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To cite this article: Stella Bolaki & Samantha Davey (2024) 'Bound' by grief post-adoption: can the artist's book assist mothers to tell their stories?, Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law, 46:3, 366-389, DOI: [10.1080/09649069.2024.2382515](https://doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2024.2382515)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2024.2382515>



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Published online: 05 Aug 2024.



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## 'Bound' by grief post-adoption: can the artist's book assist mothers to tell their stories?

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### ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary research collaboration explored the potential benefits of artist's book workshops for mothers who have experienced grief and loss following the adoption of their children, without their consent. The workshops were designed to facilitate the processing of these complex, powerful emotions and promote emotional healing. The authors ran two workshops – one which was face-to-face and another which took place online. After the workshops, a short documentary was produced, providing insights into the research process and showcasing the experiences of the participating mothers. Early indications suggest that the workshops were successful in addressing the emotional needs of the mothers and have the potential to foster healing and empowerment. By shedding light on mothers' complex emotional experiences, our research also indirectly raises questions as to the adequacy of the legal framework to meet their needs and to build their trust at the times where they are at their most vulnerable.


### KEYWORDS

Adoption; adoption without parental consent; mothers; artist's book; grief and loss

## Introduction

This pilot study is an interdisciplinary research collaboration, bringing together approaches from Law and Arts/Humanities, to attend to the voices and perspectives of mothers whose children have been adopted without their consent – especially, regarding the long-term effects of adoption on their mental wellbeing and their lives more generally. Our research sought to explore and make visible mothers' feelings and experiences of adoption and its aftermath. We explored whether using the artist's book as a tool of self-expression could make mothers' intangible experiences tangible.

The legal definition of adoption without parental consent, or non-consensual adoption, provided for within the Adoption and Children Act 2002, specifies that such adoptions are based on parental incapacity (s52(1)(a)) or the welfare of the child (s52(1)(b)). We chose to interpret 'non-consensual' adoption more widely and include mothers who felt they could not provide informed consent to the adoption of their children, due to being children themselves (i.e. under 16) at the time of giving birth.

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The impact of adoption on mothers is a subject that has long been under-explored and often overlooked. An adoption order, made under s46 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, has the impact of legally ‘transplanting’ (Harris-Short 2008) a child from one family into another. An adoption has the effect of extinguishing the birth parents’ parental responsibility for the child, vesting it in the adoptive parents, who are consequently recognised as the child’s legal parents, enjoying all the corresponding legal rights and responsibilities. Every year, thousands of children (including newborn babies) are taken into care, and a proportion of them are placed for adoption. The sheer magnitude of these figures, with approximately 82,170 children taken into care in 2022 (Office for National Statistics 2023) and 2,950 children adopted annually (Office for National Statistics 2023), highlights the scale of the issue. Although research acknowledges that adoption can have profound effects on birth parents (Davey 2020, Deblasio 2021) and wider members of the family kinship network (Davey and Lindsey 2023, it is widely acknowledged that adoptions have the most significant impact on ‘birth’ mothers. In this article, the authors will use the neutral language of ‘mother’ rather than ‘birth’ mother, since this has been seen as stigmatising to mothers who have gone through the adoption process (Wilson *et al.* 2004). Mothers who have experienced the adoption process with their children have described themselves in different ways including ‘natural’ mothers (Kelly 2005) and even as ‘unbecoming’ mothers in the eyes of the state and society (Farrar 2005).

Some mothers endure the process of being stigmatised not just once in their lifetime, but repeatedly due to limited state assistance. Mothers often lack emotional support during care and adoption proceedings, intensifying the emotional toll of losing their child. This lack of support can perpetuate a cycle of grief and lead to a downward spiral that remains inadequately acknowledged or addressed by the State. Research conducted by a leading researcher in this field, Broadhurst *et al.* (2017), has highlighted that state intervention can be ‘cyclical’. Mothers are often involved in recurrent care and adoption proceedings, with multiple state interventions culminating in the removal of children who are then placed for adoption. Mothers’ negative experiences with state authorities perpetuate this cycle, whereby they become reluctant to seek help, ultimately leading to further adoption procedures or worse. This can be seen, for instance, from the prosecution of Constance Marten for negligent manslaughter for the accidental death of her fifth child, due to fear the child would be removed by the state and placed for adoption (BBC News, 2024). The limited availability of post-adoption support for mothers (Davey 2020, Deblasio 2021, Doughty *et al.* 2023) leaves them unsupported, while managing complex and often overwhelming feelings of grief and loss (Doka 2008).

The emotional landscape mothers navigate during and after the process of adoption, can indeed be fraught with powerful emotions ranging from shame, guilt, sadness and anger (Kelly 2005) to – especially after adoption – pain, confusion, a sense of disconnection and distrust in professionals involved in care and adoption proceedings (Mason *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, many mothers have endured ‘adversity’ from an early age (Mason *et al.* 2020). Some mothers have been cared for by the state themselves or may have had to endure challenging circumstances such as domestic abuse, mental health conditions and/or other issues prior to and during adoption proceedings. At present, this paper will not consider how the potential for ‘intersectionality’ of these issues could exacerbate mothers’ suffering in adoption proceedings. Instead, it simply explores how these powerful emotions could at last become visible, as a counterpoint to a legal framework of adoption and

post-adoption that tends to make these mothers invisible. The law indeed does not just provide limited support to mothers. It also gives limited weight to parental rights in adoption proceedings, as observed by Herring (2009) and by Davey (2020). The invisibility of mothers extends beyond the UK, with, for example, the empirical research of McNamara *et al.* (2021) demonstrating how participant mothers from Ireland described adoption as ‘disempowering and often dehumanising’. That mothers play a limited role in adoption legal proceedings cumulates with the limited or non-existent support to process the emotional and psychological consequences for mothers, post adoption proceedings. Consequently, the legal framework creates a disempowering situation that leaves them open to perpetuating a cycle of grief and pain fuelling further adoptions.

It is within this fraught context of adoption that we sought to explore the efficacy of the artist’s book as a means of helping mothers process their emotions and, ultimately, foster healing and empowerment. Our study shows how mothers could be provided with a safe space to express their own individual emotional landscape. Research suggests that mothers can begin to heal if they can share their experiences and feelings and when these experiences and feelings are validated (Kane 2018).

