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Damaged Attachments & Family Dislocations: The Operations of Class in Adoptive Family Life

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Abstract: This paper is an initial exploration of an under researched area in the field of contemporary adoption—the impact of class on adoptive family life. The first part of the paper argues that whilst class is structurally present in adoption work, the effects of class difference have been a neglected dimension of practice. This neglect of class in adoption reflects its elision in the wider social field. It isn't that class stratification has materially or economically disappeared but that the inequalities it installs are concealed through a new privileging of individualism. This individualizing of social problems places new regimes of responsibility upon both individuals and parents. This section concludes with an exploration of the intensive field of contemporary parenting, where social background is considered unimportant. It is argued that attachment theory has become a dominant paradigm for parenting in both adoption and the wider social field because its classed notions of parenting are concealed. The second part of the paper draws upon a small scale qualitative study with one local authority adoption team where adoptive parents and birth parents were interviewed about class and parenting. Working classness assumed a structuring importance in terms of the interview material, as most participants were from this class background. Two areas are particularly foregrounded: the degree to which adopted children's class differences are interpreted as attachment difficulties and the degree to which middle-classness operates as a silent measure for successful parenting in substitute care.

Keywords: class; adoption; parenting; attachment; working-class

As a way of introducing this paper, I have four quotations from my research project on class and adoption.

The first is from two adoptive parents:

When we started the process I thought we had to be middleclass, living in a mansion house with a garden, had that in my head, one thing that slowed us down with adopting. They won't want two manual workers and ones who are still building their house

The second is from an adoption manager:

Adopters social backgrounds are irrelevant—it is whether they can parent according to PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, empathy) and how they score in attachment interview

The third is from an Adoption social worker:

It is funny you discussing class. I have had struggling adopters tell me that once their children go to school, they are drawn to play with children from the same background as their birth family. What is so surprising is that these children were removed very early from their first families

And the final quotation is from a birth mother:

I am not middleclass, I am working class; I am hoping my kids will have a bit more than working class, an education

These four quotations give four very different but related accounts of the complicated and contradictory place that class occupies in contemporary adoption. In the first quotation a working class couple are surprised that they would be acceptable adoptive parents. In the second quotation an adoption manager confirms that social background is irrelevant provided adopters have the right kind of attachments in their parenting. In the third quotation a social worker acknowledges the enduring mark of working classness in adopted children and in the final quotation a working class birth mother hopes her children's origins will be improved by adoption. All the quotations reveal a view of working classness as second class, an inferior social position but one that leaves an enduring mark that not even adoption can eradicate. Yet alongside this acknowledgment of working classness there is also its elision. Central to adoption work is the view that parenting is a class free activity and that how we parent is not informed by class. Yet the privileging of an attachment model of parenting promotes a particular classed notion of what it is to be a parent, a silent measure against which working class parenting must struggle or fail.

This paper is an initial exploration of an under researched area in the field of contemporary adoption—the impact of class on adoptive family life. It is part of a wider research study that is exploring the impact of class on contemporary open adoption, a project that develops previous research in this area. The objective is to find out more about the lived experience of class in adoption and how class attitudes and experiences operate within substitute parenting. Whilst class is enjoying a new visibility within sociology (for example: [Devine et al. 2005](#); [Atkinson et al. 2012](#); [Biressi and Nunn 2013](#)) and there is substantial research on mothering and class (for example: [Lawler 2000](#); [Walkerdine et al. 2001](#); [Lareau 2003](#); [Gillies 2007](#)), it has been a neglected area within adoption social work. The classed nature of adoption is often commented upon, but there has been no research undertaken on how class is a significant structuring in terms of how both adoptive parenting and attachment is understood and practiced.

The paper will be in two parts. Part one will be a brief overview of how we can understand the neglect of class in adoption work. Part two will draw upon a small scale qualitative pilot study with one local authority where adopters and birth parents were interviewed to explore class and parenting in contemporary adoption.

1. The Neglect of Class in Adoption

Given that since the 1970s adoption has largely been about the transfer of working class children to middleclass families ([Parker 1999](#); [Bridge and Swindells 2003](#)), one would expect the effects of class difference to be informing placement practice. However, whilst parenting and child welfare are central to adoption, their classed constitution is given little attention¹. In the contemporary era of open adoption, class differences are starkly evoked, as usually middleclass educated and materially comfortable adopters sustain some kind of tie for their children with working class, impoverished and under educated birth parents. Yet there has been little research on the effects of these profound class differences. One quite obvious explanation is the nature of adoption as an intervention. Since its inception, adoption has operated to sever and remove a child's first history and to replace it with a new family culture. Whilst there have been all sorts of other changes to its practices, adoption is still

