Adopted children and their grandparents
Views from three generations

David Pitcher explores how the parents of adopters respond to the role of adoptive grandparent and describes adoptive family life from the perspective of three generations. The research involved both a quantitative study (n = 236) and a qualitative study of six white British families, in which grandparents, parents and children were interviewed. The study concludes that grandparents are significant, not primarily for practical support but in their symbolic function. It is proposed that the concept of grandparents being ‘fun’ that has developed in contemporary British culture enables them to represent approval and acceptance. For parents, they are significant as ‘approving witnesses’ to this new family. The account concludes by suggesting how the three-generational perspective described can contribute to the assessment and support of adoptive families. Further studies could test whether this pattern can be seen in other cultural contexts or family types.

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Key words: grandparents, adoption, generations, adoption support

Introduction
When a child enters a family by adoption, what might be the response of his or her ‘new’ grandparents? This is a question of great relevance to adopters and to those working with them. In the literature, however, the concepts of adoption and ‘kinship’ often appear as alternatives, with kinship and grandparenthood implying blood relationship. Grandparents’ pride in the achievements of their grandchildren, and in the success of their own children as parents, is thought to be bound up with the genetic link which the grandparents see being continued (Erikson, 1994).

This article explores the relationship between children and their grandparents in a situation in which this genetic link is not present: adoptive families. It looks at adoption from the perspective of each of the three generations involved – grandparents, parents and children – on the basis that it is difficult to understand the dynamics of adoption without a multi-generational perspective.

The study
The study comprised two elements: an initial quantitative study that was designed to map out patterns within adoptive families in one geographical area and a more detailed qualitative study of six adoptive families, in which the views of all three generations were sought. In this way, a picture could be constructed that had both breadth and depth.

The quantitative research
In the quantitative ‘mapping’ study, all the people who were approved as adopters by three adoption agencies in southwest England (covering Devon, Plymouth and Torbay) over a four-year period (January 2000–December 2003) were identified. This involved 241 families. A four-page questionnaire was sent to each of their assessing social workers asking them to rate the level of involvement by each of the four grandparents, also recording those who were deceased (236 responses were received). Social workers were also invited to comment on the relationships, which were analysed statistically. The positive response rate to the questionnaire can be explained by the fact that, although a large number of families were included, it involved only 27 workers, in three adoption teams. These teams had stable staff groups with an interest in research. In addition, I was able to make personal links with them, thus encouraging a better response than would be achieved from a ‘cold’ request.

The qualitative research
The qualitative study began with three families: a pilot family, followed by two representing the two main types of adoption we see as an agency – a child with no identified problems who was placed as a young baby and an older child who had experienced abuse and
Three further families were then sought using theoretical sampling (Strauss, 1987). According to this approach, the researcher seeks participants in order to explore differences or similarities to previous respondents, on the basis of ideas that are beginning to emerge from the study itself. This enables as complete a picture as possible to be built up. The six families were therefore different in several ways. In some, intergenerational relationships were warm, whereas in others they were distant and marked by conflict. Their reasons for adopting were also different, with three families being completely childless, one having a birth child by both parents, and two having a birth child by one. One family had been foster parents who then adopted the children in their care. In terms of similarities, all six were couples who had originally planned for a birth child.

The children interviewed were aged 6–12 and had been in placement for at least two years. This age group was chosen to enable me to interview the children in a meaningful way; the two-year period meant that the family could look back at developments now that the placement was more established. Although the children’s actual experiences varied, all had been placed for adoption because of abuse or neglect. The aim was to interview all the grandparents (where relevant, as couples), all the parents and all the children. Unfortunately, in two families grandparents could not be interviewed, due either to their ill health or to family estrangement, and in one case it was inappropriate to interview the child. In these cases, it was only possible to infer their perspective from the comments of other family members. In total, this produced 21 interviews, with 32 participants.

The interviews were semi-structured. After the children had talked about their family life, I introduced four ‘story stems’, which I had designed from a close reading of the grandparenting, adoption and attachment literature. A ‘story stem’ is an incomplete story which contains an implied dilemma. The child is invited to describe what is happening and what happens next; this helps the therapist or researcher to understand that child’s perception of social relationships (Hodges et al., 2003). (An example, The Broken Vase, is shown in Picture 2.) In addition, each child was invited to draw a picture of themselves with one or more of their grandparents (see Picture 1). The story stem and the picture were designed to gather as much of the child’s perspective as possible.