Arts-based research has diversified and strengthened social science methodologies in relation to different contexts (Leavy 2015, Kara 2015). Creative and ‘embodied inquiry’ (Leigh and Brown 2021) recognises that human understanding is embodied, and language is often insufficient. For educators Leigh and Brown (2021), embodied inquiry ‘incorporates all the unconscious thoughts, feelings, sensations, reflections, emotions and images that arise from and are understood within our bodies and minds’ (p. 106). In the case of mothers, lived experiences of non-consensual adoption and the personal or social meanings attached to them may not easily be captured by straightforward interviews or surveys. As such, arts-based and participatory research can contribute to a deeper, more meaningful understanding of their experiences and personal feelings while facilitating peer support through interaction with other women with similar experiences. Acknowledging the limitations of words and the intense emotional components or stigma that often result in mothers ‘holding back’ during interviews (Deblasio 2021, p. 73), arts-based inquiry can amplify their voices by making space for non-verbal and multisensory ways of ‘meaning-making’.

The artist’s book, a medium rooted in the fusion of art and literature, provides a unique platform for self-expression and storytelling. It is a tactile, visual and interactive medium that uses the form of the book but challenges its conventional format. Mothers, whose voices have often been ‘silenced’ or ‘erased’, can find solace and agency in the creation of an artist’s book that allows for the communication of personal narratives, emotions and experiences. The concept of utilising the artist’s book as a therapeutic tool is not a new one. The field of art therapy has long recognised the potential of artistic endeavours to promote self-reflection, emotional release and personal growth (Hogan 2001). Moreover, Bolaki’s earlier work in the field of the medical humanities has demonstrated the value of the artist’s book for personal growth and healing in the context of managing long-term illness (Bolaki 2016, 2019). There has also been a recent acknowledgement of the importance of creative interdisciplinary approaches towards addressing the feelings of grief and loss experienced by mothers. This can be seen, for example, from the ‘Hope Boxes’ project launched by Angela Frazer-Wicks, MBE (building on research from Mason *et al.* 2022) and Geddes (2022) research on mothers’

utilisation of artefacts associated with their adopted children. More relevant to our project, Patricia Farrar (1999) includes art and poetry to highlight the voices of Australian mothers whose children were removed between 1960 and 1975. Her research uses qualitative research methodologies underpinned by feminist principles, and the artwork made by mothers included in the appendix offers a powerful example of their resistance to silence. Nonetheless, the application of the artist's book as a potential resource for mothers, post-adoption, is an area that has not yet received the attention of scholars.

By exploring uncharted territory, our study aims to make mothers' experiences visible to wider society and to convert intangible emotions into a tangible form of self-expression. The artist's book therefore provides mothers with a creative outlet to explore their feelings, make meaning of their experiences, and navigate their journey of healing and empowerment. By equipping them with the tools and knowledge necessary to create their own artist's book, we hope to empower these women and offer them a means of self-expression. The artist's book workshops we have run (funded by Research England's Participatory Research Fund for the University of Kent, and by the University of Essex's Centre for Public Policy Engagement Fund) have generated early evidence of impact: a documentary film with powerful testimonies by mothers and professionals working in this emotionally challenging area of practice; endorsement by Movement for an Adoption Apology, a non-governmental organisation campaigning for trauma-informed support<sup>1</sup>; and interest in the created artists' books by curators. With the help of our project champions and the use of online workshops, we aim to accelerate this impact to support more mothers internationally and to promote professional and public awareness of this issue.

Our article is structured as follows: we offer context on the history and form of artists' books, describe the interdisciplinary methodology of our research, outline our findings, where we share examples of the artists' books made by mothers, and end with our conclusions and further plans for this project. We address the characteristics of the artist's book and our workshop methodology in detail not only because this art form is not as well-known as others, but also because we want to demystify the process for those researchers interested in, but reluctant to integrate, arts-based methods in their work because of the lack of clear criteria in measuring their success or efficacy. As arts-based methods use practical and embodied activities, the process is inseparable and equally important to the product and must be designed with rigour. We hope our article will bring more clarity to what an arts-based and collaborative approach can achieve – in the context of our research and more broadly – and encourage others to integrate similar methods within their own research.

### **The rationale behind the artist's book as an expressive medium for mothers**

While drawing on the book's broader cultural functions, the artist's book extends its conventional conceptions. Emerging in the twentieth century as a form of 'intermedia' (Higgins 1966) that combines text, image and various methods of production, it is an innovative and versatile art form. Its identity is continually developing as distinct from any of the artistic activities it draws on, such as printmaking, painting, photography and sculpture. Through the richness of their material production and

autonomy, artists' books have provided a unique platform for individual voices and collective visions. In the 1970s, as they proliferated in Europe and the United States in the context of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, many included direct accounts of trauma and illness. Integrating structure with theme and materials, these 'home-made' books consisted of photographs, journal entries, drawings, collage and objects, and used innovative bindings and textures. Not situated within professional networks of publishing or the art gallery space, they circulated in small editions and 'democratic multiples' made possible by inexpensive methods of offset and Xerox print production. Digital capacities for production over following decades have extended traditional book arts methods (Linker 1980, Lyons 1985, Lauf and Phillpot 1998, Klima 1998, Drucker 2004, 2020).

Despite this history, artists' books are not widely known outside the communities of book artists, collectors, librarians and curators. Many of them today circulate within the confines of the art world or in archives. Shifting some of the conversations in these circles away from a discussion of what is or is not an artist's book, Bolaki sought to expand the traditional audiences and practitioners of artists' books in a medical humanities context. During her previous research in innovative media of illness communication, she encountered Martha A. Hall's artists' books. From 1989, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, until her death in 2003, Hall, an American artist from Maine, made books of diverse materials, sizes and constructions, produced in small editions or as one-of-a-kind objects. Her creativity was important to her healing, but she also used her books to improve the ways medical professionals interact with their patients. Inspired by Hall's books, Bolaki began investigating how engaging with, and producing, books can enrich ways of representing experiences of illness that are difficult to express in words or that remain taboo. She co-organised exhibitions on this topic and with artists co-designed book-making workshops that supported patients, health professionals, art therapists and young people as well as charities and museums.<sup>2</sup> This research into the impact of the artist's book on communicating lived experiences has clear benefits in other contexts, as our project findings have begun to demonstrate. The use of the artist's book as a vehicle of creative self-exploration and communication represents a novel method when it comes to research that seeks to prioritise mothers' experiences and views on adoption.