¹ Whilst class isn't mentioned, a recent paper ([Selwyn and Meakings 2015](#), Vol. 39, pp. 294–302) exploring the issue of smell within the context of adoption disruption, is clearly about class. A number of adoptive parents interviewed had said that from the beginning their children 'didn't smell right' and this clearly inhibited the process of attachment. The paper did not explore the relationship between the 'wrong smell' and class differences, arguing for more essentialised biologicisticbiological explanations. Yet there is a long history of the working classes being understood as the stinking poor, the great unwashed ([Barret-Ducrocq 1991](#)), which surely is contributing to these adoptersadopters' revulsion.

understood as an intervention that can remove an original social background. This understanding was endorsed in the interviews with adopters where there was a strongly held view that their children's original class background would be eradicated by adoption. However, the neglect of class in adoption is not reducible to the replacement family culture that it operates. I want to now go on to explore a number of significant changes in the contemporary social field that makes the acknowledgment of class and class differences extremely challenging.

The 'disappearance of class' in western cultures has been a much explored and debated issue within political and social sciences (Bauman 2000; Žižek 2000; Butler 2004; Skeggs 2004; Tyler 2013). Of course, it isn't that class stratification has materially or economically disappeared but that the inequalities it installs are concealed through a new privileging of individualism. We live in an era where social problems are individualized, understood as caused by the actions or choices of individual subjects. There is now the view that class as a social structuring is irrelevant to how a person progresses—or not—in their life. Everyone, if they work hard and use opportunity, can get on and achieve and we all now bear an enormous responsibility for the lives we lead. It is not poverty or disadvantage that is holding people back, it is their poor self-management. By situating failure as personal not social, it has become much more difficult to both recognize and so resist the forms of inequality and injustice that contemporary class stratification produces. Bauman (2000, p. 135) captures very well this atomizing of the social:

'The matter of improvement is no longer a collective, but an individual enterprise. It is individual men and women on their own who are expected to use, individually, their own wits, resources and industry to lift themselves to a more satisfactory condition'.

There has been a related transformation in the field of parenting. Today parenting is defined as so determining a practice that social issues are no longer considered factors in how children are raised. This new centrality of parenting means we now commonly speak of failures of mothering, not failures in the wider socioeconomic field. In her book, *Marginalised Mothers*, Gillies explores the impact that this contemporary 'disappearance' of class has had on working class mothers.

'Without the language of class to explain their lives, such mothers are set apart, misinterpreted and ultimately blamed for the socio-economic marginalisation that characterise their lives'. (Gillies 2007, p. 19)

Without a framework of social and economic inequality, these mothers blame themselves for their struggles with parenting. Furthermore, whilst parenting is understood as outside of social class (Lawler 2000; Gillies 2007; Faircloth et al. 2014), the silent measure for all parents is a middleclass model:

'For the sake of their children's future, and for the stability and security of society as a whole, working class parents must be taught how to raise children who are capable of becoming middleclass'. (Gillies 2007, p. 7)

Clearly this contemporary culture is significantly oppressive for working class mothers, but as my interviews revealed, for the unfit working class mother the consequences are far graver.

Finally, what accompanies this new centrality of parenting is an intensified and risk averse parenting culture. There is a growing literature (Hays 1996; Nelson 2010; Faircloth et al. 2014) on what has been described as this new 'intensive motherhood' (Hays 1996) with the child's attachment a central concern and the avoidance of risk a key structuring practice. Burman (2008, p. 98) describes how 'the greater segregation, protectionism and surveillance of children' has led to not only an increase in childhood conduct disorders, but in children's protracted dependence. Many commentators (Walkerdine and Lucey 1989; Skeggs 1997; Lareau 2003; Gillies 2007; Nelson 2010; Faircloth et al. 2013) have argued that this new parenting culture where children's dependence is both fostered and extended requires the kind of time and money only available to middleclass parents.

Since the 1970s attachment theory has incrementally established itself as the central organizing paradigm for this intensive parenting culture. At a time when the child at risk was becoming a cultural concern, attachment theory's emphasis on the maternal 'secure base' would offer the ideal framework to protect and nurture that child (Sales 2012; Faircloth et al. 2014). Attachment theory has now become such a normalized part of cultural understandings of parenting that its classed basis goes unnoticed. As Burman (2008, p. 140) elaborates, 'The apparatus of attachment theory naturalizes class and cultural privilege'. Furthermore, it reduces the social to the interpersonal, making a particular kind of mothering the primary and determining focus for the production of 'good' citizens (Burman 2008, p. 132).

