

In focus Northern Ireland

An article from Dr Dominic McSherry, senior research fellow and developmental psychologist working in Queen's University Belfast

My interest in adoption developed early in my career when I worked on a review of Freeing Orders in Northern Ireland. This helped me to understand the context for children being adopted from care, the often heart-breaking life circumstances of the birth parents, culminating in their inability to parent their own children, the utter vulnerability of the children, the complexity of the social work and legal decision-making processes, and the pressing need to ensure that these children received the love, care and security they needed.

At that time there was a growing anti-adoption lobby, characterised by the view that the reduction in the numbers of children being given up for adoption by unmarried mothers, was creating a void for childless couples, and the care system was seen as the means to fill this vacuum. This was about preying on the vulnerable to meet the needs of the privileged elite. It was, and remains, a powerful argument, and forced me to seriously question the ethics of the work I was involved in.

However, this internal process also led to my acceptance of another reality. We do not live in a perfect society, where everyone is treated equally. There is widespread social inequality that can crush people's hopes and lead to dysfunction, often characterised by alcoholism, drug-abuse, and domestic violence. This, in turn, can lead to children being significantly harmed, with no prospect of receiving parenting that can meet their developmental needs. As a liberal-socialist in political outlook, I wish this was not the case, and I'll continue to argue with all my strength for social equality. But, I'm also a realist, and accept there is a long road ahead in this struggle.

I emerged from this cognitive wrestling match resolved to do whatever I can to ensure we live in a society where there's no need to remove children from their birth parents but also to accept that type of society hasn't yet been achieved, and as such, to fully support current efforts being made to provide love, care and security to these vulnerable children, with one option being adoption.

Following this work I moved on to lead a longitudinal study of young children's pathways through care in Northern Ireland, the Care Pathways and Outcomes (CPO) Study. This has only served to strengthen my support for adoption from

care. Since 2000, the CPO study has been following a population (374) of children who were under the age of five and in care. Almost half of this group went on to be adopted. In the previous phase of the study (2006-2010) we spoke directly to a sub-group (77) of young people (then aged nine to 14 years-old) who had either been adopted, were in long-term foster care, long-term kinship care, on Residence Order, or had returned home to their birth parents.

With one or two exceptions, the children who had been adopted were secure, felt loved, that they belonged, and were happy. These placements were also the most stable, compared with all other long-term placement options. Meeting these families was a privilege and although they had their struggles, they exuded warmth and joy, underpinned by deep feelings of love and compassion. Currently, we're taking forward the fourth phase of this study, with the young people now aged 18-22 years-old. Although still in the early stages, we continue to see very high comparative levels of stability for those young people who were adopted, and some very positive outcomes in terms of their health and well-being, and having a family for life. Progress on this study can be tracked here: <https://blogs.qub.ac.uk/pathways/>

Having had the unique opportunity to follow a group of adopted young children into adulthood, there remains no doubt in my mind of the basic human value of adoption for children who find themselves at a very young age in the care system, having experienced or being at risk of significant harm in the care of their birth parents, with no prospect for change.

So, I will rejoice when the day comes that there is no need for a care system, and for adoption from care, but until that day comes, I will remain one of its most ardent supporters.



Dr Dominic McSherry

Dominic is a senior research fellow and developmental psychologist working in Queen's University Belfast. He's been working in Queen's for 18 years now, following his PhD in psychology at the same university.

Want to keep in touch or know more?

If you would like more information or would like to include your adoption news in In Focus Northern Ireland, please get in touch!

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