All the interviews were transcribed and analysed using two different methods. The first was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 1986). This enabled me to gain a systematic account of what each participant was telling me. The interviews were then reanalysed using Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson’s ‘Defended Subject’ approach (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). This psychoanalytically informed approach seeks to look not just at what is said, but also at what the respondent avoids saying. By observing broken speech, inconsistencies, metaphor, tone and other non-verbal communication, including the way in which the interviewer is affected (counter-transference), the researcher uncovers areas of anxiety that become important data. Thus, it was possible to gather a deep and detailed picture of each family, and then draw comparisons across the generations and across the families.

All the adopters and adopted children were of white British ethnicity; this reflected the demography of the area, as revealed from the ‘mapping study’.

The findings

Findings from the quantitative research
From the quantitative study of 236 adoptive families, it emerged that most of the grandparents were still living. In 47 per cent of cases, all four grandparents were still alive and, in a further 29 per cent, only one was deceased. Eighty-five per cent of mothers’
mothers were alive and only three per cent of cases featured no living grandparent. The assessing social workers often judged the grandparents to be ‘close’ to the adoptive parents; this was particularly marked in the case of the mothers of adoptive mothers, where 65 per cent were rated as ‘close’ or ‘very close’. For fathers’ fathers, the figure was 34 per cent. In 82 per cent of families, at least one grandparent was rated as ‘close’ or ‘very close’. In ten per cent, there was no grandparent with a significant relationship with the family. Thus, an adopted child is likely to have several grandparents available to him or her on joining the new family, many of whom are likely to be close to the adoptive parents, especially on the maternal side.

Two-thirds of the social workers said that they had actively examined the attitude of the adopters’ parents as part of their assessment, and in a third of cases a grandparent had been interviewed. However, from the social workers’ comments, it did not appear that the grandparents provided much practical help, such as babysitting, once the child was placed.

Findings from the qualitative research
The findings from the qualitative interviews are set out from the perspective of each of the three generations. Each one seemed to be working out three fundamental themes, from its own distinctive perspective. These themes were: developing a sense of connection; the position of family members; and responding to cultural expectations of what a grandparent should be like.

The grandparents’ perspective
An important issue for grandparents was at what time their son or daughter decided to tell them about their plan to adopt. In three of the families, the grandparents were not told until a considerable way through the assessment and, even then, they were not really given a clear picture of what was going on. The adoptive parents were quick to explain that this was to protect their parents from disappointment should things not work out. However, it was also clear that a powerful motive was adopters’ anxiety about whether their own parents would approve. Eventually, the adoptive parents would realise that ‘zero hour’ had come and that they had to plan how to tell them. According to the grandparents, this delay meant that they did not have long to get used to the idea and ask questions (although they did not always feel able to ask, for fear that it might be interpreted as lack of support for the idea of adoption). Then, before they knew it, they were expected to welcome a real child. In the other families, the grandparents, especially the mother’s mother, had been involved from the earliest moment. This made for much less anxiety.

In addition to the excitement of meeting the new child, grandparents felt anxious about whether the child would take to them. Several told vivid stories about their first meeting. These always emphasised the child’s acceptance of them, suggesting a possible underlying sense of relief. One grandparent described the little boy, aged five, going up to her husband and saying, ‘Are you going to be my new granddad?’ Another told of the child’s interest in their garden, which seemed to provide a real sense of connection. Often, the small size and vulnerability of the child were emphasised, suggesting a neediness to which the grandparents felt they could really respond:

She came in, bounced in, she just came over and threw her arms around me. It goes to your heart, doesn’t it? You think, ‘This child’s looking for a . . .’

Also important was the child’s first use of the relationship name. One grandmother broke down as she recalled, ‘I can remember him saying, “I am going to be a granddad now!”’ The use of the relationship name seemed to have a ‘claiming’ property.