Attachment theory is, also of course, a dominant paradigm within adoption and the primary way of understanding both the dysfunctional parenting of birth parents and the re-parenting tasks of adopters (Quinton and Michael 1988; Howe et al. 1999; Schofield and Beek 2006).

In my interviews it was clearly a way that most of the adoptive and birth parents understood their parenting, its challenges, its successes and its failures. Any sense of the differences that class might inflect on parenting had been colonized by the dominance of attachment thinking. Within this framework the child's working class family of origin can never be a resource and the child's working class birth heritage is always positioned as a deficit.

I have argued here that the culture of adoption and the culture of the wider social field work together to elide the place of class as a both an experience and an explanatory framework for parents and children involved in adoption. My research aims to return class to the field of adoption and to expose its currently silenced operations.

2. The Pilot Research Project

The aim of this pilot study was to explore the impact of adopted children's class background on their new adoptive family. There were two areas of enquiry:

The degree to which adopted children's class differences are interpreted as attachment difficulties

The degree to which middle-classness operates as a silent measure for successful parenting in substitute care

This research was undertaken with a rural local authority adoption team in the UK. The study received approval from University of West of England ethics committee and from the participating local authority research governance department. There were a number of meetings with the local authority to discuss both the nature of the research and recruiting for the study. A mailing was then undertaken by the local authority to all domestic adoptions from care in the last five years, where there was either direct or indirect contact. The mailing went to both adopters and birth parents involved in each adoption and included a letter explaining the project, an information sheet for participants and a consent form with a stamped addressed envelope to the researcher. The following is a list of the respondents: See Table 1.

Table 1. Research participants.

Participants	Gender	Ethnicity	Identity
1	M & F	White British	Adoptive parents
2	M & F	White British	Adoptive parents
3	M & F	White British	Adoptive parents
4	F	White British	Adoptive single parent
5	F	White British	Adoptive single parent
6	M	White British	Birth father
7	F	White British	Birth mother
8	F	White British	Birth mother
9	F	White British	Birth mother

All the participants who responded were from working class backgrounds, except for one adoptive father. I was interested that apart from this one adopter, no middleclass adopters self-selected for this particular research. This raises questions about why this study did not interest middleclass adopters and what might need to be changed in terms of the project design in order to engage them in the future? This meant that working classness has assumed a structuring importance in terms of this study and has certainly indicated some findings for a bigger piece of research.

3. Defining Class

This study placed an importance on the self-reporting of class by the respondents. However, as the interviews show, only the adopters were able to define their class identity, with birth parents struggling with this question. The researcher, then, drew on a number of indicators to define the class of the four birth parents: Educational background; employment; family background and family history; language use; aspirations.

Recent work on widening the scope of class analysis (Skeggs 2004; Reay 2005; Atkinson et al. 2012) has also contributed to how class has been thought about in this study. The work of Bourdieu, particularly his work on class taste in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 2010) moved class analysis away from economic inequalities to cultural and symbolic forms of domination (Atkinson et al. 2012, p. 1). The cultural and social capital of working class subjects are not accorded the same level of recognition as middleclass capital; indeed forms of working class capital are often shamed and denigrated (as the interviews below reveal). This tension is clearly evident in the working class adopters, who all have taken on a middleclass life style but still insist on their working class identities, setting up a complex and paradoxical position for them in relation to their children's working class background.

4. Interviews

The interviews were conducted by a sole researcher, who has a background in adoption and is also a psychoanalyst. They took place in participant's homes except for the interview with participant 6, who was interviewed at a family center. The interviews lasted between 2 and 3 h and were semi structured around the following questions:

- How would you describe your class background?
- How would you describe the class background of your children?
- Adopter's only: Describe how your children came into your family
- What kind of contact do you have with the children's birth family?
- How does the contact help or hinder your children make sense of being adopted?
- Birth parent only: Describe what happened to your children
- What kind of contact do you have with the children's new family?
- How does the contact help you with the loss of your children?

The two questions around how children came into or went out of families were deliberately open in order to find out more about how parents understood their parenting.

All participants were assured about the confidentiality of the research and that any use of the material would be anonymized and their identities concealed. Whilst these protocols are foundational to any research interviews, they have an even greater importance within the culture of adoption where secrecy and confidentiality are foundational to its operation. The interviews were digitally recorded (with all participants granting permission for this) and subsequently transcribed and anonymized for analysis.