Most adoption studies scholars are familiar with the life story book (LSB) or life story work (LSW) (Ricketts 2023). Adopted people have a legal right to access information about their backgrounds and personal history. The LSB is a valuable tool that serves as such a record. Its content can be created by caseworkers, parents, and the adopted child (depending on the child's age and capacity) in collaboration with the adults. LSBs originally took the form of scrapbooks in which photos and stories about the child and families they had lived with were organised. They have since evolved into structured workbooks, textual narratives, and even digital collections (Reams 2022). The purpose of the LSB is that children have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background. They are deemed helpful to establish continuity and 'an intact sense of identity' (Backhaus 1984). There are many issues surrounding the creation of life story books (Watson *et al.* 2015), most notably the fact that mothers and other family members are often excluded from this process, which is detrimental to all, including the child. In addition to arguing against such exclusion, we posit that LSW is equally important for mothers who also find it difficult to integrate the past, present and

future following the state removal and adoption of their children. Can the artist's book serve similar purposes for mothers that the life story book does for adopted children, when it works?

The book as form and idea not only has powerful spiritual and cultural associations but also rich metaphorical associations. For example, we talk of 'turning the page', or of 'starting a new chapter' in our lives. It is therefore an appropriate medium for documenting transitions in life. The advantage of an artist's book compared to a conventional book is that its text, images and other elements work together to make its message more palpable. An artist's book captures, through colour, texture and layout, ideas and feelings that words alone are often inadequate to express. In integrating their themes with their physical means of production, artists' books not only incorporate the maker's own perspective, but show how an experience can be made visible and tangible. The physical acts of cutting, folding, embossing and collaging often involved in bookmaking can be cathartic. They can help the maker of a book to stay focussed, meditate, or release painful emotions. In other words, rather than being merely reduced to their linguistic or narrative features, artists' books offer embodied, episodic and improvised accounts that literally *process* lived experiences. Finally, multi-modal artistic expression can also be seen as more inclusive for mothers with learning and mental health difficulties for whom reading and writing might pose additional difficulties (Fox and Macpherson 2015, Seubert 2022).

The distinctive power of the artist's book is best encapsulated in the words of one of our workshop participants:

I was immediately drawn to the project, because I immediately sensed the potential of the workshop. [...]. It has given me a powerful voice in a way that didn't actually involve me speaking to anyone about what had happened. And books – I think I said on the day also – they carry authority and creating one gives you a sense of agency and authority of your own story. You finally know how to articulate your own truth about what happened to you and what it did to you – and you coming out of the being silenced place. So I think creating an artbook is potentially a great way to tell the truth about the emotionally complex journey of losing our babies to adoption. (Bolaki and Davey 2023)

Discussing the special kind of authority that artists' books carry, book artist and scholar Johanna Drucker (2004) associates it not only with authorship but also with the embodied or physical acts of binding and printing a book (p. xviii). While binding gives fragments coherence that facilitates meaning making (Drucker 2004, p. 27), printing brings personal expression into the public sphere (Drucker 1998, p. 4). As a vehicle of both private expression and broad communication, the book balances 'enclosure and exposure' and offers a form of 'intimate authority' (Drucker 2011, p. 14). Drucker (2011) continues by accounting for the reasons why artists' books have been a vital form of expression for female artists. As she explains, 'women create authority in the world by structuring a relation between enclosure and exposure. The women who make books out of the materials of their lives and imaginations establish a balance that gives voice to their own issues on their own terms' (p. 14). The negotiation of enclosure and exposure has broader applications beyond the experience of artists that are pertinent to our project. Given mothers' grief and complex trauma, the lack of trust in professionals involved in care and adoption proceedings, and the fear of being judged or stigmatised, the 'private-

public' nature of books makes them a more suitable vehicle of communication than other art forms that have a more public presence. Enclosed and safe between a book's covers, a story can still be shared, but with one person at a time.

Makers of books can decide how much to conceal and how much to reveal through the way they structure the relationship between the page and the reader. However intimate the contents of the book are, a book that is made public 'faces outward' and works as 'a space of transaction, interaction, and exchange' (Drucker 2024, p. 307). The nature of this exchange is determined by the book's layout, format and overall form, but irrespective of these differences artists' books more generally are created for one-on-one interaction and to be touched. 'People may not want to touch the topics I explore in my books. Yet the books invite handling, touching, interaction' (Hall 2003, p. 14). Martha Hall's statement about illness has applications for a topic like adoption which broader society may not want to 'touch' either. The refusal of the UK government, and wider society, to engage with and understand the injustice and grief that is experienced by mothers post-adoption exacerbates their trauma and stigma. The Joint Committee on Human Rights' report 'The Violation of Family Life: Adoption of Children of Unmarried Women 1949–1976' (2022) that covers England and Wales refers to 'a lifetime of pain and suffering' for mothers whose babies were taken for adoption. 'Hurtful words implying that women "gave up" their babies for adoption, along with the secrecy and shame that have surrounded their histories for so long' have deepened the pain of separation (p. 30).

Like this report that exposed violations and documented testimonials of pain, when opened and shared, the artists' books made in our workshops confront their readers with what has remained secret or taboo. The stories in them literally 'matter' and in turn demand embodied interaction. Readers must learn to 'perform' these books as much as 'read' them. Their tactility and materiality are crucial as they underscore the emotional and human aspects of this topic that are often made invisible by legal processes or clinical models of grief. Legal language, not unlike medical language in Bolaki's previous research, rarely accommodates personal feelings and experiences. In turn, many clinical models of mental health applied in this context (for example, when mothers who cannot overcome the loss of their children are diagnosed with clinical depression) fail to acknowledge the complexity of the trauma surrounding these cases. Adoption scholars have drawn on concepts such as 'disenfranchised grief' (Doka 2008) and 'ambiguous loss' (Boss 1999) to differentiate between the death of a child and the loss of a child to adoption. The artist's book of one of our participants conveys this form of grief that is not socially validated or mourned viscerally, capturing what she describes as 'torturous . . . your child is still alive, it's the weirdest situation, really' (Bolaki and Davey 2023). The advantage of the artist's book over any theoretical language when communicating this distinct kind of grief is that its message stirs physical sensations and affects readers on an emotional level. Moreover, thanks to their versatility, artists' books can convey the singularity of an experience even if there are similarities across mothers' experiences. This aspect is lost, to a certain extent, even in reports like that of the Joint Committee on Human Rights where the stories of mothers are approached as 'evidence', and the focus inevitably falls more on similarities to set the record straight.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights' report has acknowledged that there are many women who have not shared their story even though they may have wanted to (2022, p. 6). Even though our workshops have involved an intergenerational group of mothers



