to:

tell more positive stories about their experience may be related to the fact that, from the point of separation, they were able to act in accordance with their expressed beliefs as to what type of arrangement was ‘best’ for all post-divorce.

(Kielty, 2008, p. 37)

Given her description of motherhood as a “particularly salient social identity”, Kielty (2008 p. 364) describes clearly the effort to which a non-resident mother must go to construct and explain her atypical mothering status in a way which is sufficiently culturally acceptable to allow her to hold a visible presence in the life of her child(ren) . Taking two women’s narratives in this article, one having chosen to leave her children with her ex-partner and the other having lost a custody battle to have her children live with her, Kielty (2008) examines methods the women employ to position themselves within the construct of ‘good mothering’. Kielty describes the way in which non-resident mothers find themselves having to defend themselves against the accusation of ‘bad-mother’ and the way that individual narratives allow women to construct this defence. Examining ‘ideological dilemmas’ (Stanley and Billig, 2004, cited in Kielty, 2008), Kielty describes one mother’s struggle to balance the decision of whether to return to court to fight for her son’s return to her with beliefs in mother-child bonds competing with wishing to avoid further post-divorce conflict. The second mother’s conflict sits between a woman’s right to a career and life outside the sphere of mothering along with her good mothering ideal.

As Kielty points out, these are “very difficult to resolve because they reflect different sets of competing but commonly shared values that exist in wider society” (2008, p. 375). Mothers apart experience strong emotions as a result of separation. Doka’s (1989) definition of ‘disenfranchised grief’ can be used to describe loss which is not socially recognised (Doka, 1989, cited in Schofield et al, 2010, p. 4). While remaining parents legally, parents of children in foster care are unable to fulfil practical everyday parenting and so too, their “loss is ambiguous and stigmatised... their grief is complicated by the likelihood that public blame has been attached to them for the loss” (Schofield et al, 2010, p. 4). Similarly, Kielty’s findings of non-resident mothers’ suffering speaks of the

quest to manage a 'threatened' (Kielty, 2007) or 'spoiled' identity (Goffman, 1963). Whereas historically 'relinquishing' mothers were subject to guilt and stigma resulting from family and social pressure (Howe, Sawbridge and Hinings, 1992; Jackson, 1994), current separations involving state intervention invoke feelings of inadequacy as a result of negative judgements of parenting (Charlton, Crank, Kansara and Oliver, 1998; McCann, 2006; Neil, 2013; Stenberg, 2013).

Neil's work in adoption acknowledges stigma (Goffman, 1963) experienced by birth relatives attached to judged failure in parenting alongside mental distress which may or may not have preceded the loss of her child. Key to her article is the recognition of the impact having a child adopted has and the role in which services can play to support or hinder parents at this stage. Neil (2013) found high levels of paranoid ideation among birth relatives following the adoption of their child or grandchild.

Neil suggests blaming and not trusting others, feeling you are not given due credit for your actions or that others are speaking about you, could be regarded in terms of "meaningful expressions of unease" related to disempowerment (Tew, 2011 cited in Neil, 2013, p. 197) or stigma (Kellett, et al 2013 cited in Neil, 2013, p. 107) due to the compulsory nature of the adoption processes which they found themselves in. Neil (2013) also recognises that these 'symptoms' may also be an attempt to manage a threatened identity (Schofield et al 2011) or deflect guilt and shame.

Neil recognises pain and loss experienced as a result of adoption do not go away and therefore advocates that services utilise 'recovery' approaches, currently integral to mental health strategies in the UK (Department of Health 2011, cited in Neil, 2013, p. 197). Recovery models work towards "living a hopeful, satisfying, meaningful and contributing life, even where limitations caused by illness persist" (Anthony, 1993, cited in Neil, 2013, p. 198).

1.2.6 Mothers in relationship with services

Featherstone (1999) advocates for further examination of mothers in terms other than their mothering role and the impact they have on children within child protection work. She argues for social work practitioners to consider three concepts: “diversity, autonomy and ambivalence” as opposed to what she described as the “dominant approach to mothering: assumptions based on mothers either instinctively loving or being helped to love their children” (1999 p. 51).

Featherstone (1999) also gives accounts of training experiences she had had with practitioners exploring their own notions of motherhood which I felt were particularly relevant – though perhaps somewhat dated– to this study and its elements of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). Having explored Parker’s (1995, 1997, cited in Featherstone, 1999) theories around ambivalence, she spoke of emerging emotions in the sessions as including:

[A]nger, sadness and relief that it is possible to discuss the ‘unacceptable’ side of mothering. Mothers who are social workers have found the sessions difficult but also reassuring and indeed, sometimes, liberating... It has become apparent that whilst words like ‘love’ and ‘hate’ may be too blunt to capture what is often happening, Parker’s stress on the contradictory and complex feelings evoked in the mother-child relationship is perceived as very relevant by many mothers. (Featherstone, 1999, p.52).

As has been discussed above, multiple expectations are placed on the role of the mother. Taking this into account, Brown (2006) notes an absence of clarity of expectation for mothers and provides an illustration of the relationship between mothers and the child protection system in Canada which I find are relevant to this study. Having

had concerns raised about her children's safety a mother working with child protection professionals is expected to co-operate in order to reduce risk to her children.

This effectively requires mothers to upgrade their skills and performance level or be "fired". Their ability to comply, however, can be limited by poverty, lack of safe, affordable housing and day care, domestic violence, social isolation, or parenting alone. Despite close monitoring of the progress toward reducing risk factors, the frequently very challenging work of these women to demonstrate motherly competence goes largely unacknowledged' (Brown, 2006, p. 353).

Citing Smith (2008), Wells talks of a mother's compliance being viewed as her motivation to care for her child (Wells, 2010, para 2.2).

2.1 Chapter two: Methodology

2.1.1 Methodological approach and concepts

In this chapter I outline the assumptions which underpin my research and the conceptual debates which led me to apply narrative inquiry methods to the experiences articulated by mothers apart, as well as my choice to use elements of the listening guide to analyse my data. I explore the way my practice within a women's mental health and wellbeing service working towards a model of co-creation fuelled my determination to make this research relevant to practice, alongside the ethical considerations I made in considering my study design relating to research drawing on elements of CBPR and concepts of insider/outsider research. I was clear that the methods I used needed to 'sit comfortably' within the wider context of my research and my practice.

I recognise women may describe the same events in an interview with me in a completely different manner to the way they did with a professional who has

responsibility around the care of their children for example. I do not claim this version to be more 'authentic' or closer to a 'truth', but undertook this research in the belief that a reading of these voices in a different context can bring valuable knowledge and perhaps some learning for participants about the relationship their experience can have with academic learning.

There is often inherent mistrust and fear which creates a barrier to working with or researching minority or hard-to-reach groups within society: "Understanding factors relevant to a particular community is essential to gaining trust, overcoming fears, and reducing apprehension about taking part in research, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of participation". (Story, Hinton and Wyatt, 2010, p. 117). As a result of my practice I therefore bring to the study an established trust with participants (some more than others) and an understanding of some issues they face. I also acknowledge that my position of power as a worker who regularly contributes feedback to formal and legal processes regarding the care of a mother's children, and now as a researcher, will also affect the stories women tell. I therefore needed to ensure that my study made room for a reflexive account of who I am and the context in which this study takes place. As argued in *Breaking Out Again*: "recognition that who a researcher is, in terms of their sex, race, class and sexuality affects what they "find" in research is as true for a feminist as any other researcher" (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p.228).

2.1.2 Locating the study

Finlay and Evans (2009) call for the relational researcher to 'own oneself'. I appreciate the need to make explicit the standpoints and assumptions underpinning this research. In discussions around standpoint feminism in the context of criticisms cast by

postmodern theorists such as Smart (1995), Comack (1999) usefully distinguishes between 'women's standpoint' and 'feminist standpoint'. Defining the women's standpoint as being experiential and discursive, Comack regards it as referring to "women's knowledge about their lives, knowledge which is informed by their social context, their histories and their culture" (1999, p. 303). Regarding the work from the feminist standpoint as one similar to a quilt maker, Comack describes the task as "drawing the pieces together, and in a theoretically informed and reflexive way" (1999, p. 303).

Intending this research to be congruent with my practice, with my field of work and also the women taking part in the study, I was keen to take a relational approach in which data is "seen to emerge out of a constantly negotiated, evolving, dynamic process" (Finlay and Evans, 2008, p. 1). As a professional I create different relationships with women to that of a social worker, for example. There is a difference of power. I hold no direct power over the placement of their children – while committed to sharing information with relevant professionals where safeguarding concerns arise.

My decision to use a largely unstructured interview format allowed for extended narration, encouraging participants to make explicit their own definitions and understandings. Riessman recognises the importance of "giving up the control of a fixed interview format" which she recognises "encourages greater equality (and uncertainty) in the conversation." (Riessman, 2008, p. 24).

I chose to include my own dialogue in the transcripts (see appendix 5) so that my research would hold relevance to my work, taking elements of co-creation to working alongside women within the specialist project. I maintained a dialogue throughout my study with service users of the specialist project, participants, colleagues, fellow academics and utilised my supervisors' experience as a means to exchange and

explore ideas. Similarly I chose to write in the first person to be able to express overtly my own presence, assumptions, decisions and intentions, resisting the more traditional academic style of writing in the third person (Smith, 2014) which is perceived as more 'scientific' or 'objective'.

The research sits in a context of partnership and at a particular stage of the project when a number of women have taken on various peer support roles creating resources, delivering training and co-facilitating within the sessions I deliver. I have been directed in many ways by the ideas and sentiments of the women who participate in the group, including some research participants. Women with whom I work, including participants, have knowledge of my personal life, that I am a mother and some that I have two boys. Hey (2001) proposes that sharing elements of sameness and difference is of benefit to the research relationship rapport (and also data analysis). Recognising the multiple dimensions to the concept of rapport she describes "research exchanges as messier, more ambiguous encounters - processes of connection, disconnection, break, rupture and reconnection spilling outside of simple binary modes" (Hey, 2000, p. 163).

2.1.3 Community Based Participatory Research

Again wishing my study design to reflect the context within which my research takes place, I examined the possibility of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) described as "a relatively new research model in which the research process itself is intended to benefit research participants and the communities in which they 'live'" (Blumenthal 2011, p. 386). Important to this research was the definition of community as a group of people 'who share something in common – e.g. people living in a particular locality' or groups of people "based on common identity, interest or practice" (NCCPE, 2012, p. 6). I was drawn to this approach and the two main pillars: 'ethics' and

‘community empowerment’ which also underpin the similar approaches of ‘participatory action research’ and other related approaches (Blumenthal, 2011).

These pillars could also be applied to the community based practice of my work with the Women’s Organisation and also the long term partnerships between the specialist project and the university (see 1.1.5). I do not claim to have used a pure CBPR model, which involves community involvement throughout each stage of the research process, but draw on elements of the method and describe it as being within the context of an Academic-Community-Based Research Partnership.

Blumenthal tells us “adherence to the complete CBPR model—equitable community participation in every phase of the research project—presents a number of serious challenges”. (2011. p. 387). Such challenges include definition of the community and therefore representation as well as gaining commitment of community members throughout the duration of the study. I foresaw training of community members in data collection and analysis would be time and resource heavy. I reflected my position as insider/outsider afforded me a privilege of trust, reinforced by my status as representative of both my employer and the university, which Blumenthal acknowledges can take months or years to build. I made pragmatic decisions about how this Master’s level study, alongside paid work, restricted by time and resources allowed me to create opportunities for community involvement while not attempting a full CBPR model.

Similarly to Blumenthal, I value the contribution which CBPR has made in the dialogue to address some of the inequities in more traditional research methods into health inequities and beyond.

If, as Bilodeau and colleagues describe, we view the partnership from the start as a piece of CBPR it can be seen to be ‘breaking down the mistrust and paving the way for

stronger university-community relations that can benefit both the university and the community' (Bilodeau et al 2009. p. 192).

These benefits include access to expertise of academics researchers which enhances their credibility and capacity of evidence-based practice. I committed to ensuring transparency in my research and to keep the wider group informed about progress on the study.

2.1.4 Knowing

I considered tensions between whether a subject can exist in-relation-to (Benhabib, 1995, cited in Doucet and Mauthner, 2008) as opposed to constituted by language and discourse (Butler, 1995, cited in Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). I, like Doucet and Mauthner (2008), align myself nearer to Benhabib's (1995, cited in Doucet and Mauthner, 2008) position, which regards subjects as existing in relation to and arguing for a 'narrated subject' and suggest that 'there are 'knowing because experiencing subject(s)' recognising subjects being able to act with 'intentionality and agency' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008. p. 407).

Doucet and Mauthner (2008) also reinforced my increasing realisation around the limits of 'knowing', that "women's lives can never be fully grasped in their 'totality'" (Comack, 1999, p. 296) and that this study would never completely 'know' the participants or their lives. I therefore strove to make a contribution to the wider feminist struggle, a process in which "new spaces open up and new possibilities emerge for broadening the choices available to women for resolving their troubles" (Comack, 1999. p.303) as a means of gaining insight into the experiences of mothers apart, voices which have, in many ways been silenced.

2.1.5 Choice of analytic method

Choice of analytic method requires the researcher to recognise and reflect on ways in which each offers an angle of understanding, and involves analytic ontologies as a means to make sense of and make meaning from the data relating to participants and their social world (Edwards and Weller, 2012. p. 216).

I gave much consideration to my choice of data analysis with the knowledge that “methods of qualitative data analysis provide angles on the nature and constitution of social reality (ontology), and in particular conceptions of self-other relations for the researcher” (Edwards and Weller 2012, p. 203). I considered their definition of thematic analysis as ‘gazing in’ as opposed to that of ‘sitting alongside’ in the case of the I-poem, an element of the Listening Guide which seeks the voice of the storyteller. I reflected the ways in which my paid role tends towards a ‘sitting alongside’ rather than towards a ‘gazing in’ and selected to use the Listening Guide due to the opportunity it gives the researcher to listen in closely to the first person. Similarly it recognises the co-constructed nature of narratives between researcher and researched and “emphasises the importance of the researcher’s responses and subjectivity in the construction of and analysis of a person’s story” (Loots, Coppens and Sermijn, 2013, p. 114).

2.1.6 The Listening Guide

The Listening Guide, a development of the voice-centred relational method, offers a series of readings to narrative researchers to tune in to the multiple voices (Balan, 2005) which together “compose the voice of a person” (Loots et al, 2013, p. 114), whereby public theories are borne out of private stories (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). I

was particularly drawn to the central issue they named as “that of how to keep respondents’ voices and perspectives alive, while at the same time recognising the researcher’s role in shaping the process and product” (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p 1) which I felt echoed the description of ‘co-production’:

Co-production demands that public service staff shift from fixers who focus on problems to enablers who focus on abilities. Their job is to re-define the client or patient before them, not according to their needs but according to their abilities, and to encourage them to put those abilities to work (Stephens et al, 2008, p. 13).

My decision to use elements of the Listening Guide was guided also by its commitment to recognising that we each have multiple voices (Balan, 2005; Lockwood, 2013) with which we speak and in taking account of the researcher as well as the researched. It is a process comprising a series of steps, or readings, “each time listening in a different way” (Brown, 1998, cited in Doucet and Mauthner, 2008 p. 405) which acknowledges that stories resonate differently each time we hear them.

While Mauthner and Doucet (2008) advocate a flexible approach in terms of the readings they remained committed to the full four readings which are as follows:

Reading One traces stories being told by participants taking elements of narrative analysis looking for plot, chronology of events and characters (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Mishler, 1985) alongside basic grounded theory enquiry asking the question “what is happening here?” (Charmaz, 2006). The first reading also provides a framework for reflexivity in encouraging the researcher to take account of their own assumptions and views. Reading Two traces the narrated subject, placing them at the centre of the story and seeing how they place themselves into the narrative. Reading Three identifies the narrated subject in the context of relationships in which they find

themselves. This reading acknowledges Somers' (1994) ideas of 'analytic rationality' in which "all narrated subjects are understood as intrinsically relational and as part of networks of relations" (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008, p. 406).

Reading Four focuses on the structured subject in which structural power relations are examined as a means of understanding the way in which stories being told intersect with external social forces (Somers, 1994, Doucet and Mauthner, 2008).

Had time and resources been limitless, utilisation of the full Listening Guide would have been my preferred choice for analysis for this study and so I had to make pragmatic decisions how to select a means which would ensure a rigorous examination of my data which 'sat comfortably' with my approach.

2.1.7 2 readings

I utilised two listening guide readings and reflexive writing throughout my study. In depth consideration of reflexivity as a tool alongside my own reflexive work can be seen later in this chapter (see section 2.2.1). This was not a specific reading for reflexivity as advocated by Doucet and Mauthner (1998, 2008) or Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg and Bertsch (2003), but ongoing reflexive practice integral to all stages of my study. I made the decision not to use thematic analysis, wishing to seek the distinct and unique details of women's stories as opposed to gauging trends and patterns.

2.1.8 Reading one: I-Poems

In keeping with Brown and Gilligan's (1992) reminder to researchers to listen to the ways narrators speak about themselves before the researcher speaks of them, my first reading was for the narrated subject in the form of creating I-poems from the transcripts. This allowed me to enter into relationship with, or 'tune in' to, my data and participants

primarily through their own representation of self rather than an imposed version which may create distance (Gilligan et al, 2003). In creating I-poems a researcher needs to select statements with the pronoun 'I' "followed by associated verb or seemingly important accompanying text" (Edwards and Weller, 2012 p. 205). Often researchers choose to use simply the pronoun and verb, however I was keen that rather than being a linguistic exercise, the I-poems created would 'make sense' or tell a story (see appendix 6). This allows the woman's voice to present strongly herself in relation to others. Threaded through this study are relationships - relationships with others, with institutions and with ourselves - and for this reason I chose to select fuller statements. I developed the model where I felt necessary to select words other than those relating to the first person - often names of people with whom the women is about to speak of her relationship - within the transcript to help the story to flow. This worked well where women were speaking of different children in their families or a conversation or interaction with that person such as Sally's description:

'my oldest grandson

the one I miss the most

I were there when he was born'

2.1.9 Reading two: Narrated subjects

My second reading examined relationships in which women find themselves with narrated subjects. I examined participant's descriptions of relationships as enabling or constraining, and how they defined and valued relationships.

I chose to forego reading for plot as the story in its traditional sequential event focused form was less of a concern for this study than the stories of experiences women tell. As Squire et al (2013) suggest, experience centred-narrative research may be event

narratives, but they may also be more flexible about time and personal experience, and they may be defined by theme rather than structure. I chose not to utilise the fourth reading for structural power but to hold in mind and consider relationships participants had with institutions and wider societal constructs in the second relational reading.

2.2.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity has become a standard element of qualitative research with much written about its importance to validate and legitimise qualitative research (Doucet, 2008, Pillow, 2003). Feminist research has long made space for reflexive accounts which “combine particular analytical, ethical and political dimensions”. (Letherby, 2002, para. 1.2). Within this section I shall explore the use of reflexivity as a methodological tool alongside my own reflexive journey. I explore the theoretical concepts underpinning my use of reflexivity and take the metaphor of Doucet’s gossamer walls to exploring the concept of reflexivity.

Prior to this study I believed through supervision and my work generally I had developed a reasonable practice of reflection and felt reflexivity to somehow be of the same ilk. Dewey suggests “to reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock of intelligent dealing with further experiences. It is the heart of intellectual organisation and of the disciplined mind” (Dewey, 1938, p.86-87, cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 177). Reading more about the importance of reflexivity in an academic context to produce a high standard of research nevertheless daunted me. I therefore sought to understand what reflexivity is, how it differs to reflection and how it is done as a means of defining how I would practice reflexivity in my study. Pillow (2003) cites Chiseri-Straters (1996) to make this distinction: “to be reflective does not demand an ‘other’, while to be reflexive demands both an ‘other’ and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny” (Chiseri-Straters, 1996, p.130 cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 177).

For the last nine years I have been a mother. My own mother was adopted. I believe it is no accident that my work and my academic journey has taken this turn towards working with mothers apart. I therefore believe that my personal, professional and academic journeys are inextricably linked.

I am Anglo-Irish, grand-daughter of a mother apart who I never met, mother with two children, living in a heterosexual relationship with my partner, working for a women's organisation and studying for a Masters degree. In defining my class I have resisted fully placing myself into a definite category. As a daughter of a teacher, by certain definitions I regarded myself as middle class, and yet as a woman who sells my labour to be able to afford to live I felt compelled towards a working class label. I remember being told easy ways to define class were whether you had a 'sofa' or a 'settee', alternatively whether you called your evening meal 'dinner' or 'tea'. Growing up, my parents said 'sofa' and 'dinner' but I remember choosing to use 'settee' and 'tea' to fit in with peers and avoid what I felt might be pretensions. Working within a women's drop-in centre around 14 years ago where the majority of women experienced multiple deprivation and almost all high levels of poverty, I questioned whether aligning myself as working class was a condescending tokenistic gesture masking the many privileges I enjoy. While considering my own perception of my position I also considered how participants see me as a woman, professional and as a researcher. As a mother with children in my care I may well be regarded a 'good' or 'successful' mother because my capacity to parent and protect my children has not been questioned.