5. Methodology

Both the interviews and the analysis of the interview material are understood within a psycho social framework. This means that the psychological and the social are understood as imbricated (Butler 2005, p. 5), when so often in adoption research there is a privileging of the

psychological. The interviewer, as a practicing psychoanalyst, is very accustomed to conducting intimate conversations within a relational field of conscious and unconscious communications. Whilst the interviews are not regarded as psycho-analytic sessions, there was an awareness of the transferences that the position of researcher produces, as well as an acute sense that talking about class stirs up a very intense affective field where shame is commonly provoked. There is not the space in this paper to address this dimension of the interviews.

Walkerdine et al. (2001, p. 83) discuss how their own working class backgrounds enabled them to create a 'different discourse' for reading the operations of class in their research interviews. They emphasize two aspects of their position: working class experience is not read as either lacking or pathologized against a middleclass standard and questions not normally posed were able to be asked. The interviewer's own working class background was hoped to be a similar resource in interviewing a largely working class sample.

6. Class and Parenting in Adoption

Adoptive Parents on Class

All the adoptive parents identified as working class, except for one adoptive father who described himself as middleclass. They were all keen to communicate about their class, and expressed pride in their working classness. Some of the adopters had been through higher education, but still felt tied to their working class roots. All the adopters saw their working classness as a resource in their lives.

'I am working class, grew up in a council house, first one in my family to go to university. Mum and dad didn't know about university, an alien world, but I still feel very working class myself, proud of it'. (Adopters 3)

'I would say I am definitely working class, my dad was a painter and decorator, mum stayed at home, a very local life; I moved back to the same village when I adopted; I want my son to have the same kind of upbringing I had, freedom, go to the beach'. (Adopter 5)

All the adopters lived in secure housing that they owned, all worked and could be described as part of the professional/managerial class. They all drew attention to how well they had done for themselves, how far they had exceeded their own parent's lives. In spite of this so called social progression, they all remained very clear about their working class identity. Clearly these participants are not using an economic model for understanding their class position, as by their own description they have moved into what could be designated a middleclass professional place. This sense of their working classness seems more tied to an affective sense of belonging. This is what Bourdieu would describe as a class aesthetic, a form of taste that has been unconsciously installed, creating a deep sense of class belonging (Bourdieu 2010, p. 169). Furthermore, this enduring sense of working classness is consistent with recent research on working class culture. In a recent collection on class Devine et al. (2005, p. 99), cited numerous research studies that showed how little difference there is between the affluent and the unskilled working class in terms of their culture.

'It proved difficult to sustain the view that there were fundamental differences between the affluent working class and the unskilled working class. Other studies argue that it is difficult to find any clear differences between skilled and unskilled workers, and show that the working class is still demographically coherent'.

However, the interviews revealed a less homogeneous picture of working class culture than that suggested above. For some of the adopters, it was important to differentiate their working class identities from those more disadvantaged working class birth parents.

All the adopters emphasized close and supportive ties with their extended working class families, most of whom lived very local to them. Indeed during two of the interviews, grandparents turned up

to either bring back or collect grandchildren. The traditional extended working class family was well represented amongst the adoptive parents in my sample, with all parents emphasizing the importance of these kinship connections. However, whilst all of the adopters had this inclusiveness around family, there were marked differences in how far they wanted to include their children's birth families. I will return to this point in more detail later.

Given that all the adopted children were from working class backgrounds, this could be then seen as a helpful match. Sharing a class background might help the adopters understand or empathize with the birth parents, might help them understand aspects of their children's heritage. However, a much more complicated picture emerged during the interviews. For three of the five adopters, the children's working class background was something that they dismissed, denigrated or marginalized. I will give some examples from these three families.

I asked Adopters 1 to describe the class background of their two adopted children; the adoptive father (the one middleclass adopter in the sample) said:

'Same as ours, adoption completely lifts the girls out of that cycle, the only thing that can do that, fostering you still have the links'.

I asked again about the background:

'We know the area they grew up, it wasn't that they weren't loved, but history of people not knowing how to parent, not a lot of opportunity to get out, nobody really working, that sort of life style'.

It was striking how much the parents did not want to talk about the class origins of their children; I had to persist with my question to get it answered. In answering, the adoptive father identifies some key elements in the children's class background—a lack of work, a lack of social mobility and an ignorance around parenting. Their working class origins are seen as a source of limitation and waste, making no positive contribution, so there is no loss for the children in replacing this background with a new adoptive family. This impression was confirmed when I asked the adopters about how the children's social background came into their home life with them. Again the adoptive father answered:

'Hasn't been hammered out of them, but they have nice middleclass table manners now. We did have to tell them that all the McDonald's were closed'.

This interesting communication suggests that the children's class background has been rigorously removed and replaced by a different middle class mode of being. This may reflect the father's own middleclass position, but it was also apparent with some of the working class adoptive mother's communications. She said:

'They are both so clever and that would have been wasted if they had stayed where they were'.