rather than being solely focussed on the period covered by this inquiry, they have been designed with the aim of creating a supportive environment where mothers can reflect individually and collectively on the profound long-term effects of adoption on their lives and put their experiences at the centre. We believe artists' books provide a powerful platform for such reflection; their aesthetic elements, democratic legacy, intimate authority, and the rich cultural and metaphorical associations of the book explored above make them a unique expressive medium.

## Methodology

This was a 'pilot' study to test the prospective use of the artist's book as a tool for processing grief, loss and other complex feelings mothers might experience, post-adoption. Through our workshops and a combination of qualitative interviews, post-workshop surveys, and observational research, we sought to understand the impact of the artist's book on mothers' emotional well-being and sense of identity. In 2022, we delivered two artist's book workshops (in person and via Zoom) with five mothers, conducted semi-structured interviews with four mothers and two researchers in adoption studies, and hosted two training workshops with professionals. We gathered feedback from everyone involved in the project and produced a documentary. We also commissioned blog posts and developed plans for a website that will host our documentary and other resources. Ethical approval was provided by the Ethics Committees at both universities and the selection process of participants for our workshops was exercised sensitively, having regard for the needs of the mothers. The chosen design has three important aspects explained below: participant selection, choice of environment for the workshops, and the structure of the individual workshops.

### *Participant selection*

Due to the stigma that mothers can experience post-adoption, we were aware that it might be challenging for us to recruit for this study. We recruited mothers for our project via the Family Rights Group who shared our details with mothers interested in the project, through our research networks and by social media. We received a considerable amount of interest in our project with responses from twenty-nine mothers. In practice, we received expressions of interest from mothers residing in a range of different countries such as Australia and the USA. Due to the parameters of our study, however, we needed to exclude many of these mothers from our study, using the following questions:

- (1) When was your child (or children) adopted?
- (2) Have you received counselling after this adoption?
- (3) Can you please confirm that you are not involved in ongoing legal proceedings in relation to the child (or children) who were adopted?
- (4) Can you please confirm you have not been formally diagnosed with a mental illness?
- (5) Are there any concerns that you have about involvement with this study?

Our criteria for participation in the project were that we sought mothers within England who had experienced adoption under English law, were not actively engaged with the legal process/court systems (i.e. mothers whose children had been adopted and were not involved in existing care or adoption proceedings) and mothers who did not have a diagnosed mental health disorder.

Mothers who have experienced adoption may be at different stages in their healing journey. We chose participants who were not involved in the court process, to benefit mothers seeking to heal and move on from the adoption process, rather than those seeking to challenge it. Our rationale for this selection choice was to avoid 'blurring the lines' and turning the discussion into one seeking legal advice, rather than focussing on the activities we had planned (this was an issue raised in the earlier research of Deblasio 2021, for instance). After performing a risk assessment, we chose mothers who were not diagnosed with a mental health disorder because this was a pilot study and its approach was to encourage mothers to engage in self-reflection, rather than for the session to be therapeutic in nature. We also wanted to ensure that we could adequately support mothers who attended our workshop. That said, during our face-to-face workshop we had a volunteer counsellor in attendance to support anyone who might become distressed during the workshop (Amanda Swan).

Of the mothers we screened, we determined that six of these mothers were suitable to take part in our study. Each of the accounts below are unnamed, to maintain the anonymity of the mothers involved in our project. The mothers who are named in our findings consented to participate in our filming and be identified by their first name for the purposes of discussing the books they created during the workshops.

- (1) The mother had three children, two of whom were taken into care by the state. The relationship she had with the father of her third and youngest child was traumatic, and she was the victim of recurrent domestic abuse. When social workers became aware of this abusive relationship, they became involved in her family's life and expressed concerns about her ability to protect her child. One child was removed into care and eventually placed for adoption without her consent. She was offered post-adoption counselling which she took advantage of and consequently sought letterbox contact. She described this contact as inconsistent and often late. She wanted to attend the workshop so that she could find a way to process her feelings and share experiences with other mothers who had been through the process of non-consensual adoption.
- (2) Her daughter was adopted when she was a teenager. The pregnancy was a secret which she was not allowed to discuss, because of the family shame. The birth itself was traumatic and took place in a hospital via caesarean section. Her family still will not speak of the adoption, but she has undertaken considerable self-development work to empower herself. She joined the project seeking to find other tools to help process her feelings of grief over the adoption process.
- (3) The mother gave birth at a young age with her child removed from her care and placed with a family member. She was given no counselling at the time and repressed the memory for many years. It was only when she started having

flashbacks that she began to recover her memories. She engaged in the workshop to attempt to connect with repressed feelings, associated with the adoption.

- (4) Her son was placed for adoption at the age of seven. Her son was diagnosed with specific learning difficulties and required additional support. She found it difficult to talk about the reasons for her son's removal into care and consequent adoption. She sought to attend the artist's book workshop to process her grief.

In addition to the mothers referred to above (two of whom attended our face-to-face workshop and three of whom attended our online workshop), two other mothers agreed to participate in our face-to-face workshop but later decided not to attend. This made us aware of how difficult it might be for mothers to attend such initiatives, due to the level of stigma and shame attached to non-consensual adoptions.