Grandparents were keen to describe the progress the child had made since
joining their family. This was often seen as a direct result of what the grandparent had taught them or done for them, for instance, becoming more physically affectionate or being able to swim or ride a bike. Like the first meeting, this also had the effect of making the child seem ‘like us’.

In the beginning of the placement, the grandparents’ focus tended to be more on wishing to support their son or daughter in becoming a parent – which they knew they had wanted so much – than on the child. As one grandfather put it, he was pleased ‘because it made them [his daughter and son-in-law] happy’. Then, over time, they were able to gain a sense of connection with the child as he or she became more like the family. They would identify characteristics that emphasised this similarity, such as the same birth sign, the child’s interest in their family history or similarity of temperament. Often a grandparent developed a sense of empathy with the child because of their history, in a way that the adoptive parents did not. For example, in one family the grandmother expressed a feeling of connection regarding the child’s concern about the birth siblings from whom she had been separated. Like her, the grandmother had been the eldest girl in a big family. The birth parents in this family expressed only relief that, through adoption, the child had been removed from feelings of responsibility for her birth siblings.

Where one grandparent (in all cases, the mother’s mother) was very active and involved, the others tended to compare themselves negatively with her, lamenting their physical incapacity, geographical distance or the less close relationship with their son or daughter. Grandparents also wondered how their deceased partners would have responded to the child.

The grandparents had a clear set of beliefs (whether explicitly stated or not) about what was expected of their role. These included being ‘fun’, treating all their grandchildren exactly the same and being ‘close’ but at the same time ‘not interfering’. Because of the particular circumstances of adoption, especially where the child had challenging and incomprehensible behaviour, this caused several grandparents a degree of stress. They employed a range of defensive strategies to deal with this, such as being ‘philosophical’ (‘That wasn’t to be’), generalising or idealising (‘It’s wonderful!’), or choosing not to enquire too deeply (‘That doesn’t concern us’). Each of these responses could be seen in the context of contemporary cultural norms for a grandparent.

Overall, the grandparents saw the child as becoming more ‘normal’, more part of the family, and told stories about family life that emphasised this. As one grandmother put it: ‘They are as close as anybody’s normal grandchildren.’

The adoptive parents’ perspective

For the adopters, it was very important that their own parents accepted adoption as a true form of family and themselves as true parents to the adopted child. They might demonstrate this by behaving towards the child as grandparents ‘should’. If they had any other grandchildren, their behaviour was carefully compared. In all the families interviewed, the parents expected the grandparents simply to love the children without asking questions. Telling them about the reasons for adoption is ‘pointless, as long as they love them’.

Just like the grandparents, the adopters recounted powerful stories about their child’s first meeting with their parents and the positive response. One parent described how presents from the family were ‘in piles on the floor’ and ‘we ran out of vases for the flowers’, and then how their frail parents had made the long journey to meet the child before the arranged time. One adoptive mother told me how she and her husband had anticipated and dreaded a negative response from her own mother, and were thrilled when their adopted child:

took completely to my mum and dad straight away, and I think that kind of
broke the barriers, and because she was so tiny, I don’t think they expected her to be so angelic as she was.

The responsiveness of the child was often emphasised. As the placement progressed, adoptive parents loved to see evidence of their parents’ acceptance of their adopted son or daughter and of their acknowledgement of the child’s progress, all of which was taken as confirmation that they were seen by them as true and effective parents. One mother told how, when her adopted boys (who had experienced neglect) came out of the bath, her mother-in-law always said, ‘They’re filling out lovely!’ Another mother expressed delight in recounting how her adopted daughter, who had been very slow to respond to affection, had recently allowed her father to place her on his lap.

Where grandparents did not do this, parents often distanced themselves from them and described them in a dismissive way. These grandparents might have asked a question that implied they thought of the child differently. For example:

*She said, ‘Why don’t you have your own?’ . . . His mum actually said it!*

By contrast, another respondent’s father had ‘never questioned it, never, no, not at all’. Sometimes quite significant ‘splitting’ occurred, with one grandparent (generally on the paternal side) compared negatively with another (usually the maternal side), who was correspondingly idealised. These contrasts, which seemed exaggerated, could be made between a variety of family members – adopters and their parents, the adopted child and other children in the family, and the adopters and their adult siblings. They helped to contain the parents’ fears that adoption might not be, in the words of one father, ‘just normal really, no difference whatsoever’.