During my reflexive accounts I have noticed that perhaps, similar to the role of a researcher, I have often felt on the periphery - not excluded but somehow outside the core of groups throughout my life of which I have been part and to which I assumed

others feel a stronger sense of membership. I have wondered if this is where I feel most comfortable with groups – never at the centre and always observing.

2.2.2 Gossamer Walls

Particularly useful for me was Doucet's metaphor of 'gossamer walls' (2008) existing in research relationships as knowledge is constructed. These walls sit between the researcher and themselves, (including what Doucet terms the ghosts which haunt us); with research participants; and with the research audience and epistemological communities (Doucet, 2008, p. 1).

Doucet's metaphor brings together 'sheer' gossamer with the 'solid' wall which she describes as providing "for creative ways of conceptualising reflexivity in temporal and spatial terms as well as to consider the constantly shifting degrees of transparency and obscurity, connection and separation that recur in the multiple relations that constitute reflexive research and knowing"(Doucet, 2008, p. 1). As I experienced shifts in my understanding and, later, yet another, I was aware this process would continue, my previous 'new understanding' had been imperfect, as this new one would be too. I am in no doubt that time and distance from this study will further alter what I come to understand of my data and findings. I therefore appreciated the definition of 'degrees of reflexivity' as described by Mauthner and Doucet (2003). At the end of this study I feel my understanding of reflexivity and its importance is unrecognisable from that with which I began. I also believe that "to be truly reflexive is to acknowledge that we can never truly know the impact we have on the research processes and outcomes" (Lockwood, 2013, p. 168)

2.2.3 Ghosts

Ghosts have been identified within social research (Doucet, 2008; Gordon, 1996, cited in Doucet, 2008; McMahon, 1995) recognising that through reflexivity “shadow others are present in our stories” which “can include characters from the researcher’s past’ who ‘draw us into the research in unforeseen and disturbing ways” (McMahon, 1996 cited in Doucet, 2008, p. 74). I suggest this has been the case in my professional role, but the structure and opportunity afforded me in this study has intensified my relationship with these ghosts.

The process of ongoing journaling gave space to identifying the voices of some ‘ghosts’ on a level not available within my paid role. As Doucet recognised, listening to stories of fathers as primary care-givers evoked stories and sympathies for fathers from her childhood. Her descriptions made me aware how problematic trying to locate and make fully transparent the contexts of cognitive practice is and that that an attempt to do so is generally “excluded from epistemological analysis” (Code, 1993, p.20 cited in Doucet, 2008, p.5).

2.2.4 First gossamer wall and researcher subjectivity

Central to the role of reflexivity is the attention paid to researcher subjectivity which acknowledges “who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis” (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). I have discussed (see ethical considerations, section 2.3.1) my professional relationships with the participants of this study as a means of creating transparency in decisions made about my methodology. It was also necessary to examine who I am beyond my professional and academic status. I utilised the fact that I am a mother in both my paid role and as a researcher as a means of finding some common ground between myself and participants. I have heard

countless stories of women meeting new social workers and asking ‘What does she know? She hasn’t even got kids of her own.’

I have similarly utilised my identity as a worker participants know holds a role which privileges the identity of mothers apart. I consider that on some level I have earned some trust and credibility in this with women involved with the specialist project, which has paved the way for some sense of ease within this research area.

Doucet (2007) recognises that “over time, different memories, alternate ghosts, and different versions of our selves can emerge to ultimately alter the stories we tell and the knowledges we create” (Doucet, 2007, p. 77).

2.2.5 Mediated researcher subjectivities

Alongside this study I continued to work in the field of research. I have lived with my partner and two children and seen both of my parents being ill at different stages. Life has continued.

Three key women in my life have lived apart from their children, with two of whom I have regained contact recently. Their significance within this research paid me unexpected ‘visits’ as I studied and acknowledge Doucet’s recognition that “latent or lost memories can enter in through this gossamer wall”. (Doucet, 2007, p. 76)

Doucet examines how a researcher may be ‘led’ by a ghost and how “when it appears to you, the ghost will inaugurate the necessity of doing something about it” (Gordon, 1996, cited in Doucet 2007, p. 77)). Early in this study I was moved by a scene from *Quirke* (Alexander, 2014), a period crime TV drama set in Dublin. Rows of babies lay in cots in a maternity home run by nuns from which babies were adopted. I found myself jolted to knowledge that my mother had likely lain in such a place in her earliest days. I felt compelled to embark on an as-yet-incomplete journey to trace information about my

mother's birth and mother (the absent third key mother apart in my life). This endeavour brought new ghosts into my awareness which I am beginning to recognise. "In this vein, reflexivity must incorporate the passage of time, which will continually mediate our relationship to a particular research topic." (Doucet, 2008, p. 5)

In my choice of subject and design I have committed time and consideration which is personal, an element of this study which I consider warrants exploration. Patai issues strong warnings to academics that "we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly" (Patai, 1994, p. 70, cited in Pillow, 2003 p. 177) which discomfited me in moments where I found myself lost in my own reflections. I therefore had to consider the place and purpose of this pursuit. I was keen not to "collapse under the weight of the confessional tale" (Pillow, 2010, p. 182) and realised how I present and position my own reflexive accounts in relation to the accounts of and by the participants is indeed a fine balancing act. As Coffey argues, the "boundaries between self-indulgence and reflexivity are fragile and blurred" (1999, Coffey, p. 133 cited in Doucet 2007, p 3). I was aware throughout my study of my partiality and welcomed academic texts which made space for this to be acknowledged, while also being cautious for this to not simply be sought as a token "gesture of humility" (Butler, 1996, p. 6, cited in Pillow, 2010, p. 185). Pillow cautions against the possibility of 'colonial' relationships developing and, quoting Young, recognises the limits of reflexivity: "When privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the other's situation" (Young, 1997, p. 48 cited in Pillow, 2010, p. 185).

2.2.6 Second gossamer wall, between researcher and researched

My choice to use narrative research, elements of a CBPR design and two readings from the Listening Guide similarly set this study in an inevitably limited relational context.

Participants and their stories remain vivid in my mind - my reflections and learning continue. This research nourished and enriched me professionally, academically and personally. Conversely, there have been moments in which participants' stories have disturbed my sleep and my waking hours, my mind returning and replaying words spoken or looks given during interviews.

Aisha's 'look' at a silent moment returned to me repeatedly and I attempted to put words to what I felt the 'look' meant. I sensed a 'pleading' and the interpretation I recorded was: *'I'm in a mess here, help me, I don't want to be like this'*. In subsequent reflections I questioned whether my interpretation of her asking for help echoed my own sense of inadequacy and inability to help, related to my day job in a supportive role rather than the interpretation she might have given in that moment. My notes reminded me that in our debrief I disclosed with Aisha that the interview conversation had felt different from those we were used to having. She agreed, commenting she felt it was *'tough'*. I often used the term 'stepping out' (see section 2.5.6) of my researcher role to return to the role in which participants were used to seeing me and in which they would continue to see me.

2.2.7 Proximity

Acknowledging space occupied in my psyche by participants, I began to examine my academic and professional roles. I have spent extensive amounts of time with a number of participants who no doubt have ideas about who I am and my life. The Venn diagram (see appendix 7) represents a 'doodled' visual in my journal listing some differences

and overlaps I identified between myself and one participant, serves as an example of this reflexive work.

In describing the gossamer wall between researchers and the researched, Doucet's reference to Andrews' words reminded me of the participants' integrity and curious watching of me and my study; "a researcher should imagine that she will be sitting beside her respondents as they read what is written about them" (Andrews, 1991, p. 49, cited in Doucet, 2007, p. 77).

As discussed previously (see section 2.4.3) I describe myself as working alongside women involved with the specialist support group. Below is a piece of writing I did following a particularly transformative piece of group work, during the early stages of this research which perhaps goes some way to characterise a closeness of this way of working:

'It is the space that is created between each of us

The things that are shared, said

The things that are not said, the space and quiet we give each other

The time to speak, the time to be quiet

The listening

The receiving

The writing, the words, the getting our heads down and creating

I feel a sense of honour that this small group of women want to be together and that I am welcome

Seeing each other grow and learn

This is special'

My relationship with participants has been the focus of much reflexive work and useful for me to explore in terms of emotion and attachment. As a novice researcher

experiencing intense and at times conflicting emotions myself, accounts which consciously name and contextualise emotion encouraged me to acknowledge the range of effects researching has on me as an academic, professional and human being. The emotional element to research is often left unexplored (Jewkes, 2011). Ferrel advocates for the need to “reintroduce the humanity of the researcher into the research process and make a case for critical, reflexive, autobiographical accounts and understandings—for “profound self-disclosures” and openness to the “subjective experience of doing research”” (Ferrel, 1998, p. 24 cited in Jewkes, 2012, p. 66)

Broadening consideration of consequences for the researcher outside of their research roles, I have been aware of moments in which my ‘attachment’ to or involvement with the participants feels like a barrier with my own peers. When friends talk of amazingly kind and resourced people they know adopting children following chronic neglect in their early life I hear a little voice in me wish to say ‘Are they in touch with their birth mum?’ Feeling shy, I consider whether to broach this and how I might respond if the child’s birth mother is unjustly criticised or her significance minimised. I am then aware of my very particular, value-laden, position and commitment to processes which support the identity of the birth mother to be respected and available to their children in absence.

2.2.8 Privilege

While being a mother, I also had to be honest about differences of my experience of mothering to that of participants of this study. My writing headed ‘Privilege’ documents some of the privileges I felt I hold in contrast to participants within this study. (See appendix 8).

At times I had to confront my own ideas about my role, questioning the benefit to those participating in this study and the work I do generally. Pillow (2003) advocates for

researchers to live with a 'reflexivity of discomfort' involving more dialogue around the use and reproduction of reflexivity towards a more suspicious and critical use of reflexivity leading sometimes towards the unfamiliar and uncomfortable. I have attempted to examine my status as a researcher researching a group to which I do not belong. My hope was to create knowledge about 'others' and for my work to be seen as academically credible, contributing to the dialogue around the experiences of mothers apart. With access to the experiences of these 'others' I also had access to my own experiences, expertise gleaned through professional practice and training as well as the privilege of time, resources and space accorded to me for this study. I had access to bodies of information, have been part of academic, professional and lay discussions. I have the opportunity of creating a new body of knowledge and so, as well as a privilege, a 'superiority' to be seen as a 'knower' in a way which participants in this study do not (Letherby, 2002).

2.2.9 Power

I considered whether my assumptions about my research being relational in terms of reflecting my practice was in fact arrogant or dismissive of the power relations which exist between myself and the participants. It is I who gains a Master's degree, a salary and professional credibility from the work that I do, not them. I felt the weight of responsibility in representation and creation of knowledge about 'others' in relation to the inherent power I hold. As Foucault states: "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, 1978, p. 93, cited in Pillow, 2010, p. 33). Pillow advocates for consideration of equity and relationships of care in qualitative research in which 'witnessing becomes a form of

political engagement. Our critical work is expressed by the positions we embody and by the movement of others into the spaces that we open up' (Pillow, 2010, p. 33).

While acknowledging the privilege I hold, I also consider the agency of participants and their active participation in this research. As Kesby notes "participants can draw on the techniques of participation in order to construct themselves as reflexive agents and constitute/represent their opinions and experiences to themselves, one another, and facilitators" (Kesby, 2005, p. 2055). Letherby recognises the value which taking part can have for respondents and that "it is possible to argue that the research process led to increased reflexivity in some respondents" (Letherby, 2002, para. 5.1). Just as I have considered myself in relation to my participants as 'others', I was also aware of ways in which participants defined themselves as different to other mothers apart.

Zoe (pseudonym – see section 2.5.5), for example, seemed acutely aware of having far more financial stability and resources than many other women who access support via the specialist service. Expressing dismay about the attitude of the foster carer, she told me:

'It's the first time she's been a foster parent and I'm not just saying this because they're my kids, but she's really lucky to have got my kids... she's just got such a negative attitude'

I recognise that, in setting herself apart from other mothers apart, this may also have been an attempt to align herself with myself, in her view a 'successful mother'.

At times I was aware that these differences between herself and others in her position were precisely the differences which I felt hindered a full sense of empathy for her.

Initially I sensed this was related to the fact that she didn't face the same levels or type of disadvantage experienced by other mothers apart with whom I worked and interviewed. I later recognised the value she placed on being able to purchase material

goods for her children was not part of what I purport to be important and perhaps beyond my own financial grasp. It was a jarring of my own judgements which I had not expected to discover and perhaps also “the assumption that participants are working class and researchers are middle class” (Lockwood, 2013, p. 163). This differentiating of the self from the other occurred in all interviews in distinct ways. Lockwood (2013) recognises this ‘othering’ as being central in creating a ‘moral identity’, particularly for stigmatised groups.

Concluding her writing about the second gossamer wall, Doucet concludes that she made an epistemological shift from attempting to know her participants towards knowing “something about their narratives or narrated subjectivities” (Doucet, 2008, p. 13).

Drawing on Smith (2014) I have aimed to “bring the personal from the periphery to the centre and make myself as accountable and transparent as possible” recognising the “value laden reflexive position” (Smith, 2014, p. 77) I hold within this study. Reflexive writing and learning is therefore threaded throughout this study rather than occupying a discreet position within the reflexivity chapter.

2.2.10 Third and possibly fourth gossamer wall

As a relatively new academic my relationship with my audience and academic community is emerging and at this stage – writing up - there is perhaps a vague, perhaps ghost-like figure about them. Invitations to potential interview participants stated: “It is important for this kind of research to take place so that the stories of mothers who are apart from their children can be listened to and used to inform future practice.” Since the planning stage of my research my understanding of the audience has shifted. At times I felt connection to the academic processes, experiencing an

understanding of the means by which knowledge is created through social research. I became more comfortable to consider this study's place within these confines. This led me to Mauthner's question: "Who was the knowledge produced for?" (Mauthner, 2000, p. 302). I recognise that collective knowledge emerged within the research relationship and within the focus groups. I also consider that as my role of a researcher is subjective, temporal and shifting, the role of the participants similarly morphed into that of my audience, in participating in the focus group. The focus group was an instantly grounding experience as members speaking reminded me who they feel have had power over the care of their children. During this bringing to life I was heartened and perhaps overwhelmed by the clarity with which the women were able to visualise an audience they felt should exist. The audience envisaged by the focus group members was '*far and wide*', listing social workers, parents, other mothers, adopters, social work students, mental health midwives, CAFCASS, concluding with '*anyone who's involved with children, even courts*' (Kelly).

Attending conferences provided isolated opportunities for connection with and learning about who my audience might be and the expectations placed upon academic research. Familiarising myself with academic custom and developing skill and confidence to speak about my own research has evolved over time. Being given the opportunity to collaborate with academics with whom I found common ground allowed me to begin to situate my research as a contribution to dialogue around professional responses to mothers, with and without their children, when there is violence and abuse. Presenting preliminary findings to a conference, I came into contact with an academic audience with more experienced co-presenters and gained confidence in my relationship with academic audiences.

During interviews and transcription, I momentarily became aware of the relationship between the research participants and the audience. I felt certain participants were speaking to the audience beyond me, with clear messages. I visualised them standing up in order to be seen to speak over me to ensure that their voices were clear and not lost in my translation. I have reflected that this study may have offered participants opportunities to deepen their understanding of how knowledge is created and a sense of the audience's presence through a wall that divides them. Letherby talks of the motivations for participants to engage in research as the "political importance of publicising their experience" to be able to "tell it like it is" (Letherby, 2002, para. 2.3). I do, however, acknowledge the significance of my role as a mediator in this relationship.

2.2.11 Continued reflexivity

Within this section I used the metaphor of gossamer walls as a structure to my own reflexive practice. I have discussed the importance of recognising researcher subjectivity, while also being cautious to balance situating the research and researcher with the aim of the study to examine narratives constructed by mothers apart. I have explored my multi-layered positions and subjectivity. Just as I have been constantly shifting, reconstructing and developing my reflexive accounts of my role and this research, I am aware this will continue into the future as the passage of time allows for further understandings to develop as this study and I come into new and multi-dimensional relationships through these gossamer walls.

2.3.1 *Ethical considerations*

During the design stage of this study I considered the ethics of the fieldwork and continued to reflect on ethical concerns raised throughout fieldwork, data analysis and

writing up. I questioned whether the design was likely to produce good quality learning and whether the contribution this study might make to knowledge about the lives of mothers apart would justify any ethical problems that might arise. Within this chapter I illustrate some of the ethical considerations which have underpinned this study. I do not view ethics as a discrete element to this study and so while taking time here to define and explore some ethical debates, notions of ethics are present throughout this dissertation.

Robson discusses distinctions between ethics and morals, both seen as linked to what is 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad'. He describes ethics as usually "referring to general principles of what one ought to do, while morals are usually taken as concerned with whether or not a specific act is consistent with accepted notions of right or wrong" (Robson, 2011, p. 66). An ethical principle can be seen as a "general standard or norm that promotes what is regarded as worthy or valuable for the flourishing of humans and/or the whole ecosystem" (NCCPE, 2012, p. 6).

Central to my ethical considerations were the contexts in which this study took place, the dynamics of power present and the extent to which we can be aware of the impact of these dynamics. Miller et al (2012) recognise the shifting landscape of qualitative research suggesting researchers' approach to ethics must account for context and situation. Taking a feminist perspective, I employed a reflexive approach to ethics in which the "negotiation of ethics moves beyond a model of reasoning and rationality and enables the acknowledgement of feelings and emotions" (Miller et al, 2012, p. 6). Thus relationships and the reflexive-self have been "key to supporting ethical reflection within the research relationship" (Fraser, 2000, cited in Miller et al, 2012, p. 6).

Theoretical models and guidelines direct qualitative researchers through ethical considerations but have been recognised to be "static and increasingly formalized" and

Miller et al call for an approach of “thinking ethically” (Miller et al 2012, p. 1). Key to ethical considerations is the researcher-participant relationship and the need to ensure that the study design does not harm or create risk for participants. More recently this need to take care has extended to research staff (Miller et al, 2012, ESRC, 2010), please see section 2.5.4. Before progressing to the fieldwork stage of the study I submitted an outline proposal to the University of Huddersfield School of Human and Health Sciences School Research Ethics Panel (SREP) for approval which was agreed on 20th March 2014 (reference: SREP/2014/011)

2.3.2 Power

Kesby recognises participatory approaches aspire to “reduce and circumvent the power relations normally involved in research and development and to take the notion of giving the marginalized a voice to new levels by facilitating their involvement in the design, implementation, and outcomes of programs” (Kesby, 2005 p. 2037).

My awareness that the power that I hold is instrumental (Finlay, 2008, p. 2) in my lone worker role within the specialist project deepened as I considered notions of choice and agency. As outlined in section 2.1.2 my role as a practitioner is a shifting one and my transition into a researcher further extends the fluidity of roles. Having presented a study outline to the working group (see appendix 9) I felt drawn to consider possible limited choices which working group members may have had in giving informed ‘permission’.

As observed by Kinden,

Research is only likely to become intrusive when consent is not fully-informed consent. If participants/respondents are given adequate information then research should not feel like an intrusion into their lives, but rather a welcome

opportunity to reflect and learn in a supportive process (cited in Banks and Armstrong, 2012, p. 26)

Finlay (2008) reminded me that in trying to 'empower' participants is implicit acceptance of researchers maintaining a position from which we can empower others. Finlay questions that power is exerted in one direction, suggesting "Power comes in different guises, inhabiting structural dimensions such as class, race, gender, ethnicity", reminding me to remain "alert to how different types of power cross-cut each other and impact on the research relationship" (Finlay, 2008, p. 3).

Kesby's interrogation of power in the context of participation heartened me with his optimism that through research, opportunities for change are created by opening up spaces for participation, which can "bring about positive transformation in ordinary people's lives" (Kesby, 2005, p. 2043).

Alongside the fluidity of my own role I have become aware of the evolving nature of the roles of participants in relation to the specialist project. Each participant had been through initial referral processes as a 'service user', most then morphing into a group members. A number of participants had been involved with the peer involvement programme in a relationship to myself as lone worker on the project and the wider organisation but also to their own peers and then finally as participants in this study. In terms of the cross-cutting of power as discussed by Finlay I have been aware of the power which many of these women are able to wield in different circumstances. One participant holds the kind of power which comes from longevity of involvement, much like my own. Her presence in a group can enable, unite and welcome and conversely obstruct, divide and disregard. I have witnessed her hold me to account, standing firm to her beliefs, been inspired by her formidable clarity and instinctive comprehension of power structures. I have equally been reduced to exasperation as her self-defeating

actions make her life, and witnessing it, at times almost unbearable. To view this as a relationship in which I, the researcher/practitioner holds all the power would be negligent. I recognise however it would be remiss not to account for the privilege and power I hold.

2.3.3 Self-regulation of practitioner/researcher

Bell and Nutt suggest 'necessary self-regulation' to the practitioner-researcher to explore links between professional responsibilities as they 'translate' into research situations, and the ethical dilemmas that accompany 'divided loyalties' towards research and employment (2012, p. 76). Bell and Nutt discuss the decision about whether to emphasise the role of the 'researcher' or 'practitioner', a judgement with potential for conflict or tension. Within CBPR there exists a risk of blurring the roles of researcher and researched (NCCPE, 2012, p. 4). Being an established practitioner my challenge was to be seen credibly in another role and was therefore grateful for the thoroughness of the ethical approval process (see appendix 10).