- (1) The mother found it very difficult to talk about her experiences and largely her responses were 'yes' and 'no' responses to the initial interview questions. She had suffered mild depression in the past, following an adoption, for which she had received cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). She had two children, one of whom is in care and whom she sees six times a year. The other child was placed for adoption shortly after birth. She spoke of the feelings of guilt due to giving up a child for adoption and hoped that attending a workshop would help.
- (2) The mother had difficulties when her child was two and a half. She entered a relationship with a new partner and concerns arose when the child had an unexplained bruise. The mother herself sought medical attention for the child and the partner was then accused of non-accidental injury. The child was taken into foster care and, following an expert witness report, a finding of fact was made in court of a non-accidental injury. The professionals' opinion was that this injury was caused by her partner, so she split up with him. This child was adopted at four. She got pregnant again and, following a mother and baby assessment, her child was removed into care and adopted. She sought CBT counselling but stopped it as she did not feel it was right for her. She expressed distress that her children would not know their true identity.

### **Choice of environment**

By engaging directly with the participants, we had the opportunity to gather first-hand accounts of their experiences and the ways in which the artist's book helped them to process their feelings of grief and loss. Bolaki led two workshops for mothers: one was face-to-face at the University of Kent and the other was virtual. A note about the difference between face-to-face and online workshops is important here. Artists' books are tactile and multisensory media best experienced in the flesh rather than through static photographs or video. However, with invaluable help from artists and arts educators, we designed digital resources and adapted our face-to-face workshop delivery to retain some of these elements online as much as that is possible. While a face-to-face group workshop can create a supportive and warm environment compared to a situation where participants make books on their own at home, our online workshop worked better for participants who felt vulnerable. As mentioned above, some mothers who were keen to

participate in our face-to-face workshop found themselves unable to travel on the day because of their trauma.

This led us to explore the difficulties in utilising a face-to-face workshop in these circumstances. Mothers who have experienced such loss and stigma can find it difficult to be seen by others, due to the complex feelings associated with the experience of adoption. Therefore the alternative of engaging in book making activities in a familiar space (the comfort of their home), while also sharing a virtual space with other mothers with similar experiences, has the potential to create a safer and more private environment for some participants. This also enabled participants to be heard and to choose whether or not they wanted to be 'seen' by others. This outweighs some of the disadvantages of the virtual setting noted above. For both the physical and virtual workshop, however, we provided advance information about charities and organisations that could provide mental health support following the workshop, also detailed in our ethics application.

No artistic experience was required for the workshops, and all the art materials were provided to the participants. For those who attended the virtual workshop, they were posted to them in advance. The artists' books we were going to create do not require specialised equipment and the supplies are relatively inexpensive and easy to post. We provided a wide range of materials and methods to choose from to reassure any participants with anxiety about their artistic skills. These included papers of different textures, colours and sizes, pages from magazines and books that could be collaged, ribbons and small objects that could be added, as well as a variety of book-making tools and supplies for drawing and painting. Participants were also asked to gather any small objects linked to the workshop topic (photos, memorabilia) or anything else considered meaningful to them to be incorporated into their books, if they chose to do so. In the case of the face-to-face workshop the artistic supplies were spread across a long table with participants seated at tables connected through a U-shape formation. Unlike the virtual workshop, this meant that participants could observe each other's books to get ideas for their own or interact with each other while book making.

### *The structure of individual workshops*

The workshops lasted for three hours and were structured in three parts. The first part began with introductions from participants and the project team, who provided some background about the project and tried to create a safe space. We outlined the aims of the workshop as described above and established some ground rules to ensure a supportive and respectful environment for everyone. We emphasised that the workshop is not offered as a form of counselling or art therapy given that it is designed by academics as part of a research project, but that it may have therapeutic effects. We also noted that participants may find the workshop distressing because it invites them to reflect on challenging emotional experiences. Participants were informed that they could participate as much or little as they chose in the book-making and following discussion of the experiences of making an artist's book. They were reassured that they could stop at any time or step outside if they need 'a moment'. As mentioned above, our volunteer counsellor and project champion Amanda Swan attended our face-to-face workshop. It was not possible for us to put a similar framework in place for the online workshop as it was planned at short notice but, by that time, we had established a rapport with many of the mothers through our correspondence and felt more confident that we could support them. For future workshops that will be held exclusively online to reach

a more diverse group of mothers beyond the UK, we have decided to offer an optional group conversation following each workshop. This conversation will be led by an experienced therapist to ensure that mothers can raise any issues that emerge from their participation in the workshop with a qualified professional.

Following the introductions and ground rules, Bolaki provided context about artists' books and showed participants examples of books that used a wide range of formats: hand-crafted and stitched pamphlets, concertinas of different sizes and textures, flag books, textile and crochet books, altered books, books with drawings in ink or watercolour and book works accompanied by objects. For the face-to-face workshop participants were invited to handle artists' books from the University of Kent's Prescriptions collection, which was created out of Bolaki's previous research (Bolaki and Čiricaite 2017). This allowed participants to experience artists' books more directly by paying attention to what it feels like to touch and engage with them while also taking note of techniques and ideas that they liked and that could inspire them for their own books. Participants were then introduced to the art materials before being guided through a series of prompts to create an artist's book about an emotion associated with their experience of adoption.

One method which was used for prompting participants, inspired by book artist and educator Darian Goldin Stahl (2021) with whom Bolaki had collaborated previously,<sup>3</sup> was the following: without sharing anything with the group, participants are initially asked to pick an emotion, symptom or state of mind pertaining to any aspect of their experience of adoption (this could be in relation to the pre- and post-adoption). Emotions often linked to this experience from the literature include sadness, regret, unresolved grief, guilt, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, impeded emotional development, self-punishment (ranging from social isolation to physical self-harm or eating disorders), anger, confusion, powerlessness, and many others (Deblasio 2021, p. 151). As language is often insufficient to capture the enormity of feelings, especially with unspoken trauma, the prompts included questions that encouraged participants to think in sensory and metaphorical ways about the physical, emotional, psychological, and social impacts of their chosen emotion on their lives (for example: What is the colour/texture of your emotion? What is its temperature? What is its weight? Is it full of sensation or numbing? What size is it? What does it taste like? Does it make you envision the future differently? Do you normally keep it a secret). Participants were asked to write down notes (for their own use only) in response to each question that would assist them during the book-making part of the workshop.