Where a grandparent was deceased, I found that they still remained an important part of the family. Parents would think about how their deceased parent would have reacted to the child, perhaps drawing strength from their imagined or (if the grandparent had died after meeting the child) their actual positive response to the child and her or his response to them. In some ways, these memories gave more reassurance than was provided by the living grandparents, whose responses could be less easily predicted. However, parents did use their parents’ geographical distance, infirmity or other characteristics to ‘manage’ their perceptions of them.

Adopters drew on prevalent cultural norms in their assessment of their parents’ behaviour. For example, being able to tell a story that illustrates how a (grand)parent treats the adopted grandchild ‘exactly the same’ as her other grandchildren served as evidence that they were accepted. Emotional distance could be justified by saying, ‘Grandparents have their place.’ Predictable routines, and ‘fun’ activities, seemed especially reassuring. One grandparent lived a long way away and was known to have questioned the adoption. Yet she regularly sent ‘little letters’ to her adoptive grandchildren containing tokens from cereal packets and money. This provided a message of acceptance which the lack of contact prevented from being challenged.

In none of the families was the grandparent providing a high level of practical help, and any support given tended to be cited as an acting out of acceptance, rather than as something essential to the family’s practical functioning. Grandparents were expected to be positive, affirming and predictable. Where they were not, distance was established in order to enable a more manageable (and less accurate) view of them to be maintained. Several of the parents showed a pattern of quoting their parents’ approving words and phrases verbatim, sometimes imitating their tone and style of speech:

*My dad came in and said, ‘Gosh!’ he said, ‘She’s just run up to me!’*
But that’s the only time my mum said, ‘Don’t you think you’ve taken on too much?’

Adoptive parents sometimes imputed their own negative views to their parents, even when there was no evidence that their parents held or had ever held such opinions:

They’ve got to think, all of a sudden, what this child who wasn’t born into the family is going to be like. From the tales that he [grandfather] tells you, they are very disruptive and they are going to wreck your lives, and this whirlwind is going to come in and turn what was perfectly normal and happy and acceptable upside down.

The children’s perspective

The presence and involvement of their new grandparents clearly helped the children gain a sense of being accepted by the whole family. The grandparents often provided a link with cousins and other relatives, dead as well as living. A grandparent was seen as able to tell the child ‘what mummy was like when she was a baby’, in the words of one of the children. For another child, the military exploits of a long deceased great-grandparent could be a source of pride and linked with his own interest in soldiers.

More than anything, grandparents were seen as a source of ‘fun’ and positive regard (see Picture 1).

In drawing a picture of himself and his maternal grandmother, Danny, aged eight, paid careful attention to their shoes – his football boots (because he plays football with her) and her stripy shoes. The object in the air is a ‘sticky dart’, and they are trying ‘to see who can throw it the far-est’. The whole picture emphasises ‘fun’.

Regular, predictable routines, such as coming to tea every Sunday and allowing the child to choose a film to watch together, were important in building up this picture. The analysis revealed how the children frequently used words like ‘always’ and ‘usually’ when describing their grandparents. Where the grandparent was not ‘fun’, the child would go to considerable lengths to find a way of making them fit this image:

Grandad is a dragon [ie he gets cross] . . . but dragons can be nice sometimes, can’t they?

Where grandchildren did not really know their grandparents, perhaps owing to distance or because they had died, they were always described as having been ‘fun’ and ‘nice’.

When describing The Broken Vase story stem (Picture 2), the children’s emphasis was:

Mummy says ‘naughty boy!’ The grandparents are never cross. They are pleased to help you, just happy to see you.

Mother is thinking, ‘What a naughty boy!’ The grandparents are thinking, ‘What’s the matter?’ They are not cross, they are just a bit puzzled. They think he did not mean to do it.
A significant finding was that it was not necessarily important to the child if they did not see the grandparent very often or if the grandparent could not do much with them. What mattered was their sense that the grandparent liked them. For example, one child was able to draw on happy memories of meeting his grandmother from the train on her occasional visits and the ‘little pressies’ she always brought. Another boy told me how his grandfather, who was housebound, gave him ten pence every time he scored a goal for his school football team. In yet another family, the child described being able to ‘help nanny tidy up the house, because she finds it difficult to bend down’. In interviews with all three of these grandparents, the grandparent had lamented the fact that they were not as close or as active as they would have liked to be, and that being more so would have helped their relationship with the child. However, there was no hint from the child that this was an issue for them. The positive regard represented by the ‘fun’ was what mattered.