2.3.4 Sensitivity

Particularly useful to the discussion of ethics is an exploration of sensitivity of the subject area, what it is about research with mothers apart that inevitably deems it sensitive and how sensitivity was addressed within the study. Renzetti and Lee suggest research areas are more likely to be deemed 'sensitive' are those which a) delve into the private sphere or deeply personal experience, b) relate to deviance or social control, c) relate to the interests of those in power with perhaps elements of coercion or domination and d) explore areas deemed sacred to participants which they do not wish to be 'profaned' (Renzetti and Lee, 1993, p. 6)

Marie arrived for interview with wrapping paper sticking out of shopping bags asking to borrow Sellotape to wrap her children's birthday presents as she had contact in a couple of hours. She began wrapping presents while I made a drink. Once all presents were wrapped she asked '*Is this [the interview] going to upset me before the contact?*' I allowed her to read the questions I hoped to cover in the interview with an offer to reschedule the interview should she wish. She said she felt she would be ok.

Trish arrived upset about her current relationship, worrying it was coming to an end. She showed me texts and photographs of her with her partner on her phone. Towards the end of one interview another participant was distracted by her vibrating phone – she was in the midst of a crisis to which she must return. Elizabeth arrived for her morning interview smartly dressed as she was due in court in the afternoon.

I use these examples to reinforce a sense of responsibility that these interviews and any emotional fall-out would intersect with the wider contexts of the participants' lives.

With her own awareness of potential emotional fall-out of her interview, Zoe had organised to meet a friend afterwards to spend the evening with so as not to be left alone. She had taken care of this herself, she knew what she would be speaking about would have triggers and that living alone would allow time to 'overthink'.

I have long been aware Christmas can be a punishing time of year for mothers apart (Neil, 2013), bombarded as we all are with images of the perfect family Christmas as the norm. Trish described her last Christmas; '*I closed me curtains and no decorations*'. I decided not to post out transcripts to participants shortly before Christmas when some were ready. I did not wish to exacerbate an already difficult and isolating time by sending out dense transcripts of their stories when neither I, nor other support services would be available for clarification or discussion.

During interview I asked Elizabeth whether she could tell me a little about what had led to the separation from her child and remember her responding by pulling a face which I reflected as her as asking 'do I really need to speak about this?'. I sensed a level of resistance at this point and decided to feed this back to her and offer the choice to answer or not which the section of transcription details below:

'R You kind of pulled a face there Elizabeth and the tape won't see that'

E No I know oh

R And if you don't want to answer that that's fine'

Elizabeth paused with '*I don't know erm...*' then returned to her usual flow of responding. I have worked reflexively to consider my response and the level of choice Elizabeth really felt she had at that time. I drew upon my six year relationship with Elizabeth as a professional. She had not attended group sessions for over two years, occasionally contacting me discretely by email to check in, not attending pre-booked face-to-face meetings. I admit having been surprised that she attended the interview, which she did on time as agreed. I sensed a commitment from her to this research which is what I hope drove her to answer what was obviously an uncomfortable question.

2.3.5 Gaps emerging and validations

Having continued to work with a number of my participants on different levels I am now party to the subsequent chapters in their lives, knowing them better, gaining new insights which were not present in their transcripts. I made a conscious decision not to include what I have learned from participants since interview, separate from the data collected. I did, however, wish to pay reference to the continued relationship I have with a number of participants, while never claiming to 'know' participants' stories completely

or that their stories are absolute truths. Time has shown that one particular story told in interview had what I feel were 'conscious gaps' which led me to have a distortion of some of the story.

Considering my dual role, I acknowledge that this participant felt she had to create a cohesive picture of changes she had made in her life, her wider narrative justifying the good mother, which she hoped would increase the chances of her children's return. I would suggest her investment in the story she was telling was so great that no matter how anonymous or remote the researcher at that stage in her life, I doubt she could have been less guarded. I sense that as an astute woman she understood the limits of my confidentiality and so saved us both the difficulty of disclosing information which I might have needed to pass on to relevant agencies.

This also reminds me of the role of stories and in reflecting on her good mother narrative – she lied because she wanted her children home – she sacrificed the truth, and potentially her credibility, for her children.

Within my own reflective notes months after her interview I summarise a discussion with a participant who was asking how my research was going. I explained the need to acknowledge the limits of the study and the fact that data may be affected by my role as a practitioner – that, for example, because I write support letters for mothers they may not feel able to be wholly open in their interview.

She was quite clear that she had been open and honest with me and told me '*everything*'. I suggested that we do not all tell everyone everything, while also reassuring her that generally I did feel trusted by her and that I wasn't calling her word into question, but did illustrate that none of us ever tell people everything which she said she understood.

I wondered aloud to her about whether the fact that her case was ‘completed’, her child settled with another family, helped her to be more open. This seemed to make sense to her. She spoke about how during legal proceedings regarding her child she had been unable to trust professionals. She had much to lose and so much to hide and would not have been able to tell me ‘*everything*’ at that stage.

This helped me to place the participant’s limited openness about her current situation into context of her investment being different to those whose cases were ‘closed’ or perhaps where their children were settled into long-term living arrangements. I must therefore accept the limitations as well as the advantages of my insider/outsider role within this piece of research.

Conversely there have been many more occasions in which my continued working with the participants has involved the stories in the transcripts having been validated. It has supported me to be able to know aspects of their lives which are not so readily shared in group situations or perhaps even in one-to-one casework. This continued relationship to date reminds me that just as my reflexive process will continue after submission of this dissertation so will my ethical considerations.

2.4.1 Study design

In this section I outline the study design, the way in which elements of CBPR is threaded into it and the way in which the planning has enabled participants to understand, hold roles and input into the research process. I detail the documents supporting the process to make safe involvement for the participants, myself as researcher and the academic institution.

2.4.2 Permission

Prior to commencing this study, terms of the partnership were agreed between the Women's Organisation and the university. Initial verbal permission to access interview participants through the specialist project for mothers apart was inherent in this agreement. I then presented an outline of the study to the working group of the specialist project and secured additional permission to place an invitation to participate in the newsletter, making a commitment to be transparent about my methods and the study generally.

2.4.3 Mothers as Participants

All participants in this study were mothers who had at least one child under 18 and, in the case of interview participants were living apart from some or all of their children at the time of interview. Two focus group members had recently had children returned to their care prior to the focus group. In addition, all participants had sought support from specialist services around the separation from their children, but were not necessarily active service users at the time of the interview.

I chose to use the term 'participant' within my research as I had worked to ensure levels of involvement with the women in my study. Participants were offered the opportunity to read their interview transcripts and remove any material they wished (although none took this opportunity). This allowed participants to have a record of what they had said and to experience involvement with the project. The working group and those taking active roles in the wider project were kept informed at various stages and my offer of ongoing transparency about the research has been taken up by a number of group members – some research participants and others - who have enquired about progress. In order that the research experience allowed a participant to engage fully and benefit

from the experience they were offered opportunities to ask questions about the process prior to getting involved as well as being able to participate in the focus group.

Feedback from participants can be seen as a means of checking analysis (Andrews, 2003 cited in Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013) as well as to facilitate participants learning from each other as part of the social web approach process (Balan, 2005 citing Brooks, 2000). I believe participants in both interviews and the focus groups guided not only the ethics of the study (Banks and Armstrong, 2012) but also its content and application.

2.4.4 Recruitment

Promotional material and an invitation to participate in interviews were placed in the Specialist Project newsletter, circulated to the full mailing list of mothers who have been involved with the project since it began (see appendix 11). Invitations to be involved with the focus group were posted out to interview participants and handed out to current users of the specialist support groups.

I made clear distinctions between this study and my role in the Women's Organisation. Mothers were given the opportunity to contact me outside of my paid role, for example on non-work days, as well as the option to have their interview held on the University campus. This was to allow a level of anonymity and the opportunity to break down barriers which often exist between research participants and academic institutions. All participants selected to have their interview in the Women's Organisation venues.

I initially planned that half of my interview participants would be women with whom I had an existing working relationship and half would be women with whom I did not have an

existing working relationship. Underpinning this intention was the knowledge that I had strong existing relationships with some women with whom I work and that this prior involvement could affect the data in terms of levels of trust and familiarity. While, on the one hand, I believe this brought rich data as existing trust had been built up prior to the fieldwork taking place, I had to acknowledge this may also be a barrier in certain circumstances. As a lone worker on the project, this distinction was in reality difficult to make as I am responsible for all referrals, group facilitation and case work. The initial meeting held with new referrals often involves an in-depth sharing of details of the situation in which they find themselves. In the event, as the table below shows, I had been working with all participants prior to the interviews, so there were no participants with whom I did not have an existing working relationship.

No of years	0-1 years	1-2 years	2-3 years	3+ years
No of participants	3	1	1	3

Figure 3 Length of time participants have been accessing specialist support from service

2.4.5 Fieldwork

Field work took place in two distinct stages:

Stage 1: Eight in-depth interviews with mothers who live apart from their children. Interviews were largely unstructured with some prompts available to keep participants focused where necessary (see appendix 12).

Stage 2: Single focus group held with mothers apart as an opportunity to discuss and reflect upon preliminary findings emerging from the research interviews which I have fed into my final draft. Interview participants and wider group members were automatically sent an invitation to attend the focus group. Invitations to the focus group were shared via group work sessions and by letter to interview participants. Questions addressed in the focus group are found in appendix 13.

There is often inherent mistrust and fear among participants, which creates a barrier to working with or researching minority or hard to reach groups: “Understanding factors relevant to a particular community is essential to gaining trust, overcoming fears, and reducing apprehension about taking part in research, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of participation.” (Story, Hinton and Wyatt, 2010. p. 117)

I was aware many participants will have been party to assessments and previous interviews linked to the care and placement of their children in which they felt judged and powerless. It was important that their involvement in this research did not resonate with previous negative instances of ‘sharing their story’.

In discussing birth relatives’ experiences of compulsory adoption, Neil, Cossar, Lorgelly and Young (2010) note that “[m]any birth parents felt that professionals were not always open, honest or just in their handling of the case. It was common for people to express feelings of

betrayal towards those who worked with them” (Neil et al, 2010 p.89). This is reinforced by a comment within the focus group which suggested that *‘social services should offer you help and support... not say they’re gonna support you when they have no intention of doing it’* (Tess)

2.1.10 Focus Group

I found the focus group an interesting and challenging process to prepare for in terms of positioning myself in relation to those present and to my research. I took time to consider the tone I wished to use to present my preliminary findings to the women. I was driven to make the findings accessible to a non-academic audience yet keen to not dilute messages by oversimplifying or making patronising assumptions about limits of understanding. I had recently prepared slides for an academic conference and used the same set of slides – with modest amendments – as a basis for a less formal approach to sharing within the focus group. I made decisions as to how to pitch the presentation on the day based on my existing knowledge of and relationships with women who took part.

While in familiar surroundings I was aware that my researcher role was a new one to some of the women. I was using the resources and academic privilege of being able to study to make claims about a group with whom I work but of which I am not a part. I wished to be available for questions throughout the session and so audio-recorded the presentation element of the focus group to be able to capture interjections at this stage. I presented for around thirty minutes and the recorded discussion took place for just over fifty minutes in total. The discussion element began with the opportunity for questions from focus group members and I then worked to discuss women’s impressions of the findings and if and where they felt the findings should be shared. For the second half of the focus group I placed paper sheets with images of the slides

printed on them onto the table to encourage focus group members to be able to reconnect with the presentation, which as one member initially commented was a little 'dry' at that stage. This was effective as specific slides which resonated with women were picked up and spoken about.

Initial plans for field work included holding a focus group with prospective adopters who had attended a workshop led by some of the peer involvement project as well as a focus group with some social work students who had attended a lecture led by some of the specialist project. My decision not to continue with these was threefold. First, I was aware of the richness of the data gained during interviews and felt these warranted a fuller examination, the possibility of which would have been limited within the available timeframe by the gathering of even more data. Second, recruiting a sufficient number of prospective adopters and social work student participants able to meet together for their respective focus groups posed logistical challenges which I struggled to resolve within the available timeframe. Third, I reflected on my initial decision to include the voices of prospective adopters and social work students as a means of providing outsider contributions to validate the voices of the mothers. As my confidence in my interview data increased, this endorsement no longer felt necessary. (See appendix 14 for copy of the email sent to those who had expressed an interest).

2.5.1 Taking Care

Aware of my significant role within the specialist project with which the participants were involved, specific documents and processes were designed as a means of taking care

both of participants and myself as a researcher. These are detailed within the School Research Ethics Panel (See appendix 10).

Within my research I adhered to the same standards around safeguarding which was made explicit prior to involvement of any participants. I did however draw clear distinctions between my paid work and my studies.

2.5.2 Consent, safeguarding and supporting documents

An Information Sheet (See appendix 15) and Statement of Support were given to participants (as well as verbal information about the study's aims and processes such as interview format or focus group. The Statement of Support made explicit how participants' wellbeing would be addressed and was shared with participants just before the interview/focus group took place (see appendix 17 and 18)

Participants were asked to sign the Consent Form' - or Consent and Confidentiality Statement' in the case of focus groups - (see appendices 19 and 20). Participants were made aware of my safeguarding commitments (see Appendices 15 and 16). I was clear that where I felt an appropriate service should be informed about a safeguarding concern I would in most cases make the participant aware of the steps I was taking. The exception would have been where I had concern that informing them may further endanger a child or vulnerable adult. All interviews were audio recorded in compliance with the consent provisions (see appendices 19 and 20).

2.5.3 Participant involvement

Participants were made aware that their involvement was on a voluntary basis (see Appendices 15 and 16) and of their right to withdraw with no need to give a reason.

At the end of interviews and focus groups debriefs were held allowing participants to speak about their experience of the processes and me to share information about, and refer - if necessary – to any agencies able to offer support.

Participants were able to continue to engage with the specialist project at the end of the research and as such will have the opportunity to witness the impact of research on practice. This research sits within a project and academic partnership based on principles of co-creation and community-based participatory research. “The primary goal in this research is action – using findings to secure funding, create changes in policies, and create new interventions” (Bilodeau et al., 2009, p. 193).

Interview participants had the opportunity to receive a copy of the transcript of their interview. I did not share a transcript of the focus group to maintain confidentiality of other participants.

2.5.4 Researcher

Interviewing mothers apart about their lives could have had an impact on my emotional or psychological wellbeing. Within the SREP form (see appendix 10) I detail the support in place for myself both as a professional and as a researcher. I kept a reflective journal throughout my study and practiced reflexivity and critical reflection. As well as being a methodological tool, this supported my ability to reflect and process my own experience as a researcher and support my wellbeing.

2.5.5 Anonymity

Interview participants had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym by which they would be known in the study. Focus group participant consent forms included a statement

confirming their agreement to keep confidential anything shared by others within the focus group (see appendix 20).

A number of women said they would be happy for their real names to be used and the explanation I offered was that pseudonyms protect others around them, referring back to my commitment to anonymity.

Participants' stories remain strong in my mind and I am aware that some have been told publicly in groups, in training sessions, in digital stories and also at events. I was concerned that threads of a story already shared could potentially be recognised and linked to other elements of that participant's story that was shared only in the interview. My concern was not simply that a participant might be identified by her story but as a consequence this study might expose further stories which she had told in confidence. Sally let me know by email that she recognised she was identifiable when she read her transcript:

'well you made me cry again, iv read threw it and anyone that knows me will know its me your talking about but thats ok, im happy with what you wrote so go ahead and use what you need with my blessing.'

Sensing casualness in her email and acknowledging the privilege of her 'blessing' I felt compelled to reassure this issue was something I had considered and took seriously:

'I will not be including the whole interview in one piece but selecting sections at various points in my write-up. This protects not only you but the people you have spoken about as much as is possible.'

I took steps to ensure no identifiable data about the participants have been included in the thesis; nor will they be included in any future publication resulting from the study.

Where validity of the data was not affected, I changed small details protecting participants' identity. I made participants aware that the group may well be identifiable

as it is an unusual, if not unique, group. Rather than using the name of the organisation, service or project I have used generic terms (see figure 2, section 1.1.2). I acknowledge however that a simple search of my name and the field of work would easily identify the service. I was therefore required to be honest about the limits of anonymity. As much as possible I attempted to anticipate any threats to confidentiality and anonymity (BSA, 2002 para. 35) and ensure that I have taken all reasonable steps to protect their individual identity.

2.5.6 Stepping out

A key strategy I employed was the importance of my being able to 'step out' of my role as a researcher to that which I usually perform as a facilitator, the role with which the participants were familiar and to whom in the future they would potentially be working. Defining the shift as I made it, 'I am almost stepping out of my interview role here', stepping out allowed me to frame the shift between roles. Returning to the role of a familiar worker demonstrated a congruence with the specialist project. This was done during recorded interviews and recorded as field notes from the debrief.

In this chapter I make explicit the planned strategies to conduct the study with the aim to 'create' knowledge about the experiences of mothers apart, allowing their voices to be heard whilst also protecting their anonymity and respecting their agency to tell their story, give permission and define their own experiences. In the next chapter I begin with short profiles of their family make-up in terms of the placement of their children, followed by information about their 26 children and 13 grandchildren and finally the five focus group members.

2.5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the methodological approaches employed and the considerations involved in making decisions. I have related these as a means of making transparent my aim to ensure congruence between my professional and academic work. Reflexive work has been a key feature of working through ethical considerations. Referring back to Bell and Nutt's suggestion of 'self-regulation' for practitioner researchers (2012, p. 76), I have worked reflexively towards transparency of the impact the continued relationship with participants has on the study and opportunities I have taken to make this explicit within the study and with those I have continued to know.

In this chapter I have described the way in which ethical considerations have been woven into this study and in particular the instrumental role of myself as a researcher in relation to power dynamics. I have resisted a simple one-directional view of power in favour of a view of power able to cross-cut research relationships. In my discussion of ethical considerations I used definitions of ethics as a means of creating a context for my own sense of thinking ethically as a practitioner/researcher. I have used examples to demonstrate the ways in which I have woven ethical thinking into all stages of the study. I have outlined the design of the present study from gaining permission through the steps taken to make research aims clear and accessible to participants.

In the following chapter I shall present the findings of the study beginning with profiles information about participants and the situations they find themselves and their families in. I shall then present findings relating to the 'good mother' narrative and then the specific 'incompleteness' and 'reflective' narratives from which I suggest mothers are able to construct their 'good mother' narratives.

3.1 Chapter three: Findings

3.1.1 Eight women, twenty-six children...

Eight mothers were interviewed for between around 35 and 120 minutes.

Four mothers were active members of the support group at the time of the interview, seven of them had been at some point and all had received some level of support

around the separation from their children. Mothers' ages ranged from 23 to 50 years.

Numbers of children ranged from one to six. Social care had been involved in seven of the eight cases.

3.1.2 Eight Mothers

Below I have created eight profiles for the participants in terms of family make-up, placements of children and current levels of contact. I have left the profiles purposefully scant and anonymised the detail of the subsequent stories as an act of protecting anonymity. I include this information to give context to women's stories of separation from their children.

Aisha

Aisha is a young mother of one child who was taken into care from hospital and has now been placed with adopters. She expects to have annual letterbox exchange with the adopters.

Darcy

Darcy is a mother of four and grandmother of five. She has one child living with her, one daughter who left home around fourteen and is now living independently, two children and a grandchild living locally in foster care with whom she has fairly regular contact, one grandchild whom she sees three times a year, two with whom she has annual

letterbox contact and one it would seem from the interview that she does not see presently.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth has one child living with her parents under a special guardianship order which has been in place since her child was six. She had been a single parent until this time. Contact currently takes place approximately every month under supervision of one of both of her parents with whom she has a strained relationship.

Marie

Marie has six children, having had her first at seventeen. Five of her children were removed from her care around a year before I interviewed her shortly after one child was hospitalised with a health scare. All her children now live in care. Placement orders for all children had been made – the eldest to stay in local authority care and the youngest two for adoptive families. She has different levels of contact with her children ranging from every four weeks to every six weeks each with different combinations of children.

Nicola

Nicola is a mother of three. She has two adult children who were adopted at two and four years old, now adults, and a toddler who was seventeen months at the time of interview. She has met her adult children and her youngest child is currently living with a family member under a Special Guardianship Order whom she sees every three weeks.

Sally

Sally is a mother of four and has a number of grandchildren. She had raised her children with her ex-husband until they split acrimoniously. Her elder children live independently and her younger two live with her ex-partner. She has no contact with three children and is currently building up contact with one of her them.

Trish

Trish is a mother of three children. She raised her eldest, now an adult, and her younger children were removed from her care six years ago and now live with long terms foster carers. She currently has monthly unsupervised contact with her younger two children.

Zoe

Zoe is a mother of four children, the eldest three placed in long term foster care and the youngest is now with an adoptive family. Letterbox contact has been recommended with her baby and she currently sees her elder three children six times a year in a children's centre supervised by the local authority.