Once this process of 'embodied inquiry' was complete and participants had a list of 'sensory descriptors', they were shown how to craft a simple book form. There was the option of stitching a pamphlet book, folding a single sheet of paper to create a zine, or use pre-folded concertina paper. They were then invited to select from the wide range of materials available those that they felt were the most suitable to communicate their chosen emotion. Once again prompts were used to help participants feel confident to work on their books. They were invited to think imaginatively; they were free to add text or symbols in their book, but they could also experiment with other materials. What does the impact of their emotion look like when they think of it as a piece of paper? Looking at the book template in front of them, how can they fold, hide, layer, expand, stuff, glue, expose, tear apart, colour, alter, destroy, build up, or decorate its pages so that it becomes an embodiment of their emotion? They could choose to focus on one profound moment from their experience or use the turning of the book's pages to capture the passage of

time and tell a story. For example, they could consider how the emotion they are exploring has changed over time, or might change in the future, and how these moments may be presented through the book. Or they could think about the audience of their book; what they wanted another person to see (or not see) if they were handling it. How much of their experience did they want to communicate and to whom? Participants worked at their own pace on their books for about an hour. Bolaki offered individual guidance with techniques and materials, as needed, during the making time.

For the final part of the workshop, participants were invited to reflect on the process of making and the final book they had made. We asked them what stood out for them and what they found unexpected. Was it easier to approach their experience by making something rather than talking about it? Participants were invited to share anything they wanted about their books with the group or respond to each other's books. Sharing experiences through the book object rather than talking directly about them is less intimidating and can facilitate 'emotional disclosure' as shown by research on co-created visual images of pain that can function as 'transactional objects' between patients and clinicians (Padfield *et al.* 2018). There were many moments of connection and solidarity during that sharing in our virtual workshop, many of which were expressed through body language: a nod, a sigh, an empathetic look, also captured in the documentary we produced to document the workshops (Bolaki and Davey 2023). Participants were encouraged to send us further reflections on their books after the end of the workshop if they wished via email or during the de-briefing. We received photos, additional comments and blog posts which we return to in our findings section below.

## Research findings

In discussing the artists' books created by our participants in this section, we adopt a thematic analysis that is attentive to both the emotional dimensions of mothers' lived experiences and the issues of power and representation articulated in their books. We emphasise through this analysis that it is not only what we read, but also *how* we read, that determines the potential of this work and of the artist's book more broadly. Our findings demonstrate how the artist's book enables mothers to 'name' not only their internal experiences of grief and loss, but also their bonding with their children as well as the sense of injustice caused by the permanent and irrevocable separation, giving tangible form to each one of these aspects. In expressing these complex and difficult feelings, mothers spoke also of starting their 'journey to healing',<sup>4</sup> giving meaning to their experiences, as well as connecting to and with the other mothers who shared their experiences. Our findings therefore show the rich potential of this artistic medium as a tool of healing, peer support and community for mothers who have experienced loss via adoption.

### Exploring grief

Imagery that conveys grief, pain and other feelings associated with non-consensual adoption recurs in the books made by our workshop participants. Two of our participants, Stacie and Lisa painted or used found imagery of a heart stabbed or covered with barbed wire in the pages of their books. The balancing of 'enclosure' and 'exposure' addressed above in relation to the artist's book is evident here as the structure of their

books and the materials they use determine how much they are willing to share and when. In her book Lisa added tissue paper to make the barbed wire partially visible. Interacting with this book means lifting this 'veil' which exposes the hurt. She also added an envelope with the words 'please open me'. The message inside reads 'the most precious spiritual experience turned into shame, guilt and helplessness'. As artists' books integrate their thematic and formal concerns, this message makes more sense when we follow the literal thread that connects the two key images on the left and on the right of the envelope. The former image is a sculptural rendition of the female anatomy



Figure 1. Pages from Lisa's book.

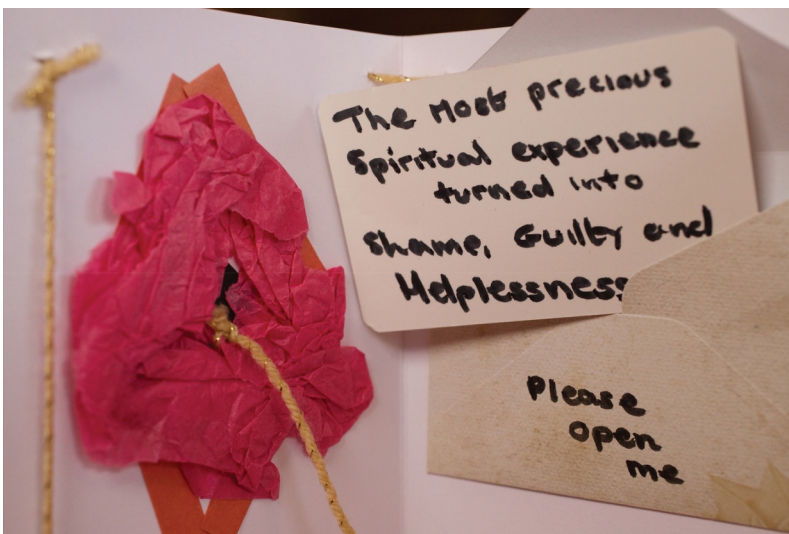


Figure 2. Detail from Lisa's book.

made by using pink tissue, and the golden thread attached to it on one end and leading to the heart covered with barbed wire on the other, represents the umbilical cord. The arrangement of images and thread powerfully captures how something as precious as pregnancy can turn into unspoken and unseen trauma (see figures 1 and 2).

### *Affirming their maternal bond and status*

Books like Lisa's not only express the grief of having her daughter adopted without her consent, but also the continuing bond between mother and child. In her research on employing artefacts in the management of disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss post-adoption, Geddes (2022) has found that mothers' interactions with artefacts associated with their children 'hold capacity to affirm their maternal status' (p. 811). Lisa's golden thread that goes through the whole book functions in a similar way – it is 'the spiritual connection with my daughter that's never broken' (Bolaki and Davey 2023) despite the physical distance. Stacie chose a drawing of a sunflower for one of her book's pages, noting that during their 'goodbye contact with her little boy' he gave her a fake sunflower. The sunflower's falling petals have a visual resemblance to tears. The petals that are still attached to the flower bear words such as 'abuse', 'lies', 'broken', 'prison' and 'mind'. On another page of her book, she included an image of a woman holding a recently delivered baby. A note in two parts is superimposed on the image. The first part reads 'I am blessed with this' followed by an arrow pointing to the figure's C-section scar. The second part of the note is written underneath and reads 'they can't take that away!' (see figure 3). Even though her child is removed, the scar on her body, which is represented through the inclusion of this image in her book, is evidence of the legitimacy of the maternal identity. As Lisa



Figure 3. Pages from Stacie's book.