In one family, the truth was too far from this for one of the children to be able to accept owing to a significant family estrangement. The parents tried to make a joke of it, then claimed that their adopted daughter was too young to understand and that it would be explained to her later on, yet it was clear that she found the situation very difficult. While discussing this during the interview, she wriggled and writhed, then got up and ran around rather wildly. The picture she drew was almost scribbled and contained no people. When asked about her grandmother, she replied: ‘I can’t know.’ Her response to The Broken Vase was:

*Mum thinks it’s him, but it’s not, it’s his sister. The grandparents are thinking, ‘Naughty, naughty sister!’ and so is Mum . . .

This was the only response to this story stem in which the grandparents were described as being angry with the child.

The adopted children, whether they were placed as babies or older, had expectations about what a grandparent should be like. This came from their experience of older people including, in one case only, a birth grandparent, and also from images they had absorbed from story books and the media. Their view of their actual grandparent was significantly shaped by these expectations, and this image, supported by carefully remembered narratives, was used to affirm their view of an approving, safe person. This person did not tell them off and confirmed all they needed to believe about their ‘special’ new family.

**Discussion: grandparents as ‘approving witnesses’**

The involvement of grandparents, both as the adoptive parents’ parent and the child’s grandparent, was important for all six families in this study. It strengthened everyone’s sense of the family as something nurturing that continued over generations and included many more family members than just the adoptive parents. The grandparents performed this role largely intuitively, making use of the shared cultural expectations around them. They often did not fully appreciate just how important they were, especially in the case of those who were less involved.

One finding from this study was that
all grandparents are significant, not just those who live close by or are supportive in a practical sense. This included very distant grandparents and even those who were no longer alive. I came to see this as stemming from the symbolic function they fulfil. Grandparents might be viewed as ‘witnesses’ to the family’s legitimacy, figures whose approval enables the parents’ anxieties about the acceptability of their family structure, and the acceptability of the actual child, to be assuaged. In order to be seen in this way, relationships take on a certain shape and the distinction between the real people and what they represent is not always allowed to be clear.

This was illustrated by one mother who described her experience of managing the behaviour of the two children who had been placed with her for adoption. For a while, she felt that her mother did not really accept just how difficult they were. This made her feel desperate and extremely isolated. Perhaps her mother thought she was exaggerating or that she was simply a ‘bad’ parent: Nobody could see . . . I got the blame . . . It was awful . . . I couldn’t take any more.

Then, suddenly and dramatically, she described the moment when her mother realised: ‘Mum’s seen!’ Knowing that her own mother understood was experienced as a huge relief and enabled her to continue caring. The grandmother told me, ‘I feel so close to them because they are my daughter’s children.’ The closeness she felt towards her daughter had transferred to the children her daughter had chosen as her own. Although their behaviour was so challenging, the grandmother was able to identify situations in which the children were endearing or humorous; such accounts were seized on by the adoptive mother as reassurance that they really were loveable, even amid other evidence. In fact, the grandfather in this particular family later acknowledged that he had always had ‘reservations . . . they are not quite a hundred percent family’, but these comments were never acknowledged, the subject being quickly changed. The grandmother’s ‘seeing’ set up a pattern of reinforcement that was based on the exclusion of some thoughts and feelings, a process that was very strong. In this family, as in the others, there was a sense of a double reparation: the reparation of the adult sons and daughters as parents and the reparation of an abused child. The grandparents had a strong sense of both.

One way of looking at this theoretically is suggested by the French narrative thinker Paul Ricoeur (2004). He describes how our ‘close relations’ occupy an intermediate level between the individual self and the wider world. It is via our exchange with these ‘close relations’ who ‘approve of my existence’ that we are able to build up an acceptable and comprehensible picture of the world. For the six families studied, the grandparents (both the real individuals and their image as held by the parents and children) were looked to for this authorising and approving function.