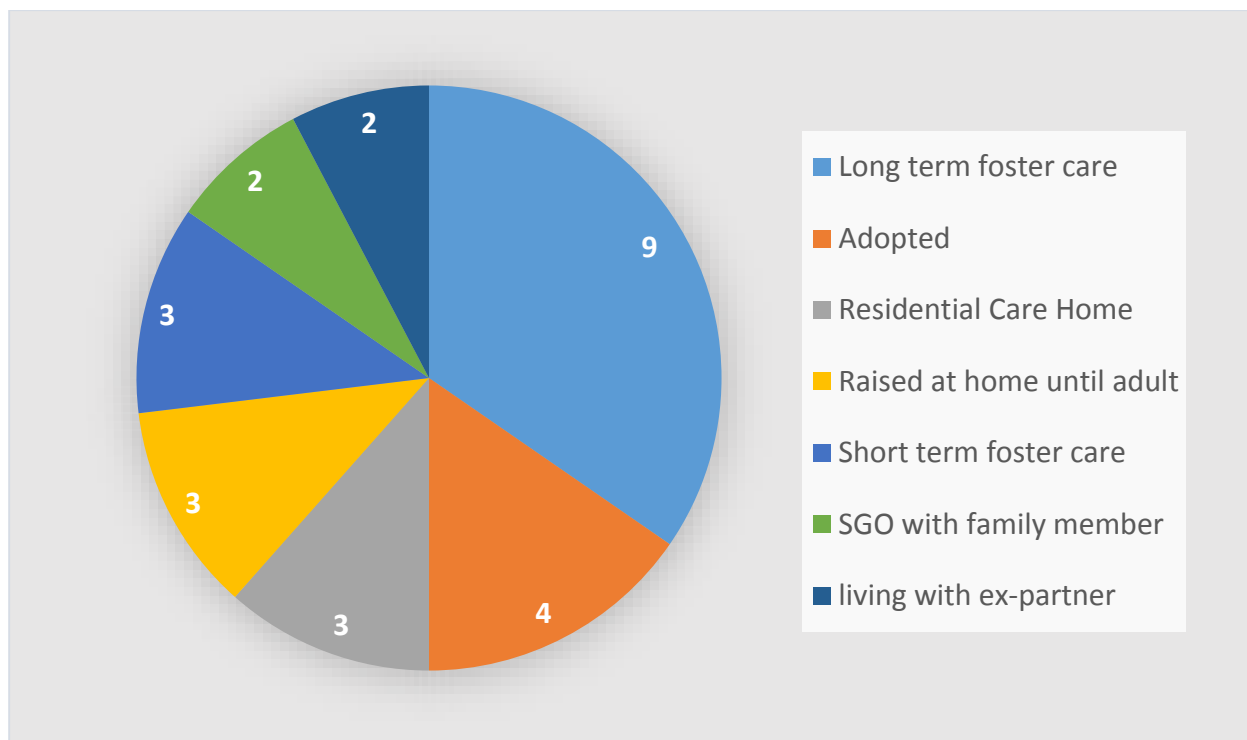
3.1.3 Twenty-six children

'Our precious beings'

(Rose)

Participants' children were living with adoptive families, foster carers, relatives who had become special guardians, in residential care, with ex-partners and one child at home.

Figure 4 summarises the residence of participants' children:

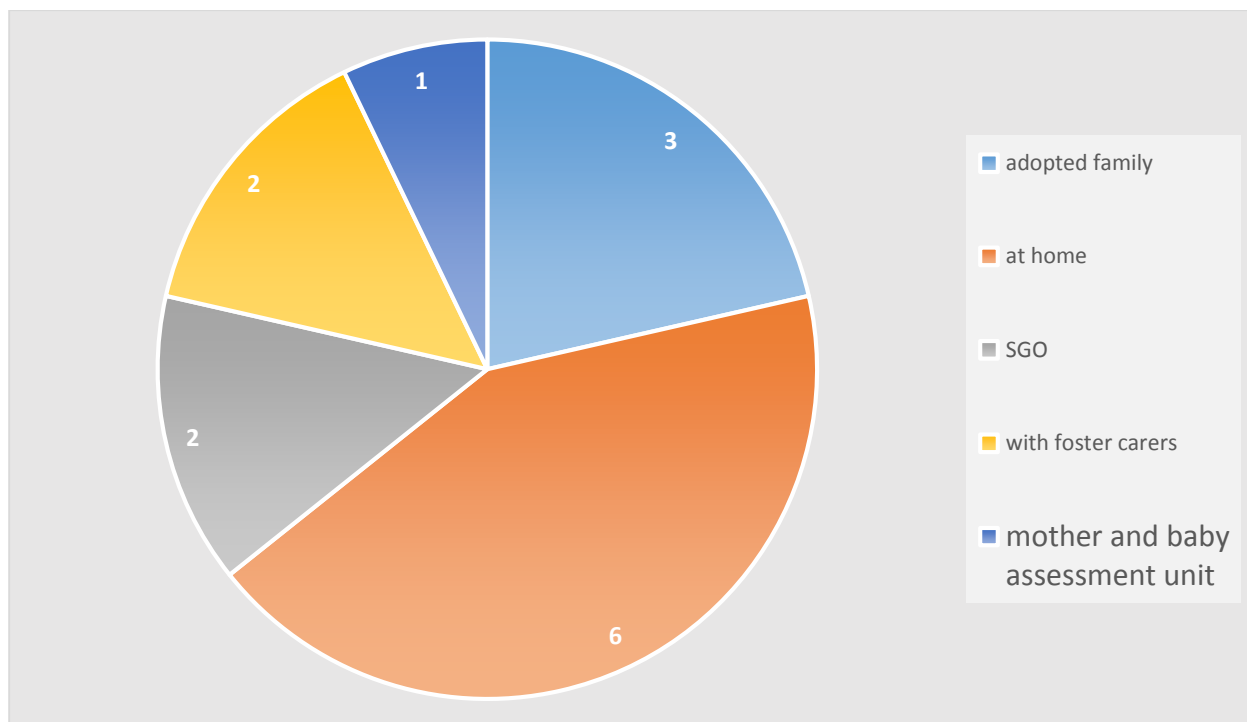


Where are participants children living?

Figure 4

3 Thirteen Grandchildren

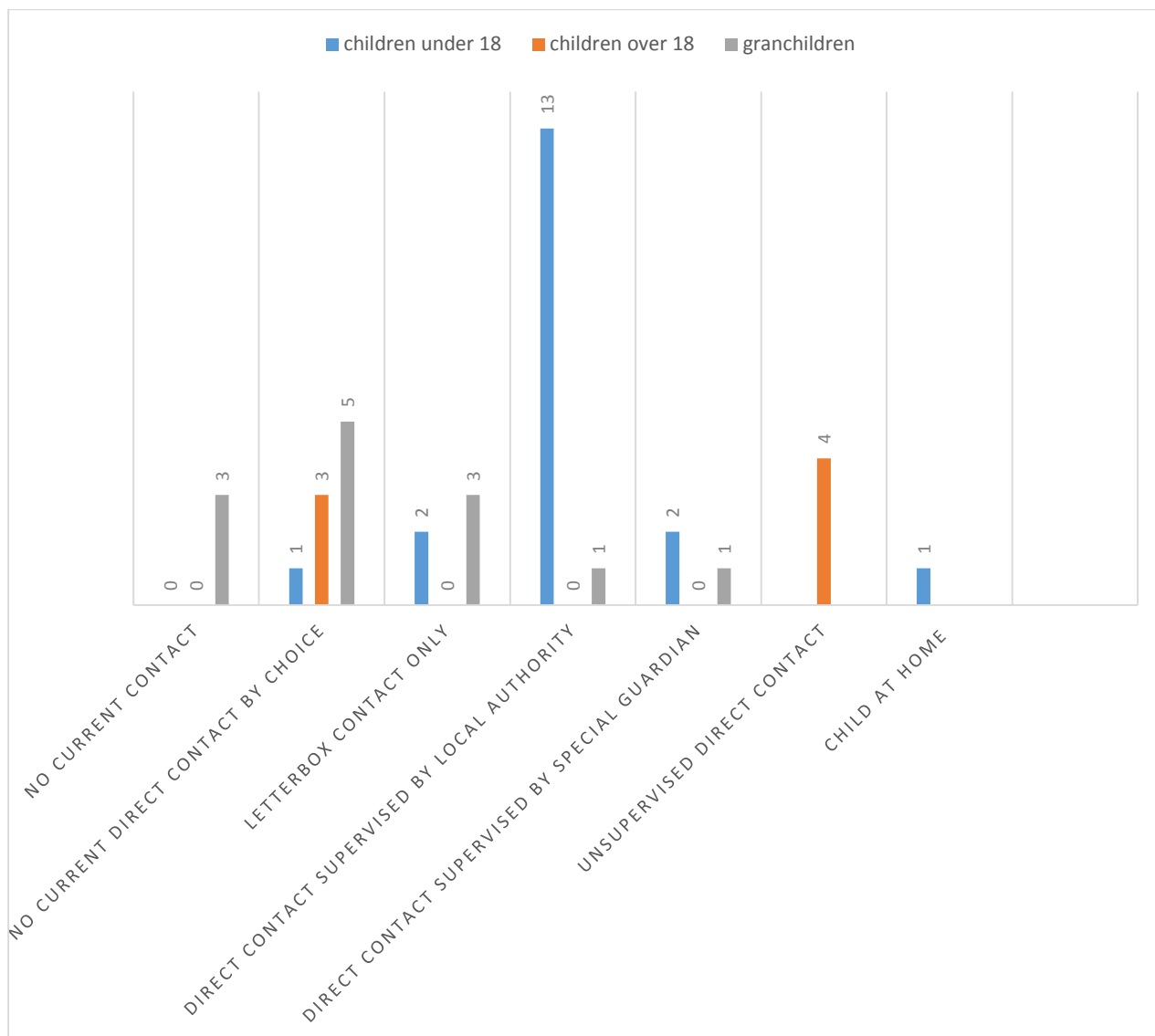
The participants had thirteen grandchildren in total. Notable to me was the fact that less than fifty percent of grandchildren were living with their mothers (see figure 5). So half the participants were grandmothers apart as well as mothers apart.



Where are grandchildren living?
Figure 5

3.1.4 Contact

Levels of contact with children and grandchildren varied greatly between participants. Figure 6 illustrates the contact arrangements between participants and their children (both under and over 18) and grandchildren. One participant described meeting her grandchild briefly at a family occasion as a one off – an opportunity she treasured.



Levels and types of contact with children and grandchildren
Figure 6

3.1.5 Focus group participants – five guiding voices

Each of the five participants in the focus group have had some involvement with the specialist project at some point or another. Focus group members had been involved with the specialist project for between three months and seven years. They were currently involved in the rolling programme, ongoing group support or peer involvement.

Three of the women received support from the centre in one town and two received support in the other town so some members of the focus group knew each other and some did not.

Two interview participants took part in the focus group. Of the remaining interview participants one was unable due to having contact with her child, one unable due to work related issues and four did not give me a direct response. As a means of protecting their identity, these women have been given new pseudonyms. In support group sessions in which I discussed my research three interview participants identified themselves as having taken part in the research but none did so within the focus group itself.

The women were aged between 24 and 41 and had between one and six children each.

- Kelly has six children, two of whom live with adoptive families and four of whom live in the care of the local authority.
- Tess has two children who live with two separate adoptive families.
- Rose has had four out of five of her children returned to her care, one child lives with his father.
- Pearl has had her only child returned to her care.
- Anna's only child is living with an adoptive family.

3.2.1 *The 'Good Mother' Narrative*

'I'd move heaven and earth for 'em'

(Marie)

Not having your children in your care can be damaging and painful whether in the case of adoption (Neil, 2007, 2010, 2013; Clifton, 2012), foster care (Schofield et al, 2010) or through divorce (Kielty, 2007). The distress of mothers apart has been seen to be higher than that of fathers or grandparents (Neil, 2012) as a result of adoption. This study examines the stories told by mothers apart regardless of the reasons for separation, with whom their children live or levels of contact.

Dominant narratives of the 'good mother' are incredibly powerful. Hays (1996) describes the way women are expected to "give unselfishly of their time, money and love on behalf of sacred children". (1996, p. 97) Every mother I interviewed articulated ways in which their capability and suitability to mother is inherently questionable as a result of their children not being in their care. As stated by Santora and Hays:

within the category of mother, only particular forms of mothering are approved.

Thus, women who find themselves outside the traditional definitions of what constitutes a good mother also join the ranks of the "failed". Among these are mothers who do not live with their children (Santora and Hays, 1998, p. 54).

Not living with children places mothers outside societal norms (Broadhurst and Mason, 2013; Clifton 2012; Fischer and Cardea, 1982; Howe et al, 1992; Jackson, 1994; Kielty, 2007; Neil 2013) and one's identity as a mother at all is threatened. All stories told to me allowed women in their own way to conform to the grander 'good mother' narrative, so pervasive was participants' and everyone's need to tell these stories resisting identification as a 'bad mother'. Participants resisted the 'bad mother' label in recounting decisions they had made to breastfeed, to take their children to child-centred activities when they were young, to buy educational books for their children and take resources along to make the best of supervised contact. Women spoke of having never 'laid a finger' on their children, their distress at seeing children being shouted at or hit in public

by their mothers. These comparisons to 'other' mothers who they view as not good mothers provide a backdrop for a sense of injustice at their not having their children in their care while other mothers do not deserve the children they have in their care.

The good mother narrative is pervasive and painful for those sitting outside its perimeters; each of Kieltz's (2008) twenty participants used their narrative interviews to defend against the 'bad mother' narrative by accounting for their atypical status as non-resident mothers. Speaking of her first visit to the specialist project a participant articulates her fears around being with mothers '*who've had their kids taken off them and for good reason*'.

Similarly Nicola tells of her reflections about her role with her children:

'I'm gonna die eventually and I'm not gonna have done anything with my life, you know. Apart from my three beautiful children. But I didn't even bring them up'

Her statement demonstrates the inescapable view of the 'good mother' being one who raises her children in her care. Similarly Zoe demonstrates her understanding of the fact that she crosses a social norm by not living with her children and the difficulty hearing about her situation may cause for others:

'You don't want people to feel sorry for you, but you don't want to leave somebody absolutely and utterly speechless. "Oh well my children don't live with me at the moment, they're all in foster care and one's about to be adopted". How do you reply to that?'

Here she positions herself in the role of caretaker to others, not always disclosing her mother apart status, as a strategy to maintain dignity and avoid pity. I discuss in more detail later how different participants deal with questions about their children and their choices in disclosure about their situation.

3.2.2 Validations of the good mother

I was struck by the role professionals often held in supporting mothers to hold on to a 'good mother' identity. Darcy describes her children's social worker having offered her good mother narratives by way of the court report she had written:

'She read it out to me. And she put "you're a good mum. It's nothing bad about you. The kids love you to bits. You love them, they love you. It's just things have gone to pot. You have got yourself in a hole and you can't get out. And the more you try you're just going deeper and deeper into this hole instead of going the other way where we want you to be. So that's the reason why we've taken them". And she's put down I'm alright with them up to 'em being up to teenage years but after teenage years up... I struggle. I can't do it.'

Darcy accepted the description of herself as 'good' with children when they are young but who struggles with them when they become teenagers. While acknowledging her limits, recognition of her love for her children had validated her parenting and good mother status.

Similarly Marie's relationships with professionals, including the carers of her children, allow her to demonstrate her ability to form appropriate relationships. She describes the way in which she has attempted to get her children back. Marie reflects that she enjoys having her hard work recognised by people such as the worker in her child's care home:

'She phones me up, sees how I am and what have you. She says she's really proud of me and pleased, which is nice to hear when you've never had really positive comments before.'

Being praised is evidently not something with which she is familiar, and she acknowledges the function it serves for her.

'I think I need reassuring because obviously I know about how to be a mum not nothing else. Reassurance I need...'

She lets us know being a mother is something she knows about and therefore she is a 'good mother' and without this role she is lost.

3.2.3 Stigmatised mothering

All mothers were aware that in living apart from their children they transgress a social norm and Elizabeth's description of the effect this has on her relationships with family members goes some way to illustrate this point:

'I feel really isolated because when she did get taken off me, a lot of the family.. I wouldn't say turned against me but stopped communicating with me like they did do...maybe they think I am a failure or were just disgusted that it had come to that so I do feel very isolated.'

Sally felt the weight of guilt and judgement of her status as a mother apart:

'I must have done something really, really wrong to have all four of my kids not have anything to do with me. You know if it's, even it were one of them, but it's all four of them'

3.2.4 Resistance of the 'bad mother' label

As a means of demonstrating their adherence to 'good mother' values participants articulated their awareness that they face judgements of mothers apart as a homogenous group. In the focus group, Anna suggests mothers apart are treated:

'with the same brush as people who really mistreat their children, it's like Baby P. We're not all like that'.

Stories of initial separation were key ways for women to construct their worth as mothers. Pressures of having children with additional needs, competing siblings, trying

to manage childrearing in a home with continuing domestic abuse or trying to balance the pressures of work were factors which led to the breakdown of family units. For Aisha, whose child was never in her care, her narrative was one which encompassed a missed opportunity to be able to prove her worth as a parent:

'they promised me a mother and baby unit .. I believe if I couldn't look after him and give him what he needs then I would have handed my son over because that's not fair on my son. I didn't get that so... I feel like I don't know if I know how to parent because they've not given me a chance to prove myself.'

3.3.1 'Incompleteness' Narrative

'there's always that bit missing in my life and that's where my kids used to be.'

(Marie)

Perhaps the most striking descriptions provided in interviews are those of the 'incomplete mother' – she has a void as a result of her child not being in her care. This narrative runs through all of the interviews, describing 'gaps', 'holes' and 'bits missing' as a result of the absence of children in women's care. Women's accounts articulate pain in many different ways. For Nicola:

'to live apart from your children, it's heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching, painful, there's a big loss, like a big hole in your life, in your heart, erm, wondering all the time, always thinking what's happening now, what are they doing? Are they going on holiday this year? Are they at school yet? Have they got good friends at school? Wondering about every little thing that you can think of.'

Aisha, whose baby was taken into care from hospital a few days after birth, makes the link between the act of giving birth, which means she is a mother, and her present pain:

'basically I feel like 'cos I give birth to him there is a part of me missing a big part. Yeah and it hurts... and the feelings are.. that I have and I have erm when I was seeing my son are still there.'

One participant went out to 'score' heroin when she found out her children weren't coming home, making the link between the gap the loss of her children left in her life to her relationship with heroin. Speaking of a conversation with a family member:

'I said I couldn't live without gear now, I couldn't live without my girls and not be on gear'.

3.3.2 The pain of 'incompleteness'

The incompleteness narrative requires the listener to bear witness to pain and a reality which does not allow for the easier-to-hear 'restitution narrative' proposed by Frank (2013), which follows a generalised plot in which a healthy person becomes ill and recovers. 'Incomplete' mothers are profoundly altered by their separation from their children. I heard stories of initial separation in which children are 'dragged' out of houses by police officers or taken by social workers at the end of the school day. Another mother's story was of a slower, deepening separation which began with her child staying with a friend as a precautionary measure following an alleged incident and another mother's children being taken to foster carers two days after the birth of the youngest sibling, following unexplained injuries. Unique stories were told within the framework of the incompleteness of their selves, their mothering identity and their status.

3.3.3 Chaos stories

Truly incomplete stories have elements of Frank's 'chaos narrative', the converse of his 'restitution narrative', which does not predict recovery or of wholeness. No participant referred to any expectation that the return of their children would allow full recovery from the separation. In discussing holocaust stories, Frank speaks of holes in narratives which cannot be filled: "The story traces the edge of a wound that can only be told around. Words suggest its rawness, but that wound is so much of the body, its insults, agonies, and losses, that words necessarily fail." (Frank, 2013, p. 98).

Trish begins to describe her present pain:

'It hurts all the time because I've got them [photographs of my children] all over my walls in my house. So every time I look at them, I'm thinking they were the good times, because it's my fault they've gone and that hurts because it's my fault and I have to try and manage my hurt now, but it's not that easy because I'm so, emotional wreck anyway, it's like it's owt, it's like if there's anything for me, I cry, dead bird or owt like that, I'm off, I do, any animal, anything, it upsets me.'

This is not an easy piece to read building up to its staccato ending. Trish speaks of the everyday pain in a way which doesn't sound like a story, it is all in the present tense.

Interestingly she follows this by saying:

'But you have to stay strong and I have to get on. I do it for me kids because it's there.'

She lives in chaos, is incomplete but she turns towards a restitution narrative as she is a 'good mum'. Trish is very clear that 'good mothers' do not give up on their children. Her life has always been chaotic but her children give her reason to focus.

I acknowledge hearing and re-hearing women's stories during transcription and analysis was at times painful and was acutely aware of things that were not said – referred to mutely in looks given, eyes rolled in a way that I interpreted to be 'pleading', or articulating pain that words could not. Particularly difficult to hear was Nicola's story of not having contributed to society because she had not raised her children. I felt compelled to share my thoughts by what I recognise now was my own difficulty to hear a chaos story, a story without restitution. Her story contradicted my own stories of her as a wise woman who contributes, in a leadership manner, greatly to the work I do. I framed my interruption as me stepping out (see 2.5.6) of my role of researcher and offered her my observation with examples. Doucet brings to life the exchange between the researcher and the researched as a gossamer wall: "multi-layered relations between researchers and research respondents, relationships that can involve oral, audible, physical, emotional, textual, embodied, as well as shifting theoretical and epistemological dimensions" (Doucet , 2008. p. 73). I continue to reflect on my own motives to encourage her to question her decades-long belief as to how not having raised her children defined her. My attempt to challenge in the moment, in my role, now seems inadequate and potentially conceited.