Figure 4. Cover of Sonia's book.

Morriss (2018) has explored, many mothers whose children have been removed, are 'haunted' by photographs and other images of their child, including carrying images and names of their children on their bodies as tattoos. These kinds of traces may be hidden, but as seen in Stacie's book, they can also be made visible and represent not only stigma but 'hope and future possibilities of transformation through re-narrativisation' (Morriss 2018, p. 816).

Expressing the continuing bond with their children, as Lisa's and Stacie's books do, is important considering that mothers are usually offered post-adoption contact, but this is rarely direct, face-to-face contact. Such contact is typically indirect, via letterbox contact informally organised via Social Services (Hansen 2019). This situation is despite the fact that research suggests that '... children and young people need to be able to make sense of their relationship to their birth family as well as being part of their adoptive family ...' (Nuffield Justice Observatory 2021, p. 3). Moreover, when contact does occur, such post-adoption contact, provision tends to be informal and arranged by Social Services or via families reconnecting through social media (Steinberg *et al.* 2023), rather than imposed by an order for post-adoption contact under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, s51.

Sonia represented her experience of pregnancy in a more ambiguous, but no less poignant, way choosing for the cover of her book a girl with a pregnant belly that looks like a bomb and the word 'exposure' as the book's title: 'The girl looks quite young, which I was – and for her pregnant belly I put a bomb, because that's basically what went off' (Bolaki and Davey 2023). The cover image is partly covered by a red paper sleeve that must be removed before the book can be explored. On the side of the cover page a note further encourages readers to 'handle with care'; the slow contemplation required when handling artists' books becomes a metaphor for gentle care and compassion when engaging with her experience (see figure 4).

### *Expressing their experiences of injustice and trauma arising from the court proceedings*

Our participants' books explore difficult feelings associated with pregnancy and losing their children but also contain pages that address oppression and injustice. Sonia included an envelope which when opened reveals a message with words including 'trauma', 'lies', 'adoption', 'baby', 'coercion', 'mother', 'birth', 'abandonment' printed in font that recalls political campaign signs. Many mothers whose children are removed go through confusing and traumatising court proceedings. Reflecting on her own experience, Stacie chose to represent it indirectly by altering a drawing we had included in our art materials pack with the permission of Lisamarie Deblasio (2018, p. 245) from whose research it was taken. The drawing was made by a mother with learning difficulties during art therapy and represents how she perceived and experienced court proceedings. In this drawing, the figure of the mother is squeezed at the bottom of the image, appearing small, curled up and tearful, with barbed wire and stabbing knives around her. A line-up of people directly above, together, appear to point a collective accusing finger at her, and the judge is situated at the top of the image looking passive.

Different words representing the unsympathetic way mothers are often viewed in the media are interspersed in the drawing, including 'bad mother', 'failure', 'dangerous'. In contrast, another set of words referring to justice are crossed out: the words 'fair', 'objective' and 'impartial'. In an online interview we conducted, Deblasio (2022) spoke to us about the mother who drew this picture and whom she had interviewed for her own research; she had gone to court to represent herself after losing her solicitor only to be attacked through a purely negative portrayal by the barrister, social worker and solicitor of the local authority. Her difficulties on the day were exacerbated by the fact that she was managing the side effects of psychosis following post-natal depression.

While our workshop participant's experience was not the same, she reused parts of this drawing, folding them into an accordion format as additional pages embedded in her book. The drawing resonated with what she described as 'the secret court' where you are 'alone with all these people there against you' (Bolaki and Davey 2023). Many other pages of her book return to the topic of injustice. For example, for the final page of her book, she used black tissue paper and white string to evoke a prison (see figure 5). She has handwritten on it: 'Condemned to a lifetime sentence for being a victim of DV' [domestic violence]. Like many women in her situation, her traumatic experience as 'a victim of domestic violence' was not only rendered invisible but compounded by the trauma of losing her child (on adoptions in relation to domestic abuse, see Deblasio 2022). The victim is approached as a 'victimiser' or worse as a 'criminal' but unlike a prisoner who has visitation rights, in her case, contact with her children was taken away.

### *Giving meaning, healing and connecting*

Through the possibility of naming their difficult and complex feelings, participants felt safe enough to explore further their personal experiences to give them meaning and start the long journey towards healing and empowerment. Some of our participants began this transformative process by choosing to reinterpret traditions of paintings and literature, investing known stories and images with their own personal experiences and meanings.

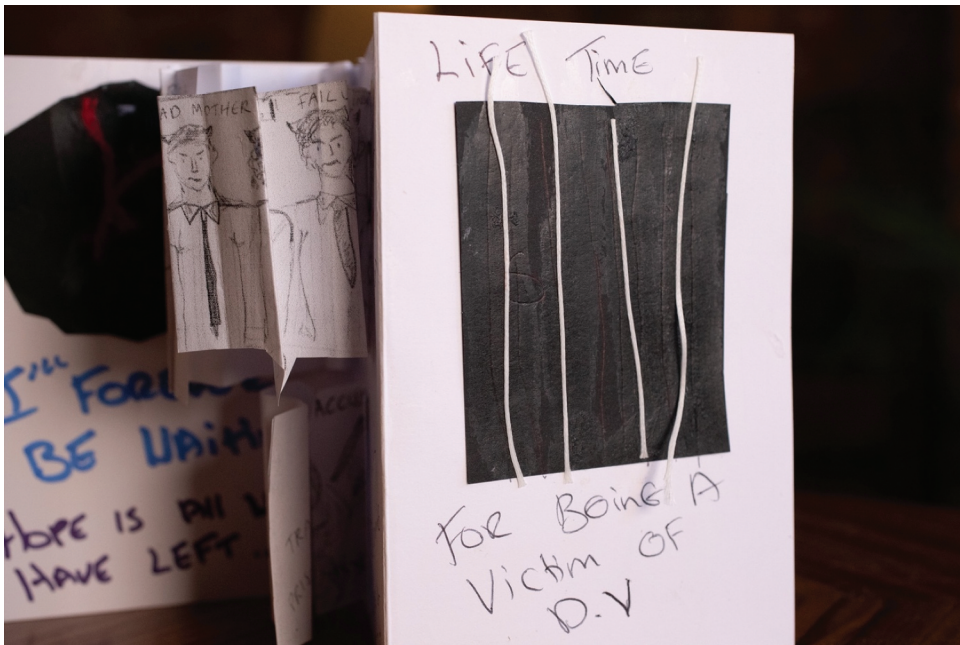


Figure 5. Detail from Stacie's book.