Adoptive parents, for all their commitment and abilities, may lack confidence in themselves as parents (Priel et al, 2000; Tollemache, 2006) in a way that other parents may not. They look to their parents and, perhaps especially for the adoptive mother to her own mother (Stern, 1995), for affirmation of their new status as parents. Thus, the adopters’ parents are both the focus of their anxiety and the ones who can best dispel it; in both cases, it is by their imagined as well as by their actual response. Others may have to fulfil this function if necessary, but nobody can really replace the involvement of the person to whom the parent themselves looked as a child. Harold Blum (1983), in one of only two other studies of adoption and grandparents in the literature, says that when people become adoptive parents, the attitude of their parents is ‘pivotal’. This includes not just their actual attitudes, such as how eager they are to help, but their ‘fantasised reaction’. From his psychoanalytic perspective, Blum describes how a
grandparent can be an ‘auxiliary superego’ to an adoptive parent. This complementarity of response, the sharing of psychological functions, supports the findings of this study.

All the adopters I interviewed started out with a vision, with a view of themselves as ‘normal’ parents. Although the image of ‘normality’ varied between the families, an important component was the ability to see their own parents as grandparents and to relate to them from this new generational position. Their parents shared this vision for them. The word ‘normal’ was constantly used by parents and grandparents. The difficulty with the concept of normality, however, is that it carries two meanings (Ricoeur, 2007): ‘normality’ is ‘a statistical average’ and also ‘an ideal’, the absence of which implies a deficiency. Ricoeur describes ‘the insolent aspect of health’, which thus creates inferiority and then establishes it as a social norm.

Accepting the idea of adoption is not all. With the arrival of the actual child, he or she has to be integrated into this vision of ‘normality’, whereupon the same anxieties about acceptance arise. The child, too, will have a parallel vision of ‘normal’ family life. In all of this, the place of grandparents as approving the actual child as well as the idea of adoption is important.

Grandparent roles, along with other roles in contemporary culture, are changing. Today, grandparents expect to leave authority issues to the child’s parents and to ‘take pleasure in the emotional responsiveness of their grandchildren’ (Kivnick, 1982; Silverstein et al., 1998; Dench and Ogg, 2002). This can meet both their needs for an idealised version of themselves as parents (Cath, 1986) and the child’s need for a ‘good double’ of his or her parents (Blau, 1984). It could be argued that this aspect of the culture links well with the needs of both the adoptive parents and the adopted child, both of whom need a sense of approval and acceptance.

Can the findings from this research be generalised to adoptions involving different ethnicity, different cultural attitudes or other forms of permanence? The present study cannot answer this question directly, especially as both grandparenting (Ikels, 1998) and adoption (Benet, 1976) are significantly shaped by cultural context. However, one other study provides some clues. Beryl Soparkar (1998) conducted 83 telephone interviews with adoptive grandmothers in the United States. Here, the cultural context and racial profile was very different, with over half the adoptions being transracial and intercountry, and with the children being generally ‘unmatched’ with their adoptive parents. Some had disabilities. A similar ethnic or religious heritage appeared to intensify the sense of belonging felt by the grandmother to the child and, conversely, a different background could serve as a barrier to acceptance when the grandmother already had reservations. However, the key factor was the fit between the child’s needs and the needs and expectations of the grandparents and parents, (something several of the grandmothers termed ‘fitting in’) and specifically the child’s responsiveness to them. Where this was present, grandparents were able to develop a strong sense of connection with the child by identifying other types of similarity, such as personality or looks. Some saw a transracial adoption as an affirmation of their values; however, a number of these grandmothers expressed an awareness that their own parents and grandparents would not have approved of the children.

Hedi Argent (2004), in Related by Adoption: A handbook for grandparents and other relatives, recorded speaking to adoptive grandparents about the need to recognise and celebrate both difference and similarity within transracial placements. The part a grandparent can play in helping the family to accept the child, and to identify connecting factors, emerged in this research and is common to both Soparkar and Argent’s thinking. Further studies could explore this from a variety of angles, including the part grandparents play (and whether this pattern is also observed) in other forms.
of non-biological family, such as fostering or step-parenting.