Nicola speaks of her addiction as a relationship she is in and its relationship to the absence of her children.

'It was just constantly about the kids, very tiring, just always about the kids, all my sessions at [addiction support agency] was always talking about the loss of my kids you know... so much so that they thought that when I got back in touch with

them I would get off gear... Cos they thought that that was what was keeping me on gear'

Trish tells stories of the pattern of separation prior to the removal of her children – in which she acknowledges the similarities between herself as a child and her children now being in care and cycling generations of children in care and in terms of her early life experiences as having already been ruptured in some way:

'My childhood, I was born, I got dumped out of a pub, outside a pub wi' my twin. So, she's going off with a fella for a beer, and an Irish man, and I've been in and out of care ever since'.

She acknowledges the struggle of breaking this cycle: 'because it's all in your mind anyway and you never get rid of that, for the hurt, and I didn't want that for my kids, but it happened.'

She compares herself to her estranged son:

'You always have the one, don't you, you always have one that's like me, one of the bad eggs.'

While 'bad eggs' would suggest she feels that the problem is part of who she has always been, this is in contrast to her other statements about the damage she has experienced in her life.

Whilst there are stories of perhaps voids, of missing out and breakage prior to being apart from their children, this consistently presented as the central rupture underpinning their incomplete narrative.

3.3.4 Missing Out

Within the 'incomplete narrative', stories are told about missing out on parts of their children's lives:

'I know sometimes there is. Just little things that she probably speaks to mum and dad about but when I speak to her on the phone there isn't enough time or its already been said and done.'

Again Marie is able to articulate that the pain is ongoing, an end to which she does not see:

'I don't think that feeling will ever change. People say it gets easier but it han't done. It's just another day when you're missing out on something'

Women speak of milestones which they miss and while women may have direct contact with their children this does not diminish the sense of missing out: *'she'll soon be a teenager and I'll have missed out on well like four years her life really'* (Elizabeth).

3.3.5 Broken

'It broke me

It killed me

I went home to an empty house'

(Marie)

Drawing on Franks' (2013) work on chaos in which fracture caused by illness is beyond articulation in words and of Smith's (2014) 'ruination' narrative in which damage is irreparable, elements of the incompleteness narrative speak of breakage as well as incompleteness, often preceded by an existing course of pain and loss.

In reading of relationships in Trish's stories I noticed some very clear definitions of relationships she describes in her life, such as her mother, Ian the social worker and the role of social care within her life generally. As a consequence of her relationship with her mother Trish suggests she has had a hard life:

'she ripped my head, from being a baby, when she dropped me and our Patrick and left us to it.'

In this statement she links difficulties in her life to 'abandonment' by her mother, later drawing a number of comparisons between her own childhood and that of her youngest two children by stating *'I were eighteen myself and I were passed round like Amanda and Justin are now'*. Important for her is the distinction she makes

'I got thrown away. But I didn't throw mine.'

In doing this she positions herself as a mother who didn't choose separation, with the belief that a 'good mother' would never choose separation from children, or give up on them.

3.3.6 Rock bottom

'I got to zero next day'

(Trish)

Most women articulated a particular point in time at which they felt they had reached a low point. For Trish it was the day after her children had been taken when she 'trashed' her house. For Marie, as we have heard, it was returning home to an empty house, while Sally tells us of reaching rock bottom around the time of initial separation from her children:

'It was awful. I just drank myself stupid, took a loads of drugs, tried to kill myself'

These low points referred to as part of the fracture of the ‘incompleteness’ narrative form a basis for reflection to which I shall return in my discussion of the second narrative (see section 3.4.7).

3.3.7 Unfit

Within the incomplete narrative Sally articulates her feelings that her mother apart status negates her ability to perform her role working with vulnerable children:

‘then to have to come and say I didn’t have my children and yet I’m looking after somebody else’s children just.. it just didn’t feel right and I felt I’d be judged even more’.

Aisha perceived that her own upbringing substantiated judgments of her parenting capacities as substandard:

‘I wan’t in a good place then and I found out that basically my childhood, made a big part in that, meaning that they said that I was emotionally abused and physically abused as a child and that could affect me, affect me being a mother to my son’

3.3.8 Contact

‘I feel complete. Like my family’s together but it is in a false environment and it hurts when they go’ (Marie)

Defining time spent with children as ‘contact’, whether direct or indirect reinforces ‘gaps’ within the narrative of ‘incompleteness’. The chart on page ***** illustrates the varied contact arrangements between participants and their children and grandchildren. As

Marie (above) suggests, contact allows her temporarily to suspend elements of her incomplete status.

Contact time is precious and yet fraught with difficulty as every contact is a goodbye and a return to a home without your children. Mothers struggle to negotiate their identity as a mother in the artificial confines of contact centres” (Naqvi and Beckwith 2014, p.16).

Having received her first letter from her son’s adopters Aisha told me:

‘I don’t know who he is and that letter’s just helped me a bit to get to know him’.

Women told me of the importance of their contact and their stories allowed them to tell the grander narrative of the ‘good mother’ in the ways in which contact happens. Telling of bringing equal amounts of gifts such as magazines to each child, cooking with their children where it was possible within the confines of the contact centre, throwing a tea party for their first birthday and videos being filmed as keepsakes by contact workers are all ways that mothers apart are able to demonstrate their adherence to the ‘good mother’ narrative. Neil et al (2014) recognise the importance that contact can play in supporting birth relatives to cope with and make sense of the loss of a child.

Mothers whose children were adopted told stories about final contact sessions with their children to say goodbye. Nicola describes saying goodbye to her daughter who was asleep:

‘I had to hold her hand and rub her hand and say goodbye

I love you sweetheart

I got out of that car I just felt so desolate’

Zoe’s final contact with her baby was held with her elder children present as well as her violent partner:

'Vile...I got in there, I was very upset. I could have killed the contact officer. She were "don't cry, it's going to be ok". It's not going to be ok love.....They make you do it.... it's so hard to let go'

The contact officer's wish to soothe or reassure did not acknowledge the finality or pain of what was occurring.

3.3.9 Gatekeepers

Key relationships described within the terms of the incomplete mother are with 'gatekeepers', figures who sit between the mothers apart and their ability to be a 'complete' mother. Within the transcripts I identified the gatekeepers as social workers, special guardians, ex partners and foster carers. A number of stories placed children in the 'gatekeeper' role, often in situations in which the mothers' role is supplanted by an abusive ex-partner, undermining the mother-child relationship through maternal alienation (Monk, 2014; Morris, 2010).

Women who feel vulnerable also tell stories in which they situate themselves as gatekeepers, often in the context of having to protect themselves from further hurt from their children.

Nicola's story is one of a family who are able to communicate about very difficult issues, who find it hard at times but who find their own solutions. Nicola's son, James, is cared for by her sister, Shelley. Nicola feels Shelley enables her to be accommodated within James' life. Nicola's relationship with Shelley is one in which she feels listened to, heard and supported. Nicola is clear that Shelley is keen for her to have a relationship with James:

'It's with her to decide [about me seeing James]. Yeah. But she wants him to have a good relationship with me. She really does... Which is good cos she's, she's said to me before it'll mess his head up if he hasn't got a good relationship with his mum'

Nicola is letting us know that Shelley ultimately has power to withdraw her contact and the general decision making over James, but that Shelley does not wield this power insensitively. When decisions need to be made about James, Nicola describes the process, being clear not to brush over the challenges, yet concluding that she and Shelley communicate to find ways forward:

'We're alright, we can talk. You know it might take me a couple of days to say what I've got to say but I will say it in the end. You know, just to get it out there. And Shelley will say to me you know, her face will change and she looks nervous, you know and then she says what she needs to say and then I try and calm the situation and make it nice, the situation try what I can to make it nice for her.'

3.3.10 In the dark

Being 'kept in the dark' about their children's lives, whether by professionals or family members, is a threat to mothering identities discussed in all interviews with implications for women's mental health.

'I do feel like I am being kept out of the loop and ... It doesn't help my state of mind. I feel like it doesn't help me progress to get, you know. Because obviously the bond and the relationship between me and my daughter is my main priority but obviously I'd like to get my relationship better with my mum and dad as well.'

Having become special guardians and ‘gatekeepers’ of contact with Elizabeth’s daughter, Elizabeth’s relationship with her parents has shifted. Writing about children being cared for by a known person I previously wrote it can “put family members in positions of power in your life as they have the final say about your child. So, relationships shift – you may feel that as your child gains a carer, you lose a sister or a mother” (Darby, Jones and Beckwith, 2014 p. 74).

Elizabeth’s contact with her daughter’s carers is often tensely organised at the last minute and initiated by herself and she makes a direct link between the issues around contact and her drinking and her mental health:

‘Sometimes I do have lapses in my alcohol. And it’s kind of linked, not to my daughter obviously but to the difficulty of seeing and stuff like that. I’ve just got to train myself to deal with that better, deal with that in a different way you know’

I was told stories of distress and worry about children’s lives in which mothers feel they are the ‘*last to know*’, for example, a mother being told of her children’s foreign holidays only after their return and for Trish hearing in a review meeting about her son’s road accident a month previously. Trish told me ‘*I should have known, because once I got told that, I were angry for not getting told*’. ‘Good mothers’ know what is happening to their children.

Within this section I have illustrated the narrative of ‘incompleteness’ from which mothers construct stories to convey their sense of dislocation as a result of the separation from their children. I shall now describe the narrative of reflection from which mothers are able to create stories about the meaning making of their experiences. Far from being static identities I suggest mothers borrow from these narratives to enable them to (re)construct their ‘good mother’ narrative which supports their identity as a woman.

3.4.1 'Reflective' Narrative

Neil's work on the feelings of birth parents and grandparents about adoption and post adoption contact identifies three patterns: 'positive acceptance', 'resignation' and 'anger and resistance' (2007). Clifton's (2012) work around birth fathers came up with not dissimilar concepts of 'affiliators', 'resigners' and 'vindicators'. The 'reflective' narrative in some way encompasses all of these allowing for stories through which mothers apart are able to make sense of their 'incompleteness' by looking back over what has taken place to extract meaning.

In naming this narrative I had much to consider. I rejected 'learning' and 'realisation' due to a suggestion that participants now knew or realised something they didn't not know before. In naming this narrative 'reflective' I draw parallels with my own reflective (and reflexive) journey in this study, with the therapeutic world and reflective practice championed within social care. Aisha is able to reflect on the significance becoming a mother had in her life. Speaking of her life before her child she told me it was:

'Painful really. Umm. A lot of erm, a lot of people hurt me over the years... and I didn't really know what love was and ... my son showed me that'.

This quote is reminiscent of Lockwood's suspended mother who "indicates that having children served as an incentive to make lifestyle changes with motherhood providing a sense of purpose and meaning to their lives" (Lockwood, 2013, p. 260). Aisha draws on the notion of mothering as a primary identity and speaks of the learning which having a child gave her in contrast the pain of her earlier life when people hurt her.

More than one mother told a story in which they themselves were positioned as the gatekeeper as a means of protecting themselves from further hurt.

The reflective narrative allows women to acknowledge what has happened in the past as a means of learning from and processing ‘mistakes’ and the gaps in their mothering. Interesting to me was the relationship women constructed between their children’s upbringing and their own childhoods, often located as a means of demonstrating the way in which they wished their children to have different experiences. Zoe reflected a link between what she had been aware of as a child between her parents as having affected her experiences in an abusive marriage:

‘when it comes to affection, I’d become quite emotionally distant from everybody at the time my kids had been taken and I do think a lot of it is down to my relationship that I had with my mum.’

3.4.2 Quest

“You may tread me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I’ll rise” (Maya Angelou)

Franks’ ‘Quest Narrative’ around illness describes the way in which the teller is able to lead their own story:

“Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it... the quest is defined by the ill person’s belief that something is to be gained through the experience.” (Frank, 2013, p. 115) which is recognisable in Zoe’s quote below:

‘it all started coming clearer and I kind of formulated a plan in my head for myself of what I wanted to do and what I wanted to achieve and [be] the parent I want to be for when my little people come home and that’s kind of how I, I kind of keep it together’.

Within quest narratives a purpose is found in the pain of illness, replaced in this study with separation from children. Some participants’ legal or practical ‘fight’ is over, their

children have permanent placements or have grown up and their current quest is to stay well, maintain their contact and be a role model for their child by whatever means they can - for the opportunity to fulfil a fuller mothering role in the future.

In finding a purpose mothers powerfully construct their worth. Zoe recounts how she inspired another woman to leave a violent partner after sharing her story with her:

'I had a brilliant reaction off one person. It actually got her to leave her partner, who was abusing her, because I told her what I'd been through and a lot of the reasons that my big three weren't returned, is because what I'd been through in the past and that's an amazing reaction and I would hope everybody could react like that in some way and take it as a positive'.

Nicola described her experience of delivering training to prospective adopters as part of peer involvement project:

'It's very genuine. People are very open and honest and they relate to both sides. Cos they're adopting but they can relate to the birth mother, especially after meeting us, you know they can understand, you know, how hard it is for us... and that we're, we're appreciative of them as well. I think that surprises them. That we're appreciative of their, what they do, you know... that they're there for us kids'

3.4.3 Realisations

'you don't realise when you're in that bubble 'til you're out of it and then when you are out of it it's too late.' (Marie)

A word often used by women is 'realise'. For Marie, having been in successive violent relationships, the time away from her children had given her the opportunity to realise

the impact this had on her children. She acknowledged that the children were affected by the shouting and verbal abuse which went on when they were out of the room.

Similarly Zoe describes the time it took her to realise the need to leave her partner:

'the social worker said to me "Zoe, you need to get away, I can get you away, we can go now". I wish I'd of said 'just open the car, I'm coming', I wish I had. But ultimately it was the death of my friend that really made it very clear that no matter what I was to do in my life, Andrew will always bring everything crashing down around me.'

Alongside some stories of realisation and learning about what was wrong prior to separation and at times a need for things to change were contradictory stories of how things were in fact going ok and that if perhaps things were different children may not have been taken away. These were particularly prevalent in situations where domestic abuse had been present.

3.4.4 Responsibility

Many women talked of responsibility as affecting the levels of pain felt:

'it's my fault they've gone and that hurts because it's my fault and I have to try and manage my hurt' (Trish).

Acknowledging the need for her children to be taken at that time, Darcy spoke of respecting how her children were taken into care. They had been taken from school at the end of the day avoiding a scene outside her home in the view of neighbours on the estate. She lets us know she is able to give people their 'due' when they act fairly and do things she values such as the social worker who had agreed to propose contact for Darcy and her children be maintained in court:

'and I'll give her her due she said it in court to the judge'.

3.4.5 I take responsibility/am not to blame

'I've had to call the police to the house so many times to remove him and then again it's my poor choices because I've chose to remain with him.' (Zoe)

This dichotomy of 'I take responsibility' and 'it's not my fault' was present in most interviews and in the focus group discussion. I have had to consider that perhaps these are not quite in opposition to each other – they are two voices which sit side by side – 'I am responsible for staying in the relationship' and 'I am not responsible for the abuse I (and the children) experienced' – a dichotomy illustrated by Zoe's quote above. I propose that where this dissonance could be seen as contradictory might also be seen as context setting. I felt this was particularly so when women were not engulfed by anger.

Dissonance between contradictory thoughts in people in situations where they feel their identity is threatened can be a source of stress in itself for a parent (Festinger, 1957; Schofield et al, 2010). Schofield et al (2010) recognise that where anger is present following the removal of a child, acknowledgement of feelings and identity as parents allows for more positive professional/service-user relationships. Marie's reflections on contact say a lot about the challenge of supervised contact and also demonstrates this insight in precipitating separation:

'Knowing I've got to be watched... with my children. When it wasn't me that's done nothing wrong to 'em. It were just my fault and the choice of partners that I made.'

These two ideas of not doing wrong and also finding fault in herself sit side by side.

Identifying mother blaming in the context of domestic violence Katz (2014) calls for more work to look beyond the unilateral model which sees children as passive beings.

This involves the mother being held responsible for what is often termed the 'failure to protect' (Katz. 2014; Lapierre. 2008).

Zoe's acceptance of responsibility alongside her blame for her partner's poor behaviour is articulated below:

'Our big three won't be coming home because of the beatings I've taken, the way you've [ex-partner] been in the past, all the drinking, all your stupid nonsense, all the way you carried on for years and you should have gone a long time ago and you will go now and he did, he went'.

To further illustrate the dichotomy I take the example of Aisha who says of her child:

'I want him to for.. forgive me really... because I know that deep down, that it is prob... it is my fault that he was taken away....'

Here she accepts some responsibility yet she also states '*I don't feel like I had the chance*', suggesting a lack of fairness in the outcome of adoption.

3.4.6 Disclosure

I shall examine the choices women make about how they speak or don't speak about the absence of their children. Zoe linked being able to talk about her separation to the fact that she felt no shame about what had happened and is clear that she 'would never go out and purposely lie to somebody' but thinks thoroughly about who and why she might tell someone:

'I kind of protect those who don't need to know. It's like sat at the hairdressers, young girl who's cutting my hair doesn't need to know...if I feel that your conversation that I could have with you would mean anything of importance, I'll tell you about myself. But if I've no need to, I don't see the point of putting myself through that pain or... putting anyone else, because you don't know how they're going to react. For all you know, they could have been in exactly the same situation and they could be exactly like me. But they might not be and they might not be able to, "oh my god, well what have you done?" They might think I'm some sort of baby breaker or something'.

Zoe presents herself as a woman with capacity to think thoroughly about both her own wellbeing and that of others she encounters. She is someone who has the privilege of people she describes as good friends and who recognise her strengths while knowing all that she has experienced.

3.4.7 Rock bottom as a point of reference

In relation to the concept of rock bottom discussed within the previous narrative (see page***) many women felt reaching rock bottom was a point from which they reflect, make decisions or move on in some way. For most women their rock bottom was in the

past and often referred to as a place or time to which they did not wish to return. As Sally told me:

'I've gone from really rock bottom to being ok.. I'm not going back there I'm not'.

Sally's determination not to return to rock bottom supports her to maintain her wellbeing by accessing support when needed, by keeping her alcohol consumption low and by ensuring she does not let her children take advantage of her again.

Elizabeth speaks of her present day cycling relationship with reaching rock bottom, asserting her knowledge that she needs help:

'I am asking for help. I am asking for help, I am screaming out for help but I know that isn't the right way to go about it'.

She articulates her cycle of drinking and poor mental health as being tied up with the absence of her daughter and difficult negotiations usually between her and her mother around contact with her daughter and that the marker of 'rock bottom' is usually signified by *'ending up in the cells'*.

3.4.8 Relationships to accessing support

Elizabeth clearly distinguishes ways different services are able to support her and her relationship to them. Elizabeth breaks down the ways mental health support does and does not meet her needs. Describing the Samaritans she told me:

'they can never give you opinions or anything and sometimes I find that difficult.. But sometimes I need to talk. I just need to say it out loud... which helps'.

The Community Mental Health Team 24 hour telephone line is useful because:

'they can kind of feedback a little bit... they can get someone sent out the next day if they think I need it. But I am with the Community Mental health Team at the moment anyway'.

In terms of the 'Clinic':

'They just kind of assess, see to where you are at and see you best to treat you...either regular appointments with the CPN and regular appointments with the doctor.'

Elizabeth recognises that support groups:

'do help you but they do trigger other stuff as well'.

Finally when Elizabeth finds herself in the police cell this offers an opportunity to

'kinda sit and reflect'.

3.4.9 Reflecting on relationships

Recognising that narratives are told within the context of many relationships (Plummer, 1995), integral to the stories I heard were relationships in which women found themselves. Mothers apart are forced to reflect on the limited roles they have in their children's lives. Reflection may lead a mother towards a deeper, potentially healthier understanding of her own situation or a reinforcement of injustice which may serve to be more limiting to them in future relationships with professionals. "For some people, feelings of distrust and betrayal could have long lasting consequences affecting their ability to work with professionals; not just the individual they felt let them down but others from the same team or agency" (Neil et al, 2010, p. 89).

Drawing on Neil's 'positive acceptance' and Clifton's 'affiliators', mothers spoke of ways in which they have worked with, accepted and resisted, outcomes of separation. Shifts between 'acceptance' and 'resistance' and the co-existence of both were articulated differently by each participant relating to relationships they hold. Darcy's vast and complex web of characters stands in contrast to Marie's narrative referring only to

professionals, foster carers, her children and but fleetingly of her own mother, no doubt as a consequence of the isolation occurring as a result of relationship abuse.

Darcy described over ten years of involvement with services and a complex relationship with her children's social worker. Asked whether she got on with the social worker she replied:

'I do now yeah, cos I think, I think I've got to work with them now. At the time I just thought I can't do with that Lucy [social worker], she's took my kids. I told her to her face "I said I hate you".

Darcy does, however, appreciate certain aspects of the situation which have been handled well such as the day on which the children were taken:

'I think that was really good... I'm on a big estate. Everybody knows everybody... I think if the kids had have come home from school and then Lucy had come and took 'em, I think Sarah [daughter], especially, would have gone kicking and screaming down the street. Neighbours would have been out'.