To illustrate this, she tells me what the children's birth mother wanted for the girls in terms of their new adoptive family. The birth mother said she wanted them to be able to go to the park and the beach. The adoptive mother saw this response as having 'narrow ambitions for the girls' it could be argued that the birth mother has different ambitions for her children, ambitions formed through a rather different class experience².

Indeed there was a strong sense that these adopters conducted some surveillance of their children's behavior for signs of their original class background in order to correct and replace these behaviors.

² There is now a growing literature on the differences of working class subjectivity (Walkerdine et al. 2001; Skeggs 1997, 2004; Gillies 2007) differences shaped and formed through structural inequality and lack of recognition. Gillies (2007, p. 77) makes the point that working class ambitions are shaped by fitting in, not standing out, whereas middleclass ambitions are tied to visible achievement. If you lack middleclass legitimacy, then standing out is very challenging.

These adopters had different class positions, but in terms of their adopted children, it is the middleclass position that is the more desirable.

They were not the only adopters who saw McDonald's as a signifier of low grade working class taste. Adopters 2 complained to me about the presents their two adopted children had been given by their birth parents:

'Lots of stuff arrived with the children, plastic tat, nothing had any meaning, lots of plastic free gifts, kind of thing that you get with McDonalds, nothing of value'.

Here there is again a denigration of the children's working class culture, which the adopters dismiss as cheap and valueless. Yet these were the adopters that had been surprised that they were allowed to adopt because of their working class background.

In my final example, adopters 3 were very uninterested in their children's class background, telling me it was unimportant. When pressed I was told that their children's birth mother was a working class drug addict, still living in the same town as themselves, alongside her wider family. This proximity was very troubling for the adopters and they had changed their children's names to protect their privacy. Again, they very much wanted to totally replace their children's background and showed little interest in having knowledge about the children's early life. The adoptive mother said 'Anything the children want to know we have' There was a strong sense of closing the family lines, and shutting out the children's earlier history. The birth mother was presented to me as nothing more than an addict

'We keep track of the birth mother via the local paper; she is 36, petty crime to support her habit'.

When it came to discussing contact arrangements, the same conflicted and denigratory relationship to the birth parents circulated. Adopters K did an annual letter but seemed dismissive and disinterested in this form of contact and unsure about who it was for

'I do a letter, but no-one picks it up and I don't who it is sent out to; I didn't do last years but just about to do this year's'.

They are similarly disregarding of the children's life story books, where there is a lot of uncertainty about whether they even have them. There is a strong sense that this earlier history and heritage is less important than the children's new life with their new family.

I want to now think about what we can make of these (largely) working class adoptive parents in a relation of denigration and marginalization to other working class parents?

In spite of a shared cultural heritage, these adopters were expending a great deal of energy and commitment to pointing up huge differences between themselves and these other more failing working class parents. I would argue that in a culture that still denigrates working classness, working class people find it imperative to separate themselves from those others who are lower down on the working class ladder. Bourdieu, writing in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 2010, p. 33), says

'It must never be forgotten that the working class 'aesthetic' is a dominated aesthetic which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics'.

It was clear that all the working class adopters in my sample identified with the dominant middleclass aesthetic, whilst still endorsing their working class origins. Their homes and their life styles were clearly modelled on middleclass taste, an aspirational standard against which their working classness was a source of failure. So whilst working classness was a resource for these adopters, it was also a cause of concern, as it created a proximity to a more troubled form of working classness in their children. This troubled working classness touched something in them about their own class position. This meant that rather than operating as a source of empathy, it operated as a source of revulsion. This can be seen in the ways that the children's class behaviors, or class attachments have

to be remade or removed from adoptive family life. We could say that the injurious class identity of working class adopters is mobilized by the adoption of working class children, which leads to a denigration/rejection of the children's working class background.

For two of the adopters there was a very different relationship to their children's class background. These were two single adopters (participants 4 and 5), who very much embraced their children's class background and wanted to include the family of origin as a positive for their adopted children. Both these adopters found the exclusive culture of adoption difficult and challenging. Both came from large close knit working class families, where family gatherings and family relations are important and this is very much their relationship to their children's birth family. These adopters were critical of what they experienced as the 'rigidity' of the local authority letterbox system, complaining that they were not 'allowed' to write extra letters and include photographs. Adopter 4 was upset and frustrated that her daughter did not have visiting contact with her birth parents: 'My daughter would say to me, 'I am still getting used to it here and I want to see my mummy and daddy'. This adopter linked the lack of visiting contact with her daughter's very slow capacity to settle. With these two adopters there is not the same mobilization of class injury in relationship to their children's class background; indeed they embraced their working class children's heritage. A follow-up study, with a larger sample would allow a greater and more in-depth exploration of how these differences within working class adopters can be understood.