**Implications for practice**

This study has implications for the assessment of prospective families and also for the support of established adoptive families. In assessing families, it is just as important to explore the attitudes of those (grand)parents who do not support adoption or are not close, as those who are. The perceived attitude of deceased parents might also benefit from exploration (‘What would your mother have thought of this, were she alive’), as this will be having a significant impact on the applicants’ thinking. This study suggests that it is also important to encourage applicants to be open with all their parents at an early stage. Not to be so will inevitably cause them stress.

It may be helpful to explore their perceptions of what grandparents should do and how they should behave, perhaps involving the grandparents themselves. Questions like ‘What makes a good grandparent?’ or ‘Where is the line between help and interference?’ would be helpful in making explicit some assumptions that, if left unstated, may cause misunderstandings later on.

Parents’ parents could be asked: ‘What do you know about adoption? What do you imagine an adopted child to be like?’ As an outcome of this study, Plymouth has devised an information leaflet to be given to the parents of prospective adopters and a pilot information evening for the parents of adopters is planned.

One of the biggest challenges in supporting families is how grandparents can be enabled to support the child, whom they may understand surprisingly well, without this being perceived by the parents as a rejection or criticism of them, so negating the role of grandparents as ‘approving witnesses’. In some cases, it may only be the grandparent who can see what is really going on within the family and only the grandparent who has the power to challenge it. My view is that adoptive families cannot be fully helped unless their original vision of being a ‘normal’ family is explicitly acknowledged, perhaps in some detail. This may be very different to the current reality and can be a hidden source of anger and hurt.

This study has also shown that for the grandparents to play their part as ‘approving witnesses’ demands a level of idealisation and, conversely, of negative projection that can make the family fragile in the face of change. There were certain narratives, especially for the children and grandparents, that were ‘disqualified’ (Henley *et al*, 1998). Both a family systems perspective (eg Klever, 2003) and a psychodynamic perspective (eg Steiner, 1993) point to the need to enable all family members to be less emotionally ‘stuck together’, to use a concept from Bowen theory (Titelman, 2003). Parents and grandparents who can think and act more flexibly, and who are as free as possible to form and express their own view without this causing unbearable anxiety, are a greater resource to the child. The interviews with the eight children showed that, although they were positive about most aspects of their family, seven of them expressed some level of uncertainty about issues relating to their wider family. Furthermore, they appeared unable to communicate this uncertainty to their adoptive parents directly. The adoptive parents likewise did not seem to be aware of this or provided reassurances that did not really help. For example, one mother emphasised the contrast between the child’s birth grandparents and her own parents. However, in my interview with the child he expressed a worry that he would forget his original family. If he could, then he might just as easily forget his current adoptive family. Another child, who had been led to expect an idealised new family, could not reconcile this with being told off by her grandfather. By contrast, the adoptive mother saw her father’s firmness as supportive of her and a recognition of the difficulties she faced with the child’s behaviour.
Conclusion
This article describes a study of six adoptive families which has taken the perspective of relationships within the child’s, the parents’ and the grandparents’ generation. This was set in context by a larger but less detailed study (n = 236) of all the people approved as adopters in Devon (including Plymouth and Torbay) over a four-year period. These findings support the ones from the six families studied in depth.

In all the families, grandparents were significant to the parents and to the child, a fact that was clearly salient for the grandparents themselves. This was not affected by geographical distance or physical disability. Grandparents seemed important as much for what they represent as for what they do. Fundamentally, they act as ‘approving witnesses’, symbols of acceptance both to the new parents and to the child. In the words of one mother, ‘Mum sees!’ The meaning of grandparenthood within contemporary British culture, as well as the individual characteristics of the grandparents themselves, are important and, to some extent, interact with each other. Ties of kinship are created by a sense of family continuity and by interlocking relationships. In adoptive families, just as in families formed by birth, grandparents can be seen to play an influential role.

Acknowledgements
The author would like to acknowledge the advice and support given by Dr Liz Webb and Professor Andrew Cooper at the Tavistock Clinic, London.

Author’s note: This research was undertaken as part of a doctoral degree. David Pitcher welcomes correspondence about this area to dave.pitcher@plymouth.gov.uk

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