For Trish moments of acceptance are interspersed with hurt which she sees as being triggered by instances where her mothering identity is interrupted by children.

3.4.10 (Re)negotiating mothering

Nicola described disparity between feelings she had for the children she lost to adoption to feelings for the adult women with whom she was reunited. When asked how her daughters might view her she suggested:

'Just... their birth mum who they are getting to know. Just that really, nothing stronger or ..'

She elaborates and acknowledges that she had high expectations of an intense mother/child bond, saying it was:

'Difficult that because they were everything to me, all these years and now that I've met 'em. I am getting a closer bond with Claire than I am with Anna. .. They were everything for all those years and now I've met 'em and it doesn't live up to.. to you know the expectation of meeting 'em and it all being roses and flowers and everything... You know, it's quite hard because they are two strangers... So, they're totally strange women that you've got an attachment to, a deep down rooted attachment to that, that can't be broken. But at the same time.. it's not easily built on'.

3.4.11 Moving forwards

Having renegotiated their mothering roles mothers apart draw upon their reflections in order to construct stories to support them in their everyday lives. As Zoe tells us:

'it's not that I want to forget my daughter, but I try not to have her on the front of my mind all the time'.

In asserting that she doesn't wish to forget about her child she lets us know she is a 'good mother' and yet also acknowledges her need to be able to function by not constantly thinking about her daughter:

'In some respects I think of some of the really, really bad times I've had and maybe I've been given this opportunity away from my kids to put my life right'...maybe, it's a blessing in one way. It's a bloody stinging one'.

The prompt I used to encourage women to speak of the future asked of hopes to which women consistently wished to have more involvement in their children's lives as well as a consistent message about a challenge to stay well. Within this section I have described ways in which mothers construct individual stories of 'reflection' as a means

of making sense of their separation and to support their good mother narratives in relation to their incompleteness.

4.1 Chapter Four: Concluding discussion

‘They use ordinary magic

to keep the room safe,

strong and clever women

who understand what it is to be broken’ (Darby et al, 2014, p. 87)

Having amassed a wealth of data, read widely and reflected often, I was aware there were choices as to what to ‘select’ and how to shape this final discussion. Returning to my commitment to incorporate elements of community-based participatory research I turned to the focus group members taking their suggestions to attend to issues of mental health, contact, trust generally advocating for more support to be available to mothers apart (see appendix 21).

Hearing and re-hearing the focus group recording was a mostly comforting experience heartily reassuring me of the value of group work. Women heard, encouraged and respected each other’s experiences, recognisable as activists able to make links between their situations and wider political debates, each bringing their own angle to the discussion, at different stages of their activist journey reminding me of the political nature of women’s personal lives. I felt pride and privilege being part of the skilful discussion offering humility, insight and humour to give space to their interpretation and vision of the research process. My reflections reinforced the significance of emotion in the research process (Jewkes, 2011; Lockwood, 2013; Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2014). I live and work in the area I grew up in from the age of 7 and gave birth to my children in the same hospitals as a number of the participants. I have spent much time working collaboratively with mothers apart from their children to inform and shape services, create resources and deliver training. Over time my experience and knowledge has

fused with that of women accessing support and guiding the work of the specialist project.

I do not claim this group or interview participants to be representative of the whole mother's apart population due to the small sample size. These women have engaged in a service which values and gives voice to their experiences and identity as mothers apart and exposed them to a model, not universally available to mothers apart. I do however claim this small study justifies further exploration of the contribution mothers apart can play locally and nationally to inform and create dialogue within the realm of self-help and also on service and policy levels.

4.2 Ours by blood

I propose two narratives from which mothers apart are able to construct a 'moral identity' (Lockwood, 2013). All women told stories from both narratives falling within the grander narrative of 'good mother'. The relationship between the narratives is essential, the dislocation of 'incompleteness' demands the 'reflective' process required of the second narrative discussed.

Mothers apart articulate loss and fracturing of their identities as a result of separation irrespective of where their children are living or levels of contact. This defining loss is a critical event in their lives, to be 'lived with' as opposed to 'got over'. Their status contradicts judgements, including their own of 'good mothers' being synonymous with 'resident mothers', forcing them to reassess the limiting narratives available to them. For many mothers apart the separation from children will occur following other disruptions in their lives (Lockwood, 2013, Schofield et al, 2010, Neil, 2013) and the return of children will not necessarily bring to a close the impact of separation. Having explored the separation from children in relation to Franks' (2013) narratives of chaos and restitution

I have constructed narratives of ‘incompleteness’ and ‘reflection’. This research highlights the need to pay heed to the impact living apart from children has on women’s lives, particularly in relation to the dearth of stories about living apart and the social stigma attached to doing so.

4.3 Limiting narratives

Inescapable to this discussion is the link between the stigma and blaming which occurs for mothers apart and their sense of identity and wellbeing. Limiting narratives of parental roles, specifically mothering, give little space to those occupying non-conventional mothering roles, further stigmatising experiences of living apart from children and feelings of loss. Consequently impact on identity and wellbeing may inhibit possibilities mothers may have to secure the return of their children to their care. I have drawn on studies in which the separation from children has happened in the context of adoption, foster care, imprisonment and divorce and found parallels with experiences in terms of disenfranchised grief (Doka 1989).

4.4 Recommendations

‘What’s going to come out of all of this?’ (Kelly)

“Telling stories about difficult times in our lives creates order and contains emotions, allowing a search for meaning and enabling connection with others” (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). Telling stories is a process in which we all engage and to which we attach meaning and I have found that being able to reconstruct and renegotiate mothering narratives offers women opportunities to reflect upon meanings and resist the dominant narratives of mothers apart.

Through more stories, recognition can be given to the fullness and variance of the experiences of mothers apart focusing less on causes, events and inadequacies and

more on the assets, experience and strengths mothers apart are able to offer themselves, each other, their families and communities.

4.5 More stories

I advocate more stories by and about the experiences of mothers apart be available in order that more useful and less damaging narratives can emerge, lessening distress and dissonance between the cultural ideal of mothering and their own status as non-conventional mothers and promoting positive self-image and healthy adjustment.

Neil (2013) advocates for support available to birth relatives to be adoption focused, taking into account of the specific impact this type of loss and associated processes may incur for a woman. I broaden this to advocate for services which account for the gendered impact that separation from children, in whatever form, has on a mother's mental health and wellbeing.

4.6 Future research

Drawing to the end of this study I am aware of further conclusions which could be drawn from the data and would welcome the opportunity to revisit it. As with the 'reflective' narrative mothers apart are able to reconstruct their narratives I understand that time and new experiences may provide me "with new ways in which to make sense of the accounts of those who participated" (Andrews et al, 2013, p. 208).

This research highlights the value that elements of CBPR can bring to working with mothers apart and would therefore recommend that future research aims to further reduce and circumvent the power relations normally involved in research and development' by "giving the marginalized a voice to new levels by facilitating their

involvement in the design, implementation, and outcomes of programs” (Kesby, 2005, p. 2037).

This study emphasises the importance of contextualising narratives of mothers apart and a longitudinal study would be helpful to bring understanding to shifting narratives following the course of separation- and perhaps reunion. This may then form the basis of practice development.

4.7 Practice recommendations

I advocate for practices which acknowledge the impact living apart from children has on women’s wellbeing and which proactively seek to identify women they work with who live or have lived apart from their children. I maintain a need for gender specific services which value mothers apart stories and encourage contributions mothers apart may make recognising the benefit these offer to themselves, their children and their carers as well as wider family members and professionals. Where women are seeking support and are living apart from their children I recommend services should anticipate issues relating to separation may warrant exploration. I urge family services where social work practitioners allocated to children to proactively recognise the needs of the mother as being linked to those of the child.

I advocate for services to consider the actual experience of contact for a family which promote individual parents to be able to make ‘whatever contribution they are able to make’ (Schofield et al, 2010) to the welfare of their child(ren). In doing this contact arrangements, whether direct or indirect facilitate this contributing process, meeting the needs of all involved. Where adoption is the outcome to consider possibilities of direct contact which Neil et al (2014) have explored within a longitudinal study, and found to have positive outcomes in situations where a number of variables are present.

4.8 Trust Issues

In order that my recommendations be followed recognition must be given to the need for professionals to build trusting relationships with mothers apart involved with the care of their children with a conscious awareness of power dynamics.

4.9 Dissemination

Following my commitment to CBPR and my hope for this study to have a voice outside academia I shall strive in time to write articles or present findings at conferences which might be accessed by those professionals named within the focus group. Where possible I shall strive for opportunities to co-write with mothers apart themselves.

4.10 Conclusion

More stories and narratives will be of benefit to mothers apart, mothers on the cusp of separation from their children, professionals and academics and humans generally offering alternatives to limiting, fragmented judgement-laden stories often heard today. Each of their stories are distinct and in listening to individual stories we are able to contextualise women's lives and gain greater understanding of the uniqueness of their experiences which can only enhance our work as academics, professionals, activists and human beings.



I have to get on.

I do it for me kids

I'm not dead yet

I could have been

I lost my kids

I could have killed

I wanted to kill myself then

I'm still here

Trish

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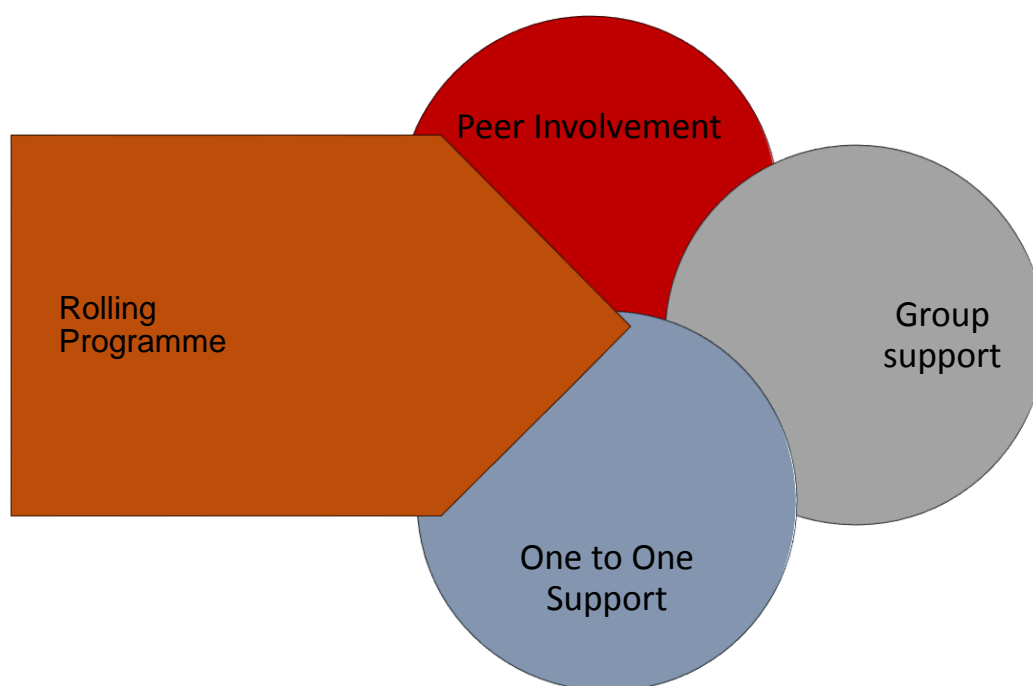
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Appendices

Appendix 1 - The work of the Specialist Project

The usual route following an initial referral meeting within the specialist project is via the rolling programme, alongside which women may receive limited one to one support or get involved with the peer involvement strand of work.



- Rolling Programme for newly referred mothers apart – supporting mothers apart to identify and work through the issues they face linking to the separation from their children.
- One to one support – limited on going support to members of the mothers apart service including via newsletter sent four times a year
- Group support – Ongoing facilitated support groups for mothers apart from their children who have attended the rolling programme.
- Peer Involvement –opportunities for mothers apart to engage in activities which support and develop the work of the specialist project. This work

recognises the importance of being able to 'give back' to services and have experiences recognised as well as being able to offer their time.

Appendix 2 - Opportunities Peer Involvement within the specialist project

The step from service user to volunteer can be a great one and so 'peer involvement' allows mothers to be able to give back while also using the service by taking on roles within the service:

Contracted consultancy arrangement with University to plan and deliver the following alongside mothers apart from the specialist project:

- 2 presentations per year for social work students (undergraduate and postgraduate level) prior to going on placement which allow students to gain an insight into the experiences of mothers apart and to explore some of the challenges of working with families where children do not live with their mother.
- Annual day long workshop for practitioners studying for Msc Advanced Safeguarding providing opportunities to reflect on their practice and the impact which separation from children has on women's lives through facilitated group exercises and discussion.
- Annual workshop in which mothers living apart from their supporting interview skills for first year social work students.
- Involvement in interviewing for social work students.

Adoption preparation group training, delivered both locally and regionally

- Delivery and preparation of 5 sessions per year for prospective adoptive parents who are currently being assessed by local authority adoption team. By dispelling some of the myths about mothers apart and creating opportunities for dialogue these sessions have two main aims. The first is to encourage adopters to engage in letterbox contact with birth parents once they have adopted a child. The second is to demonstrate the benefits of meeting with a birth mother prior to adopting a child.

Support roles within the specialist project for mothers apart to take on specific roles within the project:

- Contributing to newsletter
- Preparing mail-outs

- Co-facilitation of groupwork
- 'Checking-in' roles to support new group members
- Representing the specialist project at both in house and external events.

Appendix 3 - Symposium abstract

[VIOLENCE: CHILDREN, FAMILY & SOCIETY CONFERENCE 2015](#)

University of Northampton June 24th to 26th 2015

Professional responses to mothers, with and without their children, when there is violence and abuse

Symposium Convenor: Laura Monk

A cross-disciplinary panel of researchers explore interactions between mothering, mother-child relationships, abuse and violence through research conducted in social work, psychology, early childhood studies, and human and health sciences. The papers span a range of circumstances where mother-child relationships can be threatened, targeted, interfered with and affected by abuse and violence. They are thematically linked by a focus on the responses of related services and professionals in these situations.

Social work practice in pre-birth child protection is awarded critical thought through ethnographic study where issues of power and control are identified when there is familial violence. Maternal alienation is investigated through accounts of women who describe strategies that include exploitation of institutions and manipulation of professionals who unwittingly collude with perpetrators. A gender specific mental health and wellbeing project in the North of England has drawn on the strength of mothers' experiences of separation from their children to create powerful resources and generate social change. Research that examines how professional responses may help or hinder mothers and children to attain a life free from abuse offers insights into the important matter of how professionals enable them to promote each other's long-term recoveries.

Within the prevailing culture of mother/victim-blaming, survivors who are mothers may suffer for the actions of their abusers whilst the perpetrators remain unaccountable, refuse to engage with services, continue to abuse through unsafe contact, or even gain residency of children. Although there is often a focus on the perceived flaws of the mother who is a survivor, certain practitioners and agencies recognise that the best form of child protection is mother protection. It is important work for all in the field of violence and abuse to help support women to make changes that will ensure safety for them and their children at crisis point and in the long-term.

Paper 1: 'It's all optional': An exploration of power in pre-birth child protection

Ariane Critchley

Pre-birth child protection is concerned with a client who is here and yet not here – an unborn baby. It asks of parents that they participate in processes designed to safeguard the well-being of their child, whom they are yet to meet. Social workers are expected to assess the risks and needs of the baby, alongside parents and relevant professionals.

Assessing and intervening in the lives of unborn babies perceived to be at risk has become an accepted social work activity. However the practice deserves our critical thought. Page |

Focusing on those situations complicated by the risks of intra-familial violence, I will seek to explore the place of power and control in pre-birth child protection.

Paper 2: Maternal alienation: a thematic analysis of how six mothers became separated from their children in a context of domestic violence

Laura Monk

This paper presents the findings of an investigation that extends existing research into the concept of maternal alienation (MA): when mothers are alienated from their children in a context of domestic violence. The study aims to understand the mechanisms through which MA occurs.

Paper 3: Taken From Our Care: the story of telling stories for, by and about mothers living apart from their children

Siobhan Beckwith

Witnessing violence and abuse can have a profound effect on a child's development. The reason often stated for children being removed from their mother is her 'failure to protect' from an abuser. For a mother, the removal of her children can feel like a further punishment. Relationship abuse can baffle: judges, social workers and family members ask, "*Why does she go back? Why does she choose him over her children?*" We know it is more complex - many choices are not real choices. Some women speak of "taking the beatings" as punishment for having lost their children - for the guilt and shame they feel.

I shall present and elaborate on a number of pieces from 'In our Hearts, Stories and wisdom of mothers who live apart from their children': to tell the story of the book and its journey.

Paper 4: Recovery-promoters: Ways that professionals help or hinder the recoveries of mothers and children in the aftermath of domestic abuse

Dr Emma Katz

The issue of how mothers and children can rebuild their relationships with one

another following domestic abuse is vital yet under-explored. This paper will consider

how professional interventions may help or hinder mothers' and children's

relationships with each other after they have separated from perpetrators. Using

mothers' and children's own narratives, it will explore how professionals can

strengthen mother-child relationships as part of their wider recoveries.

Appendix 4 - Methodology of literature search.

A thorough search for relevant literature was conducted using the following strategies:

1. I performed a search of electronic databases using keywords. I spent time looking at literature I already had to consider which keywords would generate the most relevant literature. As Cronin et al (2008) recommend, I took time to consider the terms of my search carefully and combinations of words. The key words I used were broken down into groups broadly coming under the heading of 'mother', 'impact', 'living apart' and 'qualitative' using the Boolean operators ('AND', 'OR' and 'NOT') (Ely and Scott, 2007).. These were then broadened into categories which would have similar meaning or generate similar data. Accordingly under 'mother' (mother* OR parent OR "birth parent" OR birth), under 'impact' came (stigma OR impact OR anxiety OR isolation), under 'living apart' came (adoption OR foster* OR "living apart" OR separat* OR "non-resident" OR "non resident") and under 'qualitative' came (interview OR life experience OR narrative OR qualitative). As a means of excluding studies around fathering I also used NOT ('father').
1. A review of my own existing literature in the field. Having specialised in this field for over seven years I have built up a body of literature and knowledge of authors and performed author searches to review up to date and relevant literature.
2. An author based search to review relevant literature written by authors with whom I was already familiar.

3. I accessed the grey literature via resources of relevant organisations and charities, some of whose resources I have utilised in my practice. These were British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), Women's Aid and the Adoption Research initiative, some of which were useful to include statistics to build up a context for this study.
4. Having attended a number of conferences and lectures during the course of my study I was able to draw on material from those I heard speak and with whom I networked.

I selected databases which I felt would elicit relevant material to my study (Cronin et al, 2008). I accessed Scopus, Community Care Inform and CINAHL with a time restriction of 1997 to date. This date was based upon the fact that one of the key articles to this study had been written by Babcock in 1998 and wanted to ensure articles which may relate to Babcock's would be given the opportunity to be accessed. All literature was limited to English language publications.

Following the keyword search I then utilised the distinct mechanisms of each database in order to hone the search further. I used Scopus as a means of carrying out author cited searches which I did on the following articles, each holding key relevance to the participants and this study :

Sandra Kielty - Working hard to resist a 'bad mother' label: narratives of non-resident motherhood (2008).

Beth Neil - Coming to terms with the loss of a child: the feelings of parents and grandparents about adoption and post adoption contact (2007).

Kielty's (2008) article, as a narrative study, specifically addresses the gendered issues of mothering apart while Neil's (2008) article is concerned with the impact

non-consenting separation involving state intervention has on 'birth relatives' in the context of adoption.

My keyword search of CINAHL located 180 results, of which I rejected 170 because they were not relevant to this study.

I accessed materials through Community Care Inform (Children's) within which my search terms did not work and so adapted my search by following the threads of 'Adoption and Fostering and then Birth Parents to access materials. This yielded a selection of research, key documents, legislation, case law and guides totalling 120 documents. For the purpose of this literature search I assessed the 31 research articles from which utilised those which related to the experience of the birth parent or birth mother directly. I selected five research articles which were directly concerned with the perspective of the birth family. Other resources were drawn upon within the thesis as grey literature with which to set context.

Appendix 5 - Transcript examples

I have chosen to include two sections of transcript as examples. I have chosen two pieces which I feel contrast each other as Marie's responses are far shorter than Darcy's and required much more prompting. I did not include full transcripts for reasons of confidentiality. I recognise the specialist project may be identifiable and that increasing risks of participants being recognisable. Transcripts also contained much content of a personal nature relating to family members who had not given consent to their stories being shared.

Part one

Marie – lines 62- 105

R Erm and what's it like when you see them?

M Like we've never been apart

R Right, ok and so erm and does it so sometimes you've got 6 children in the same room. How does that feel?

M I feel complete. Like my family's together but it is in a false environment and it hurts when I go.

R Right. So what's false about the environment?

M Just the surroundings, you get watched over.. somebody types ..erm. Obviously you've got to watch what you say to your children which I don't speak out of turn to my children anyway.

R Yeah

M So, but

R But the fear is that if you said something..

M That they wouldn't agree with it and it would go back to social services

R And so is it a contact officer then that is usually..?

M Two contact supervise officers in the same room as me.

R So you have two every time?

M Yeah

R That's intense then?