7. Birth Parents on Class

'It was a fact, I was never going to get my kids back, even if I had won a million pounds on the lottery, it was a fix, right from the moment they were taken off me, to it ended. It is one rule for them and one rule for me'.

The above mother captures very well the position of an unfit working class mother today. She understands the enormous gulf that separates her world from the world of acceptable mothering. This mother has been defeated by the rules of a culture that she has been powerless to challenge. All of the parents interviewed knew that there was an enormous difference between their lives and so-called 'normal families' but this difference was never described in class terms. The four birth parents struggled to answer the question about their class background. Here are their answers:

Birth mother 7: (Laughing) 'I haven't thought about it' (looking at her mother also in the room).

Birth mother 8: 'Don't know what you mean. I see myself as a down to earth person, help people when they need it'.

Birth father 6: 'I am working class. All my family were my world and I just worked for them, farming'.

Birth mother 9: (laughing) 'I am not middleclass, I work, my husband works, now I don't have the children I look for work, so working class I guess'.

It was clear that these four parents were working class, a definition based on the following information communicated in the interviews: economic position, employment, family background and history, aspirations, education, language. However, unlike the adopters, they do not understand their lives in class terms. Indeed, they didn't really understand the question and even the two parents who said they were working class, were taking the term very concretely, and understanding the question to be one about their status as workers. In talking to the parents, there was a profound sense that their histories were characterized by the precarity of deprivation, abuse and poverty, but the language of class inequality and injustice was never used to describe themselves or their background. This means that, unlike the working class adopters, their class backgrounds were not a resource or an explanation for their lives. This raises some important questions about how working classness can be a resource for some parents, but not for others. Unlike the adopters, the birth parents in this study were not resourced by either family, education or work. Two of the parents mentioned their family—indeed one of the

mother's was interviewed with her mother present—but these family ties did not operate as a source of support, meaning or stability. Most importantly, the social condemnation that failed parents receive, powerfully prevents their class background being anything except a source of shame and denigration.

Commonly the parents framed their experiences in individual family terms—their families had failed them and they had then failed as parents. Here are two examples:

An exchange with birth mother 9 who had five children adopted:

Why do you think the children were adopted?

'My own stupid screw ups, didn't have the best start in life, abused when I was a child, didn't have the right upbringing, the right tools to cope with children'.

What was missing?

'A family really, it's like you can only trust so much and I couldn't trust my family, in a normal upbringing you would have the keys, you would learn from mum and dad, had none of that, I made a lot of mistakes'.

Birth mother 8, who had three children adopted, was very forthcoming about her family background, and like birth mother 9 related this to her own difficulties with her children. Her mother was violent and neglectful, but no-one removed her until she was 14. She lived with her gran, then in foster care, then a children's home. At some point in social care she was sexually abused.

'We didn't have a stable environment like normal families, we were just wild because we had no chance of a home'.

Both these birth mothers have a notion of a 'normal' family where they would have had the 'right' upbringing. This would have supplied them with the tools and the keys to have been better mothers themselves. We could say that they are using the language and the references of middleclass mothering as a measure, against which they have failed. There is a clear correlation in these communications between abnormal/working class and normal/middleclass. Within such an opposition their mothering can never be understood as any kind of contribution for their children. Furthermore, as there is no wider social framework for them to understand their experiences, they blame their own families, and then themselves for what has happened to their children.

8. Adoptive Parents on Parenting

The interviewer was interested in exploring whether these working class adopters had taken on the dominant attachment model of parenting. The local authority manager had already made it clear that, in line with most adoption teams in the UK, they use an attachment framework. This issue emerged in the interviews when parents discussed how family life has been since the arrival of their adopted children. Adopters 3 used the language of attachment most directly. The adoptive mother had been to attachment training and some workshops 'to put her mind at rest' and she then used the language of attachment to describe the two adopted children. Here is how she describes the older daughter, who was 8 months old when placed:

'L has attachment difficulties; she was in a busy foster placement, busy household, lots of children. The foster mum said L had attachment difficulties. L's attachment took a long time. She has an insecure attachment, she goes nowhere by herself; she cries when I leave her at a school; it has taken her a long time to attach to me'.

In contrast, her younger sister who was placed at 4 weeks from hospital, has no attachment difficulties and is described as more robust and more secure than her sister.