M Yeah, its' not nice

R So how do you deal with that then Marie?

M Just enjoy my time with my children, just make the most of it cos that's the only time I get

R Just let me know. Just before we get started we spoke about. You've got contact this afternoon

M Yeah

R ..and I'm noticing that your upset already so just tell me if you need a break or if you want to stop Marie and that's a genuine. How do you feel Marie?

M At the minute, pretty shit. Knowing I've got to be watched..

R right

M . with my children. When it wasn't me that's done nothing wrong to em. It were just my fault and the choice of partners that I made. (sobbing, long pause)

R So are you meaning the reasons that you're in the situation now?

M Yeah

R Do you want to speak a little about that? My questions, I know you've looked at the questions but they don't have to be done in order.

M Basically.. I've gone from one violent relationship to another one and you're not, you don't realise when you're in that bubble 'til your out of it and then when you are out of it it's too late.

R And so what is it..are you saying you don't realise when you're in the bubble Marie?

M That my children were affected by the verbal abuse and the shouting.

R Mm

M You don't realise at the time. Even if they are in the other room.

R And whats.. But you feel you have realised that now?

M I've realised that now. Yeah

Appendix part two

R Yeah, and what other hopes Darcy, hopes for you and the kids.

D Well, I'm just hoping the kids are alright where they are. So long as they're looked after and that and they get there, what they wanna do and that. I'm just bothered about Arran at the minute, cos obviously he's only a short term placement. I'm just wondering at the minute where he's gonna be going. They're keeping him at Moorside school up at Hopton so hopefully they'll be getting him a family in the Valley area where he can get to school. I know at the minute he lives over Denby Dale so they're having to bring him from there in a morning and a taxi home all the way over to Hopton which is a bit of a trail for him.

R It's also near to you isn't it?

D Yeah, oh, he knows, goes past in a morning and he says my Nanna lives there. But what they've done because they know it's upsetting him they've started going the other way now up [name of town] to [name of village] that way

R Ok

D Where before they were going up New Road to the village. Obviously he knows the village cos he went to playgroup there. Then they go up Church Street and they turn up.. My Nanna lives up there. So, he was upset.

R That's hard for him.

D It was upsetting Yeah.

R So, in terms of your hopes. When I ask you about hopes I notice you resist.. Cos, you're not sure... Is there uncertainty looking in to the future..

D Yeah. If Lucy said yeah that's fine then yeah. But it might not. Cos she said I'm good when they're little. So, she might say go work in a nursery or something or do like kids in infant school. I'd probably be able to get away with it up to juniors but if it were to go into like High school I think or look for something else. I like elderly care.

R Yeah, so it's young 'uns and the old 'uns but it's just those in between
(laughter)

D So I can do both. So, if she said no you can't do that I suppose I could on wi' care. When I went to the job centre she said the only things I'm gonna say to you is because I've read your medical notes is because you have got arthritis in your neck

R Yeah

D And you've got back problems as well, I wouldn't recommend you do that sort of work.

R Right

D Cos there is a lot of lifting.

R Right

D With elderly people. Some of em can be really thin and others you can get...

R Yeah

D So if you come to pick somebody up and then your drop em then you know where are you? You're gonna feel guilty and then if they fall and break their hip or summat they can report you. Oh, it could be a nightmare. But that's the only two things I've ever known. Is like old people.

R And you like old people do you?

D Old people and kids. I've never really set my mind on anything else cos my friend up the road says why don't you go cleaning or.. I says no, (intake of breath). It's not for me

R It's not for you

D It's for her, she goes cleaning in the morning at the co-op in the village and she cleans at night time at the bank but that's not me. I don't want to do that. In other words I want to do something better than just going round with a bloody mop bucket cos I do all cleaning at home for me and Callum so I don't really want to go out and do more. Summat else. Like the job centre woman says I've got an idea Darcy (voice lifts) and it's only an idea. She says why don't you do some voluntary work?.. And I went oh, I've never thought of that actually. Well, you've got your shops in town. Like you said you like the elderly, I said yeah.

R There will be shops locally in Mirfield wont there?

D MM She said have a look in the village where you are. Go into the charity shops there. See if they need any hand, even if it's just sorting clothes out. It's a couple of hours out of the house. Alright you don't get paid for it but it gets you out o' the house. Meet other people, get a friend and that. Sort of sort stuff out. Cathy says she's done it. She used to work at the Age Concern. She said mum, it's good. I were upstairs, sorting clothes out and sticking labels. She said you could do that. Then

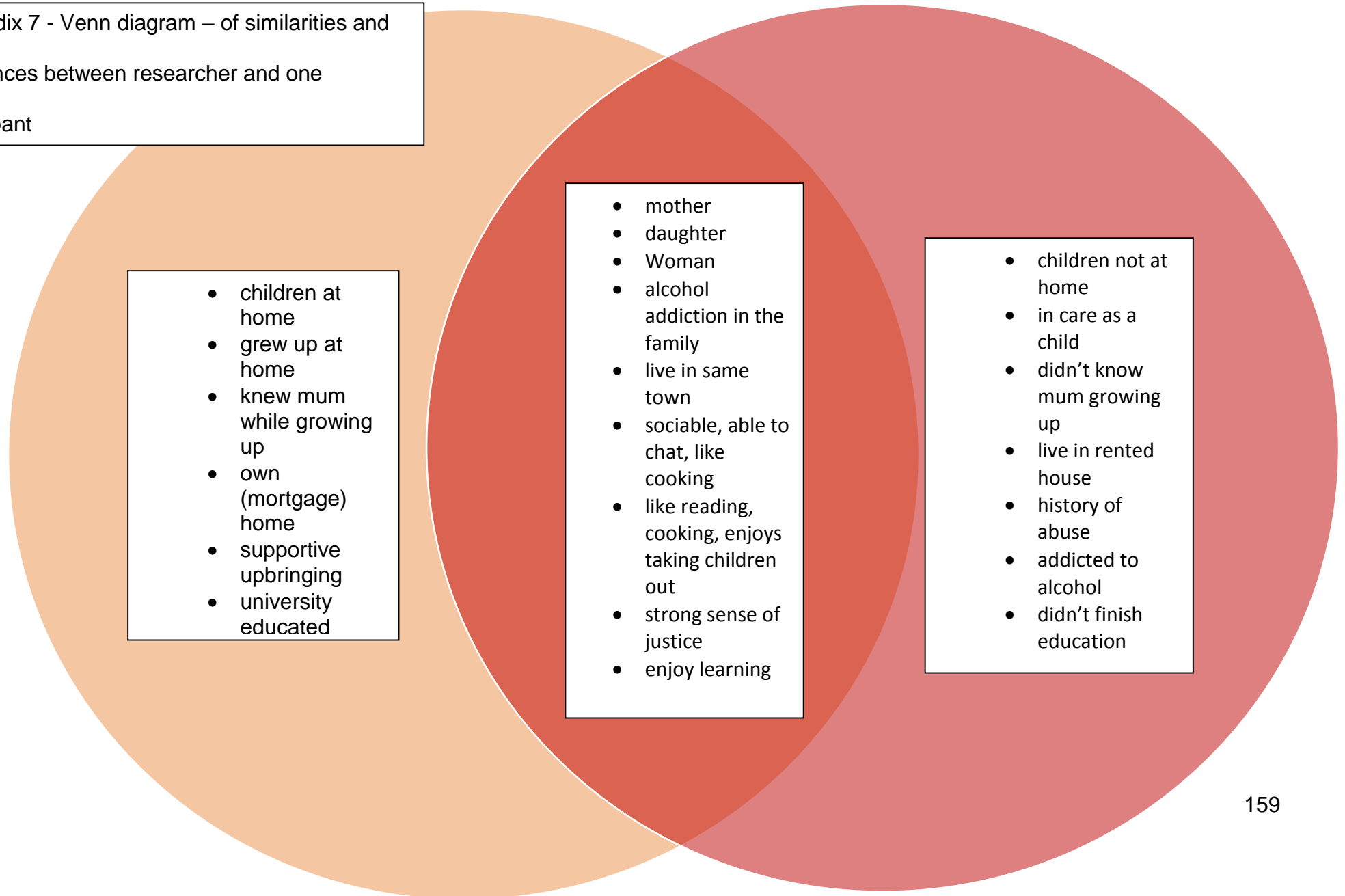
I've also gotta think about my arm as well cos that's proper week erm. That's twice I've broke it in the last two years.

Appendix 6 - Section of I-poem from Zoe's transcript as an example. Lines 341-381

I've made friends
kind of thing I have
I have a lot to offer
when I see people
I think other people
I have
I've got a few close friends
I think there's times
I could have really gone to pieces
I don't know
I've obviously got something
I had a terrible relationship with my mum
I've had good friends
I think he was really threatened
I think he was scared
I have so many good relationships
I hope my baby has a good life
I just hope
I can sail this kind of even keel
that I can cope
I can get them back
I'm just doing everything I can that

if I can keep to just that
I was running on empty
if I wouldn't have got into such a bad state
maybe I would have made better choices
if I'd had a different attitude
I don't just want them to have a good mum
I want them to have a good role model
I think a lot of the bad
I had
I weren't parented very well
I think
If I had been parented better
I would have seen
If I would have had a better role model
I would have probably dealt with him differently
I mean I would never have done that
I always tried to be different
I'm not passing the blame

Appendix 7 - Venn diagram – of similarities and differences between researcher and one participant



Appendix 8 - Section of reflexive work:

Privilege

I have two children who live with me and my partner in a home that we chose to be in. Prior to the birth of my children I was not subject to a parenting assessment. I had both my children in hospital going against the advice of the consultant to have a vaginal birth after caesarean with my second. I chose when to leave hospital, whether to have my children immunised. I chose to breastfeed on demand and be led by my children to end. I chose to attend very few organised mother and baby activities with my first son and more after the birth of my second when a number of the friends I had left the area.

I chose to have my boys sleep in my bed as babies. I lied to the first midwife about this who looked at his cot and was assured he slept in it. The midwife of my second son didn't ask the question – though I had steeled myself to be honest and deal with the response – having managed to not suffocate my first child.

My children are generally at school on time and (particularly in September) are reasonably smart. I am not concerned if they arrive late occasionally or looking slightly dishevelled assuming that people will understand the challenges of family life and be understanding. I share worries I have about my children with school staff without the fear of exposing myself to scrutiny or social care interventions.

I make decisions about my children's diet, education, haircuts, clothing, activities and holidays. I am the first person to be contacted if my child is ill while at school, I am invited to celebration assemblies if they receive an award. I watch them in school

performances and sporting activities. I make and attend medical appointments with my children.

I choose how to discipline my children, when to allow them to take steps towards independence and offer advice and share my own experiences to support them to make decisions.

As a family unit we have support from wider family members and friends. I have friends who have known me for a long time who I feel I can depend on and who listen. I sometimes struggle to manage my work/academic/family life blend. I try to keep the appointments I make, be on time and keep our house reasonably tidy – sometimes I do better at this than others but I do not fear the over-intrusive gaze of professionals on my home environment.

I named this piece privilege because I have come to realise that unlike many women in the world, including participants in this study, I have the privilege of being able to take much in my life for granted. My work and the reflexive nature of my study heighten my awareness of and give me the space and purpose to explore and name some, not all, of the privileges I hold.

Appendix 9 – Information about the Working Group

Working Group

A 'Working Group' made up of 'peers' meets four times a year in which active service users are involved in dialogue and decision making around current and future work with the project lead and volunteer organiser. Tasks are allocated which include writing for a newsletter, fundraising and administration. The project provides opportunities for group members to take on specific roles within the project whether it be preparing mail-outs, co-facilitation of the groups or 'checking-in' roles to support new group members.

Appendix 10 - School Research Ethics Panel (SREP) application form

Please note: Original appendices referred to in the form below are not included but appendices pertinent to the dissertation have been attached in their own right and referenced within the body of the document.

THE UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD **School of Human and Health Sciences – School Research Ethics Panel**

OUTLINE OF PROPOSAL

Please complete and return via email to:

Kirsty Thomson SREP Administrator: hhs_srep@hud.ac.uk

Name of applicant: Siobhan Beckwith

Title of study: The narratives of mothers living apart from their children and the opportunities to learn from them.

Department:

Date sent: 12 February 2014

Issue	Please provide sufficient detail for SREP to assess strategies used to address ethical issues in the research proposal
Researcher(s) details	Siobhan Beckwith
Supervisor details	Professor Eric Blyth Dr Rosemary Rae
Aim / objectives	<p>This study will examine the narratives of mothers living apart from their children in the UK and explore the opportunities for learning from them. For the purpose of this form I shall refer to mothers living apart from their children as mothers apart. This study will place the narratives of mothers apart in the context of learning. I shall examine their relationship to their story of being apart from their children and also how their story resonates with others who hear some of their stories.</p> <p>This study aims to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• contribute to knowledge around mothers apart.• raise the profile of mothers apart.• create debate around the ways in which professionals can acknowledge the needs and experience of mothers apart.• understand the link between telling and hearing stories to learning, both on a personal and also a professional basis• allow participants the opportunity to share and process their narrative.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • create an evidence base for the use of community-based participatory research with mothers apart. . • create an evidence base to further develop work by the [REDACTED] which is based within [REDACTED] and for which I am the project lead in my professional capacity. • allow participants to be involved with, understand and see the relevance of research on their lives <p>Drawing on elements of Community Based Participatory Research I respect the fact that the participants themselves will have a role in guiding the ethics of this study by their participation (Banks and Armstrong, 2012). I acknowledge that each participant holds their own personal ethics and morals which have guided their experience.</p> <p>I aim for this study to be carried out to a high standard of ethics and will be guided by the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based participatory research. A guide to ethical principles and practice (NCCPE, 2012) • Code of Ethics and Conduct. The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009) • Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002) • the Data Protection Principles embodied in the UK Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA, 1998)
Brief overview of research methodology	<p>The field work will take place in 4 distinct stages:</p> <p>Stage 1 - 8 in-depth interviews will take place with mothers who live apart from their children. Interviews will be largely unstructured with some prompts available to keep participants focused where necessary.</p> <p>Stage 2 – Focus groups held with prospective adoptive parents who have taken part in a session delivered by the mothers apart peer involvement project (subsequently referred to in this documentation as the “prep group”.</p> <p>Stage 3 – Focus groups held with Social Work students studying at undergraduate and masters level who have attended a lecture delivered by the [REDACTED] peer involvement team</p> <p>Stage 4 – Focus group held with mothers living apart from their children which will be an opportunity to discuss and reflect upon early findings of my research which will then feed into my final draft. Interview participants will automatically receive an invitation to attend the focus group to enable them to see how their narratives have been interpreted. The focus group need not solely be made up of interview participants. Lists of questions which I aim to have answered are found in appendices 13 and 14.</p> <p>Narrative interviews will take place with mothers apart. This term relates to mothers who have sought support from services around their separation from their children. This tends to include – but is not exclusive to – mothers whose children have been or may be adopted, mothers whose children live with foster carers or special guardians or those whose children live with extended family</p>

	<p>members where there tends to be tension around contact. These are all mothers whose children are under 18 at the time of the interviews.</p> <p>There is often inherent mistrust and fear which creates a barrier to working with or researching minority or hard to reach groups within society. 'Understanding factors relevant to a particular community is essential to gaining trust, overcoming fears, and reducing apprehension about taking part in research, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of participation.' (Story, Hinton and Wyatt, 2010)</p> <p>It is likely that many of the participants will have been party to assessments and interviews previously linked to the care and placement of their children in which they have felt judged and powerless. It is important that their involvement within this research does not resonate with previous instances of 'sharing their story'.</p> <p>In discussing birth relatives' experiences of compulsory adoption, Neil, Cossar, Lorgelly and Young note that: 'Many birth parents felt that professionals were not always open, honest or just in their handling of the case. It was common for people to express feelings of betrayal towards those who worked with them' (Neil et al, 2010 Pg 89).</p> <p>They later note that: 'For some people, feelings of distrust and betrayal could have long lasting consequences affecting their ability to work with professionals; not just the individual they felt let them down but others from the same team or agency' (Neil et al, 2010, Pg 89)</p>
Permissions for study	<p>I have gained initial verbal permission for my study to access interview participants through the [REDACTED] project located within the [REDACTED] Wellbeing Project at [REDACTED]. I remain Project Lead for the [REDACTED] and this study is embedded within a partnership between [REDACTED] and the University of Huddersfield.</p> <p>Formal agreement shall be sought prior to focus groups between myself and [REDACTED] Adoption Team and the University of Huddersfield Social Work Division – from whom verbal agreement has already been obtained. An initial approach has been made and a willingness to allow access to participants has been confirmed by email.</p> <p>I have also discussed the study with the Working Group of the [REDACTED] project made up of group members past and present inviting individuals to speak to me about the study along the way. I have made a commitment to be transparent about my methods and also asked that my invitation for participants go in a newsletter which was agreed upon.</p>
Access to participants	<p>Access to interview participants will be through the [REDACTED] within [REDACTED]. They will be women who have accessed the service at some point but will not necessarily be active participants at the time of the interviews.</p>

	<p>Participants will be given an Information Sheet and a Statement of Support as well as verbal information about the study's aims and processes such as interview format or focus group. The Statement of Support will be given to every individual who agrees to participate in the study in advance of the individual interview/focus group and makes explicit how their wellbeing is addressed within the process.</p> <p>Participants will be made aware that their involvement is on a voluntary basis and that should they wish to withdraw no reason need be given (see Information Sheet).</p> <p>Promotional material and an invitation to get involved with the project will be placed in the [REDACTED] Newsletter which is circulated to the full mailing list of mothers who have been involved with the project since it began. Not all of these mothers will be actively receiving services at that time.</p> <p>I shall make it clear that this research is separate to my role at [REDACTED]. Mothers will be given the opportunity to contact me outside of my role within [REDACTED], for example out of work hours and premises as well as having the option to have their interview held off site. They will be given the opportunity to have the interview on the University campus. This will allow them the opportunity to visit the University and break down barriers which often exist between participants and academic institutions.</p> <p>Prior to attending the adoption prep group with the mothers apart prospective adopters will be given invitations to take part in the focus groups. The focus group will be held within six months of the adoption prep group. Prep groups take place every 2/3 months and so prospective adopters from more than one prep group may be sourced as a means of getting enough participants for a focus group – ideally 6 or 7.</p> <p>Focus groups shall take place in the following venues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [REDACTED] or university for the mothers apart and prospective adopters • University campus for Social Work Students
Confidentiality	<p>Access to interview recordings will be restricted to myself and my academic supervisors. These recordings will be stored on a computer which is password protected and will be deleted after five years.</p> <p>Interview transcripts will be made available to participants should they wish to have a copy.</p> <p>Participants will be asked to create a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.</p> <p>Participants shall be made aware that in situations where I believe someone to be at risk of danger I will have to break confidentiality. In a situation where I</p>

	<p>felt an appropriate service be informed about a safeguarding concern I would in most cases make the participant aware of the courses of action I was making. The exception would be where I had concern that informing them may further endanger a child or vulnerable adult.</p> <p>In the case of focus groups participants the consent form will include a statement in which they will agree to keep confidential anything shared by others within the focus group – see attached</p>
Anonymity	<p>Participants will be known within the study by a pseudonym which they will choose. Records of whose pseudonym relates to whose transcript prior to transcription will be kept on a password protected computer file. Similarly any other person whom they mention in their interviews/focus groups will be renamed – such as children or individual professionals.</p> <p>I shall endeavour to ensure that any other person they may mention in their interviews/focus groups are not personally identifiable.</p> <p>No identifiable data about the participants' experience will be included in the thesis or any future publication. Where it does not affect the validity of the data I shall change small details as a means of protecting participant's identity.</p> <p>I shall make participants aware that the group may well be identifiable in that it is an unusual, if not unique group. I need to be honest about the limits of anonymity and ensure that I shall do all that I can to protect their individual identity.</p> <p>I will endeavour to anticipate any threats to confidentiality and anonymity (BSA, 2002 Para. 35)</p>
Psychological support for participants	<p>In order that the research experience allows a participant to engage fully and benefit from the experience they will be offered opportunities to ask questions about the process prior to getting involved.</p> <p>Once a participant has expressed an interest in the research they will be given a copy of the relevant Information Sheet (Appendices 5 & 6) and immediately prior to the interview/focus group they will receive a copy of the correct statement of support (appendices 9-12). Both these documents will be read to the participants and they will be asked to sign the consent or consent and confidentiality statement in the case of focus groups (appendices 7 and 8). Prior to the interviews and focus groups participants will be offered the chance to 'check-in' about how they feel about their involvement.</p> <p>Drawing on the words of Sarah Kinden: 'From my experience, research is only likely to become intrusive when consent is not fully-informed consent. If participants/respondents are given adequate information then research should not feel like an intrusion into their lives, but rather a welcome opportunity to reflect and learn in a supportive process' (Banks and Armstrong, 2012, pg. 26).</p> <p>Interview participants will have the opportunity to continue to engage with the Mothers Apart programme at the end of the research and as such will be able to hopefully witness the way that research can shape practice. This research sits</p>

	<p>within a project and academic partnership based on principles of co-production community-based participatory research. ‘The primary goal in this research is action – using findings to secure funding, create changes in policies, and create new interventions. (Bilodeau et al., 2009, pg 193).</p> <p>At the end of the interviews and focus groups a debrief will be held which will allow the participants to speak about the experience of the interview and allow the researcher to share information about and refer to if necessary any agencies which would be able to offer support to the participants.</p> <p>In the case of the potential adopters I shall make them aware of the support available to the participants via the adoption team.</p> <p>In the case of the Social Work Students I shall make them aware of the support available to the participants via the University.</p> <p>I shall offer interview participants the opportunity to have a copy of the transcript of their interview.</p> <p>I shall not offer transcripts of the focus groups as these will include the words of other focus group participants.</p>
<p>Researcher safety / support (attach complete University Risk Analysis and Management form)</p>	<p>Interviewing mothers apart about their lives could have an impact on my emotional or psychological wellbeing. I have worked for 15 years in mental health, 12 years in Women’s services and specifically with mothers living apart from their children. During this time I have built up an understanding of and insight into their experiences.</p> <p>Having worked as a deputy manager within a Family Intervention Project, I understand the wider context of family and community issues which affect the mothers apart.</p> <p>I am trained in coaching skills (Succeed Training), Safeguarding for Managers (In-Trac training), Masterclass on Neglect (University of Huddersfield) and Freedom Programme Training Delivery (Freedom Programme).</p> <p>I hold a certificate in counselling and have completed both the ‘Introduction to Brief Therapy’ and ‘Staying Brief with Adults’ (Brief). My training in basic local safeguarding is up to date and I have also attended CAF (Common Assessment Framework) training as well as specific Core Group and Case Conference training. This training, some of which may seem more relevant than others has allowed me to gain a fuller understanding of the context of my work and provide me with skills and tools which transfer into my role as a researcher in the field. This in turn supports my own safety and capacity to support myself better in both my research and professional roles.</p> <p>I am part of a national network of professionals who support birth parents which I attend twice a year and have built up local networks of colleagues to avoid isolation in my role. I receive regular management supervision within my role at [REDACTED] as well as NLP based supervision alongside. As a means of staying healthy I take regular exercise and engage in healthy activities. I shall make use of the support of my supervisory team and academic colleagues as well as my personal tutor. Should it be necessary I shall make use of the psychological support available to me either via the university or [REDACTED] I hold a belief that it is necessary to take</p>

	<p>responsibility for my own wellbeing during this process and be open if I do feel isolated or in need of support.</p> <p>I shall keep a reflective journal throughout my study and shall practice reflexivity and critical reflection. As well as being a methodological tool this will support my being able to reflect and process my own experience as a researcher and support my wellbeing.</p>
Identify any potential conflicts of interest	<p>I am a researcher based in practice with [REDACTED] and so already hold a role with the [REDACTED] group. My role is very much about offering support and identifying ways forward for women in terms of their wellbeing. I regularly write letters of support for women who are in the legal arena either trying to have children returned to their care or have increased contact. My role within [REDACTED] could therefore impact on the narratives the women may tell.</p> <p>Within my research I shall have to adhere to the same standards around safeguarding and this will be made explicit prior to involvement of any participants. I shall however draw distinctions between by paid work and my studies.</p> <p>I have chosen to seek to interview participants with whom I have an existing working relationship (50%) and those with whom I do not have an existing working relationship (50%). I do this as I acknowledge that I have strong existing roles with some of the women I work with. I acknowledge that this prior involvement will affect the data in terms of levels of trust and familiarity. This may bring rich data as existing trust has been built up prior to the fieldwork taking place.</p> <p>I hold obligation to [REDACTED] as my employer and am therefore bound by their policies and procedures. I also hold obligation to the University of Huddersfield Social Work Division who have offered a fee waiver in order that this study take place. I support delivery of the sessions with both the adopters and the social work students. I shall be explicit about my dual roles and while I will be open to discussions prior to the focus groups about the delivery of the sessions I will aim to steer the conversations towards the narratives of the mothers and learning which comes from hearing them.</p> <p>Bibliography</p> <p>Banks, S. & Armstrong, A (2012). <i>Ethics in community-based participatory research: Case studies, case examples and commentaries</i>. Durham University: National Centre for Public Engagement and the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action</p> <p>Bilodeau, R., Gilmore, J., Jones, L., Palmisano, G., Banks, T., Tinney, B., Lucas, G. I. (2009), Putting the "community" into community-based participatory research. A commentary: <i>American Journal of Preventative Medicine</i> (37), 192-194.</p>

	<p>British Psychological Society. (2009). <i>Code of Ethics and Conduct</i>. Leicester. BPS</p> <p>British Sociological Association. (2002). <i>Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association</i>. Durham: BSA</p> <p>Centre for Social Justice and Community Action and National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2012). <i>Community-based participatory research. A guide to ethical principles and practice</i>. Durham. (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action and NCCPE)</p> <p>Data Protection Act (1998). The Data Protection Principles. (DPA)</p> <p>Neil, E., Cossar, J., Lorgelly, P. & Young, J. (2010). <i>Helping Birth Families: Services, costs and outcomes</i>. London: BAAF</p> <p>Wyatt, S, Story, L., & Hinton, A. (2010). The role of community health advisors in community-based participatory research: <i>Nursing Ethics</i> (17), 117-126.</p>
Please supply copies of all relevant supporting documentation electronically. If this is not available electronically, please provide explanation and supply hard copy	
Information sheet	See supporting documents
Consent form	See supporting documents
Letters	NA
Questionnaire	NA
Interview schedule	See supporting documents
Dissemination of results	The results will be shared with research participants and partner agencies

	<p>The findings will be reported in my MSc thesis and made public</p> <p>Findings will be disseminated in journal articles, conference papers and presentations</p>
Other issues	<p>Background Information also provided – see supporting documents</p> <p>Please note that once ethics approval has been gained all documents will be placed on University of Huddersfield letterhead prior to being used.</p>
Where application is to be made to NHS Research Ethics Committee	<p>Not required - See attached email from [REDACTED], [REDACTED] Adoption Team (16 January 2014) (Appendix 16)</p>
All documentation has been read by supervisor (where applicable)	<p>Yes – see completed supervisor form</p>

All documentation must be submitted to the SREP administrator. All proposals will be reviewed by two members of SREP. If it is considered necessary to discuss the proposal with the full SREP, the applicant (and their supervisor if the applicant is a student) will be invited to attend the next SREP meeting.

If you have any queries relating to the completion of this form or any other queries relating to SREP's consideration of this proposal, please do not hesitate to contact either of the co-chairs of SREP: Professor Eric Blyth e.d.blyth@hud.ac.uk; ☐ [47] 2457 or Professor Nigel King n.king@hud.ac.uk ; ☐ [47] 2812

Appendix 11 – Invitations to participate in interview (a) and focus group (b):

a) Invitation to take part in research interview:

University of Huddersfield

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

**Invitation to take part in a research interview
– to mothers who live apart from their children**

Are you a mother living apart from your children?

Would you like to be involved in research about your experiences?

I am currently studying for an MSc by Research degree at the University of Huddersfield for which I am researching the experiences of mothers who live apart from their children.

I aim to interview a number of mothers about their experiences of living apart from their children.

There is very little research which looks at the experiences of mothers who live apart from their children. It is important for this kind of research

to take place so that the stories of mothers who are apart from their children can be listened to and used to inform future practice.

If you would like to be involved in this study please make contact with me directly and I will tell you more about what will happen. My contact number is 07583

766291 and my email address is u1368831@hud.ac.uk.

b) Invitation to participate in focus group



Invitation to hear about and feedback on a research project

Are you a mother living apart from your children?

Would you like hear about research which is about other mothers apart?

Feedback and focus group session

Tuesday July 21st 11-12.30 - [REDACTED]

My name is Siobhan Beckwith. You may know me through the [REDACTED] project. For the last two years I have been studying for an MSc by Research degree at the University of Huddersfield for which I am researching the experiences of mothers who live apart from their children.

I am doing this because there is very little research which looks at the experiences of mothers who live apart from their children. I hope this research will help the stories of mothers who are apart from their children to be listened to and perhaps used to inform future practice.

I have interviewed a number of mothers about their experiences both before and after they lived apart from their children. . I would like to share my early findings with women from the [REDACTED] project and receive

feedback. This will take place in an audio recorded focus group and I will feed in the main point from these discussions into my final report.

If you would like to take part or would like to find out more please let me know beforehand either via text or call to [REDACTED] or by email to

u1368831@hud.ac.uk

Thank you for your time

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

Interview questions

Below are a list of questions I aim to have answered within the interviews:

Can you tell me how old you are?

How many children do you have?

Are they boys or girls?

What age are they?

How long have you lived apart from them?

Who do your children live with?

Do you have any contact with your child/children?

(if direct contact happens) How often do you see them?

How does contact happen?

(if letter box happens) How often do you write or receive letters about your children?

Is this through a letterbox type service?

What do the letters mean to you?

Can you tell me what it feels like to live apart from your children?

Can you tell me about life before you were apart from your children compared to now?

Can you tell me about how you came to be apart from your children?

Can you tell me about any hopes you have for the future?

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

Focus group with mothers apart

During the focus group I will present a number of key findings which I will allow participants to ask me questions about. I shall then aim for the following questions to be answered:

Which aspects of the findings, if any, ring true for mothers apart and other women they know?

Which aspects of the findings, if any, do the participants disagree with

What could be learned by mothers apart from these findings?

What are the core messages identified within the research findings by participants?

Who do they feel, if anyone, could benefit from hearing these messages?

In which ways might the participants see these findings being useful?

In which ways do the participants feel, these findings might help other women or families?

How might these findings, if at all, help professionals working with families?

Are there any questions which the participants might have hoped the research would address?

Appendix 14 – Copy of email sent to those having expressed an interest in the prospective adopter and social work student focus groups

Hello

Thank you for your interest in my research. I am sorry that I have taken a while to come back to you. My studies are generally going well but I have made a decision not to hold the focus groups you had expressed an interest in. I have done this for a number of reasons:

Firstly the focus groups were one part of my study looking at the narratives of mothers living apart from their children, alongside interviews with mothers themselves. I have through these interviews gathered more than enough data for my final dissertation. Holding focus groups with social work students and prospective adopters would have meant losing the depth of my study into these interviews.

Secondly, after much reflection I felt that the focus group element which you had expressed an interest in could in itself be a study rather than an add-on as it would perhaps have felt. It is something I would very much be interested in doing in the future. Thirdly, which I am sure you are aware, the task of getting enough participants together in one place at the same time has been difficult.

Thank you very much again for your interest in the study, I have been encouraged by peoples enthusiasm. If you have any questions about my research or the work I do at [REDACTED] please do not hesitate to get in touch. There are some evaluations which have been done about our work, one which includes information about the partnership with the University plus other resources.

I wish you all the very best.

Take care

Siobhan

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

Information Sheet – Interviews with mothers

Introduction

- I am carrying out this piece of research to find out more about what can be learned from the experiences of mothers who live apart from their children both before and after the separation from their children.
- As well as studying for my Masters in Research at Huddersfield University I work on the [REDACTED] project within [REDACTED] in [REDACTED].
- My research is being supported by the University of Huddersfield in partnership with [REDACTED].
- I am inviting you to take part in this study.
- Feel free to ask questions at any stage of this process.

Why take part?

- There is a lack of research into the experiences of Mothers in the UK who live apart from their children.
- It is an opportunity for you to speak about your experiences and have your story listened to.
- I hope this study will encourage more understanding of the lives of mothers who live apart from their children and their relationship to others.

- This study may help to inform policies, planning and practice within services. This might include local authorities, mental health services, voluntary sector organisations and family support agencies.

You can get involved if:

- You are over 18 years of age
- You are a mother who currently lives apart from her children
- You understand why and how this research is being done

What will it involve?

- Participation is voluntary – no payment will be offered to you for taking part.
- You will be interviewed for up to around 2 hours. The interview will be audiotaped.
- At the beginning of the interview there will be a number of simple factual questions about your situation so that I can get a picture of your situation and then some more open questions to which you may give more in-depth answers. These will look at your life both before and after your children stopped being in your care.
- Your interview recording will be transferred onto a computer which is password protected.
- Your interview will be transcribed and typed up. You will be offered the opportunity to have a copy of this should you wish to. At this stage you will be given the opportunity to amend the notes should you feel they are not an accurate record of your interview. This opportunity to amend will be for 2 weeks after you receive the notes only.
- Access to records of your interview will be restricted to myself and my academic supervisors at the University of Huddersfield, Dr Rosemary Rae and Professor Eric Blyth.
- Your interview will be used to inform a thesis to be handed in for the award of MSc by Research at the University of Huddersfield.

- I aim to share the findings from the study as widely as possible. This means that material from it may be used in publications, such as journal articles, in the future.
- Your real name will not be revealed at any point during this study. Reports or any following publications will not include any information which could lead you being identified. You need to be aware that the [REDACTED] will be identifiable within the research. You will need to create a false name by which I shall refer to you in any publications.
- I will use your own words and not change them at any point.

Safeguarding

I have a responsibility to protect individuals from harm. This means that that confidentiality would be breached only if I had serious concerns about your safety or the safety of any other person. In these instances I may have to share information with the relevant agencies such as the local authority or the police. Where possible I will speak to you about any action I have to take first.

Appendix 16

University of Huddersfield

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

Information Sheet – Focus Group

Introduction

- I am carrying out this piece of research to find out more about what can be learned from the experiences of mothers who live apart from their children both before and after the separation from their children.
- As well as studying for my Masters in Research at Huddersfield University I work on the [REDACTED] project within [REDACTED] in [REDACTED].
- My research is being supported by the University of Huddersfield in partnership with [REDACTED].
- I have interviewed a number of mothers about their experiences both before and after they lived apart from their children. I would like to share my early findings with women from the [REDACTED] project and receive feedback.
- I am inviting you to take part in this study.
- Feel free to ask questions at any stage of this process.

Why take part?

- There is a lack of research into the experiences of Mothers in the UK who live apart from their children.

- It is an opportunity for you to speak about your experiences and have your story listened to.
- I hope this study will encourage more understanding of the lives of mothers who live apart from their children and their relationship to others.
- This study may help to inform policies, planning and practice within services. This might include local authorities, mental health services, voluntary sector organisations and family support agencies.

You can get involved if:

- You are over 18 years of age
- You are a mother who is or has been involved in the [REDACTED] project.
- You understand why and how this research is being done

What will it involve?

- Participation is voluntary – no payment will be offered to you for taking part.
- The discussion will last up to around 2 hours and will be audiotaped.
- At the beginning of the discussion I will share my early findings and then there will be opportunities to comment and feedback with a number of questions about how you feel about the study so far.
- The discussion recording will be transferred onto a computer which is password protected.
- Access to records of the focus group will be restricted to myself and my academic supervisors at the University of Huddersfield, Dr Rosemary Rae and Professor Eric Blyth.
- The discussion will be used to inform a thesis to be handed in for the award of MSc by Research at the University of Huddersfield.

- I aim to share the findings from the study as widely as possible. This means that material from it may be used in publications, such as journal articles, in the future.
- Your real name will not be revealed at any point during this study. Reports or any following publications will not include any information which could lead you being identified. You need to be aware that the [REDACTED] will be identifiable within the research. You will be known by a pseudonym in this study or any future publications .
- I will use your own words and not change them at any point.

Safeguarding

I have a responsibility to protect individuals from harm. This means that that confidentiality would be breached only if I had serious concerns about your safety or the safety of any other person. In these instances I may have to share information with the relevant agencies such as the local authority or the police. Where possible I will speak to you about any action I have to take first.

University of Huddersfield

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

Statement of Support – Interview

- There are no known risks to taking part in this interview. However, sometimes talking about experiences and feelings can be upsetting. It is important that you know you can stop the interview if becomes too upsetting. Your wellbeing is a priority.
- You do not have to answer every question – you can stay silent or ignore a question if you feel you need to.
- If you want to take a break during the interview for any reason please let me know.
- At the end of the interview there will be an opportunity to raise with me any issues arising from your experience of the interview to identify whether you feel you need any additional support either from within [REDACTED] or from other services locally.
- You can withdraw from the study at any point until the two weeks after you have received the notes – should you wish to see them - and you do not have to give a reason.
- Taking part in this study will not affect the support you receive from [REDACTED]. Information shared in this interview will not be shared with the organisation without your permission unless there is a safeguarding concern – see information sheet.
- Any prior knowledge of your situation I have will not be used within the study if it is not referred to within the interview.
- Not taking part will not affect the services you receive from [REDACTED] or any partner agencies.

- You will be invited, having taken part in the interviews, to take part in a focus group discuss further into the study to discuss my early findings. Your feedback will then be analysed and may be included in my final thesis.
- You will be sent a copy of my summary findings at the end of my study.
- My contact details are at the bottom of this sheet should you wish to contact me about my research in the future.

Researcher – Siobhan Beckwith University of Huddersfield and

██████████

Telephone -

██████████

Email U1368831@hud.ac.uk

My Research Supervisor on this study is Professor Eric Blyth, University of Huddersfield who is available on ██████████ or by email at: e.d.blyth@hud.ac.uk should you wish to speak to him.

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

Statement of Support – Focus Group with Mothers

- There are no known risks to taking part in this focus group. However, sometimes talking about experiences and feelings can be upsetting. It is important that you know you can stop the focus group if becomes too upsetting. Your wellbeing is a priority.
- You do not have to comment on every topic in the session – you can stay silent at times if you feel you need to.
- If you want to take a break during the focus group for any reason please let me know.
At the end of the session there will be an opportunity to raise with me any issues arising from your experience of the focus group to identify whether you feel you need any additional support either from within [REDACTED] or from other services locally.
- You can withdraw from the study at any point and you do not have to give a reason.
- Taking part in this study will not affect the support you receive from [REDACTED]. Information shared within this focus group will not be shared with [REDACTED] without your permission unless there is a safeguarding concern – see information sheet.
- Not taking part will not affect the services you receive from [REDACTED] or any services.
- You will be sent a copy of my summary findings at the end of my study.

- My contact details are at the bottom of this sheet should you wish to contact me about my research in the future.

Researcher – Siobhan Beckwith University of Huddersfield and

██████████

Telephone - ██████████

Email U1368831@hud.ac.uk

My Research Supervisor on this study is Professor Eric Blyth, University of Huddersfield who is available on ██████████ or by email at: e.d.blyth@hud.ac.uk should you wish to speak to him.

University of Huddersfield

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

Consent Declaration - interviews

- I have been given a copy of the information sheet and statement of support
- I understand the information sheet and statement of support
- I am satisfied with answers to any questions I have raised
- I agree to interviews/focus groups being audio recorded
- I understand that the findings from this study will be published in the form of a Masters research thesis, and possibly journal articles and conference presentations.
- I agree to the use of anonymised direct quotes in any publications and presentations arising from this study.
- I understand that confidentiality will be broken should there be concerns about my safety or that of children or other adults.
- I freely and voluntarily agree to take part in this study
- I have created a pseudonym to protect my identity

Participant Name

Signature

Date

University of Huddersfield

Experiences of Mothers Living Apart from their Children

Consent and Confidentiality Declaration – Focus Groups

- I have been given a copy of the information sheet and statement of support
 - I understand the information sheet and statement of support
 - I am satisfied with answers to any questions I have raised
 - I agree to focus groups being audio recorded
 - I understand that the findings from this study will be published in the form of a Masters research thesis, and possibly journal articles and conference presentations.
-
- I agree that I will not discuss outside the group anything shared by other participants in the group.
 - I understand that confidentiality will be broken should there be concerns about my safety or that of children or other adults.
 - I freely and voluntarily agree to take part in this study
 - I have created a pseudonym to protect my identity

Participant Name

Signature

Date

Researcher Name Siobhan Beckwith

Signature

Date

Appendix 21 - Focus group quotes relating to discussion themes - mental health, contact, trust and more support for mothers apart.

The specific comments which I relate these decisions to are as follows: Kelly stated *'There needs to be more support for mothers without their children. There's not enough support for the women'*.

Pearl later states: 'They call it children and families but... in my experience it's children first second and third'

Anna stated: *'They say I've got a trust issue but no wonder'* recognising what previous encounters with services may have on ability to build a trusting relationship with professionals. This relates also to Neil et al in section on Reflecting on relationships (see section 3.4.8).

Rose spoke of the need for some level of contact – post adoption *'Even if it's just twice a year'* which was then reinforced by Kelly speaking of her having a *'close knit family'* and the sense that her adopted children's siblings were also punished for the mistakes she had made. The section title for 4.2 comes from a quote within the focus group in which Anna States that *'by law they're not ours, but by blood they are'* referring to her relationship with her adopted child.

Pearl spoke of the fears around mental health and the challenge of getting timely and clear guidance from professionals confident in dealing offering support to those who experience mental distress.

'My thing is inherited, you can't control what is inherited, you know. I've been to university and all the rest of it. I think a lot of people have this preconception that it's a certain chunk of society that this kind of thing happens to and they don't see the wider picture of it, that it can happen to anybody.'

She also spoke of the daily impact fear of a relapse in her mental health and the potential of future local authority involvement has on her. For Pearl being '*on the radar*' continues to have an impact on her decision whether to have further children. Similarly women described having been hesitant to ask for help from services for fear of children being taken into care (Broadhurst, 2013).

Gold from the stone

Oil from the Earth

I yearned for my home

From the time of my birth

Sissay (2000)