Adopters 1 also used attachment to capture a difference between their two children. Their oldest daughter had 'experienced abuse' but the youngest was removed so early 'she had less attachment difficulties'

Adopters 2 also made a difference between their two children, who were 2 and 5 months when placed.

‘My oldest A, was a real struggle at first, she had been neglected, but he was removed at birth. A hadn’t been looked after, wasn’t fed properly, passed around the family’.

With these three families the notion of forming a singular attachment to two parents means the favoring of the youngest child, the one who has the least attachment to his/her former life. The oldest child in each case is seen as struggling because she has taken longer to form an attachment. In each of these cases the older child’s relationship with the birth family was an issue, with questions that couldn’t be answered. Are these children’s kinship ties to their first families being pathologized as attachment disordered behaviors?

Adopters 1 reported to me that the oldest daughter was incredibly curious about her history:

‘L wants to know where she was before Sue [the foster carer]. She is devastated because we don’t know her first spoken word, whereas for her sister, A, we were there for the first everything—first word, first step. Because A never lived at home, removed from birth, she is so different. She cannot remember a time before us, but we have gaps for L’.

The adopters tell me that L is very persistent about wanting information

‘She wants to know why we can’t phone up her birth mother and ask what her first word is. When we say we don’t where she is, L wants to know why? Can we find out where she is and can we visit her?’

For these adopters there is clearly a conflict between the kind of family attachments they want to achieve, and the demands of their oldest daughter, with her continuing curiosity and attachments to her first family. Whilst these adopters are very angry at the lack of information they have for their daughter, they will not entertain any possibility of finding out this information from the birth family itself.

Adopters 2 have a similar conflict about the place their children’s former attachments occupy. The adoptive mother became very emotional telling me about her family tradition of giving all new babies a teddy bear. She turns to her adopted son and asks him about his teddy bear, but the little boy starts telling me about Rabbit, a stuffed toy that his birth father had given him. He becomes extremely animated and starts asking for Rabbit in a loud voice, which brings his sister into the conversation. She has Fluffy, she tells me, Fluffy is so important that he never goes out of the house. The adoptive mother, now looking very distressed, tells me her daughter has had Fluffy since her birth, a stuffed animal given to her by her birth mother.

Clearly these two stuffed toys, Rabbit and Fluffy, have enormous importance for the children as important ties to their birth history, but for the adoptive mother they are complex signifiers of her children’s attachment to their first family. Within the attachment framework, there is no room for attachments elsewhere, setting up profound conflictual difficulties for adopted children. Furthermore, the contested position of the birth family in adoption work installs a complex paradox for adopted children; they sustain links with simultaneously endorsed and refused parental figures. For working class adopters these former attachments touch all sorts of issues including their own class identities.

My argument here is with the kind of model of family life that contemporary attachment work promotes and whether that model is the best one for adopted children. The current attachment literature has an insistence on the building of new bonds and on parents developing empathy with their children in order to enforce a singular, familial relationality. This raises a number of questions for working class adopters: Are they comfortable with this attachment model of family life and how different is it to their own working class experience of family? What has to happen to the differences of their own working class backgrounds in order to become such an adopter?

There was a marked contrast with the two other working class adopters. They didn’t use the language of attachment to describe their relations with their adopted children and they had a more

spacious and open attitude to their children's history. It has been argued that an attachment framework and open adoption practices are irreconcilable (Sales 2012, pp. 120–125) and it is not therefore surprising that adopters are more open when they are not drawing upon attachment thinking in their parenting. Adopter 4 reported that her adopted daughter told her early on 'I am from a different country' and she knew that respecting this difference would be foundational to her daughter settling down.

9. Birth Parents on Parenting

All three of the birth mother's used the language of attachment to describe their parental deficits. As all of the women had had periods of time in a mother and baby unit as a support to their parenting, they had clearly acquired some of this language. However, there was often considerable confusions about how they understood the purpose of the placement, the expectations of them and why they had failed. Running through all of the extracts is class differences, and how difficult it is for these mothers to understand and participate in the middleclass culture of parenting.

This is an exchange with birth mother 6:

'The mother and baby unit, was this to help you hold onto your girls?'

'Yeah, it was to show my parenting skills, which was going fine, but I got postnatal depression and then wasn't bonding with them or something and they used that against me'.

'Did you know they would be placed for adoption after the mother and baby unit?'

'No they didn't tell me that'.

And the following exchange about her son:

'C taken off me at 6 months, domestic violence related, I was in a holding placement, which is like before court proceedings, before they put him up for adoption, but I wasn't allowed to do nothing for him, it was weird, like, I could feed him and all, they would have him in their room'.

'Was the idea that they would help your parenting?'

'I didn't get a chance to bond with him, every time, like in the first placement, I got to bond with him at the hospital, but the second I left, after that social were just in control, I got to feed him, but I was told about my baby all the time'.

This birth mother is using the language of the professionals—bonding, parenting skills, post-natal depression—to try and communicate to me about how she failed the numerous placements with her children. Of course, separated from the wider social context of this woman's life, these expressions communicate very little, but what she has understood is that her mothering has fallen far short of these professional standards. Here we see very clearly how parenting is divorced from the wider social field and distilled into a series of detachable universal skills that all mothers need to acquire if they want to keep their children.

Birth mother 8 spoke at length about her failures in various mother and baby placements. Here is her description of a foster placement with her son:

'Not allowed to do much, she wouldn't let me cook, and I had to eat lot of weird stuff, one day vegetarian, I wanted to be my own parent, I had always lived independently, and sometimes I didn't want to out with I if it was cold but I had to, do you remember that snow back in 2009, we had to go down to T . . . that day, frightened of an accident'.

This birth mother captures how difficult she found the culture of the placements, the food, the emphasis on exercise and fresh air, the surveillance of her as a mother, this is a culture that is so other to her life. Like birth mother 6 there is an increasing sense of imprisonment, detention, judgement, with very little understanding of how she should be mothering and how she is failing in these placements.

In contrast, the interviews were full of practices of parenting where the parents communicated about the numerous ways they continued to care about their absent children. All the parents I interviewed expressed worries about their children. Birth mother 8 tied her worry to her maternal position: 'I wouldn't be a mum if I didn't worry' whilst birth mother 9's concerns were to do to with her knowledge of her daughter: 'I am worried about J who doesn't like change, worried how she copes with living with two women, L is young enough he can adapt to anything, but J more confused being that bit older'.

As none of the four birth parents had face to face contact with their children, the letterbox communications were an important way of sustaining their tie to their children. The three birth mothers all had special places for the letters they received, as well as photographs of the children in albums and displayed on walls and surfaces in their homes. The practice of writing letters was reported as challenging for all the parents involved. Birth mother 8 expressed her difficulties: 'It is hard for us mums to write to our own flesh and you have to write it in a stranger's way, it is awkward, know what I mean'. Birth mother 9 explains how she tries to keep up her maternal place: 'They are not allowed to call us mum, but I try and keep the letters as family orientated as I can really'. All the parents complained that they had been forbidden by the local authority to fully communicate their love for their children. Birth mother 9 was upset that the local authority wouldn't let her give her daughter a ring from her and the father with the engraving 'daughter we will always love you'. Birth mother 6 had written an 'unacceptable' letter where she says 'you are always in my heart and I am missing you so much'.

All the parents expressed a wish to see their children and a desire to be ready when they reach 18 and can legally search for them.

The above practices get little or no recognition within the wider culture of adoption. Adoption has disqualified these parents from a parenting role, so the ways they continue to show love and concern for their children receive very little acknowledgment or are given very little importance. However, it was very clear that there were many ways in which these failed parents still practiced parenting with their absent children.

10. Conclusions

This paper set out to explore the under-researched area of class in the field of adoption through a small scale study interviewing birth parents and adopters. Working classness assumed a structuring importance in this study as the majority of the self-selected participants were from this class background. This produced two particular findings that would reward further exploration. Firstly, with three of the adoptive families, their injurious working class identity was mobilized by the adoption of working class children. This had a negative impact on their relationship with the children's birth family and contact arrangements, resulting in a wish to replace or minimize the children's birth heritage. Secondly, three of the adoptive families embraced the attachment model of parenting, interpreting their children's difficulties with belonging through this particular framework. This had a number of effects: a privileging of the younger adopted child who had less history with previous parents; an emphasis on the building of bonds within the adoptive family; a refusal to address the older child's birth attachments through contact arrangements. Two of the adopters, in marked contrast, were more embracing and open towards their children's birth heritage and didn't draw upon attachment thinking in terms of their parenting.

The interviews with working class adopters clearly then showed differences in both class and parenting attitudes, but the sample is small and a larger sample would provide more information about these differences. What has to happen to the differences of working class parenting in order to take on attachment thinking? How can we understand the differential operation of class where some adopters are clearly more comfortable with the working class background of their children? Unfortunately, my sample didn't represent middleclass adopters and in any future study this would be an important inclusion. Do middleclass adopters parent more easily within the attachment model? Finally, there was ample material that showed marginalization and pathologization of failed birth

parents. What are the effects of this pathologization of their backgrounds on adopted children? How far are attachment difficulties in adopted children a response to being kinship and class conflicted?

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