American poet Adrienne Rich (1972) has described 're-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction' as 'an act of survival' for female writers (p. 18). Lisa pasted copies of a painting by Pablo Picasso titled *Weeping Woman* and an 18<sup>th</sup> century etching by William Blake called *Pity* in her book. *Weeping Woman* is based on an image of a woman holding her dead child and is taken from Picasso's anti-war mural, *Guernica* that was painted during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). In Blake's *Pity*, a baby springs from his mother towards an angel. When embedded in her book which is about the loss of her daughter, these images acquire a different meaning. This intervention not only demonstrates that art is healing because it 'turns suffering into beauty', a message printed on the final page of Lisa's book; it is also about seeing one's story reflected in these images, which gives further authority to the maker, while also interrogating which stories get represented in literature and art. As Sonia put it during the final discussion of the workshop: 'when you see yourself in it, that's when the power comes in' (Bolaki and Davey 2023).

The mother who experimented the most with this act of re-vision used images and text from Lewis Carroll's famous children's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to create 'a visually coherent narrative of [her] lived experience' (this will be outlined in a forthcoming blog post by Sonia, on our project website). A photocopied black and white image of Alice going down the rabbit hole pasted on an otherwise blank page captures powerfully Sonia's mental health journey in the book (see figure 6). The envelope included on the same page containing words associated with adoption described above helps recontextualise the image of Alice, but readers are free to make their own associations. Another page of her book includes an illustration (this time in colour) from the tea party scene accompanied by the following text from the original:

If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary-wise; what it is it wouldn't be, and what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?

*Alice in Wonderland* is filled with riddles and absurd situations that have delighted readers of all ages. While this scene resonates with aspects of Sonia's experience in ways that will remain private, her book leaves it open for readers to re-interpret it in relation to the topic of non-consensual adoption. As she reflected on this book after the workshop: 'It can be puzzling and emotionally demanding but there's a huge sense of satisfaction when you succeed in creating an art workbook that provides such a succinct and powerful way of connecting with your experience' (forthcoming blog post).

Considering the books made by our participants as whole, they may be 'bound' by pain and grief, but they are also 'bound' to speak (in all the different meanings of this word in the context of artists' books).<sup>5</sup> The work discussed above and the feedback we received by our participants confirm the distinctive power of the artist's book as an expressive and potentially healing vehicle. As Stacie shared with the other participants during the workshop: 'Me doing this [workshop] is a healer in some way – to get it out. It makes me feel stronger that I can actually do it, cause before I would probably break down' (Bolaki and Davey 2023). Using the visual and multisensory strategies of bookmaking to express unspoken trauma seems to facilitate emotional release, particularly in the absence of words to convey traumatic experiences. As Sonia reflected:

Although language is a powerful tool, I'd struggled to capture the complexity and diversity of my experience in words. [...] I wanted to create something that resonated with me,



Figure 6. Pages from Sonia's book.

something I hadn't been able to articulate just verbally [...] Sometimes words are not enough on their own and in this context, I needed an additional powerful tool to help with self-expression and connecting me emotionally to my experience. (forthcoming blog post)

The corporeal, emotional and intimate dimensions of the artist's book not only helped connect our participants to their experiences but also served the dual desires for self-protection and recognition. As Sonia added about her artistic process:

I approached the task in two stages, firstly I captured the way I provide containment for myself. This helped give me a sense of safety. Then I was ready to look at what needed to be contained. When the images emerged, I felt excited, and the final product was for me quite empowering. The creation of the art workbook was another step on the journey to healing. It helped improve my overall well-being by providing a sense of accomplishment, restoration, self-understanding and self-expression. (forthcoming blog post)

As our participants' aesthetic choices further demonstrated, artists' books are highly versatile media. All the mothers who made books experienced the artist's book as liberating and less intimidating than other art forms because it does not come with any rules or constraints. Anyone can create an artist's book that has aesthetic merit and can be used as a tool for communicating lived experience.

Finally, the workshops not only offered a safe space for mothers to access deeper emotions and express experiences in a non-verbal way but also offered the opportunity to connect with others with similar experiences; a form of what Morriss (2018) describes as a 'maternal commons' (p. 816). Sonia valued 'the respectful and supportive atmosphere of working with other women who were also trying to find relief for their suffering and the strength to move forward' and noted that 'creating the art workbook in quiet communion with others felt healing' (forthcoming blog post). There is evidence about the high value placed on peer support by mothers who have lost children to adoption (Scottish Government 2023), both in terms of its healing potential and as a political act that exposes the structural inequalities and governmental policies that exacerbate stigma (Morriss 2018).

Our research shows the removal of children into care and placement for adoption can lead to a damaging cycle for mothers and children. This is exacerbated by the lack of support that mothers receive, post-adoption. While the Adoption and Children Act 2002, s3(1)(c) does make reference to the need for the maintenance of adoption support services for the benefit of 'natural parents', when mothers spoke to us directly in their interviews and indirectly through their books, it became clear that the support provided is limited and that there are practical barriers (such as limited timeframes for obtaining support and lack of trust in professionals) which can affect mothers' ability to access these resources. It is common for local authorities to provide these support services, which can be difficult for mothers to access, due to their mistrust of professionals. Our findings reveal that mothers are dissatisfied; not just about the legal outcomes whereby their children are adopted, but also by the processes used by professionals before, during and after the adoption process. Therefore, the findings from our empirical research highlight the existing inadequacy of current legal frameworks.

## Future plans and conclusion

Drawing on our respective expertise in arts and law, our research demonstrated the potential benefits of artist's books workshops for mothers who have often been marginalised during adoption proceedings before becoming invisible post-adoption. Equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to create their own artist's book, mothers found in this intimate art form a unique platform for self-expression and storytelling. Our pilot study indicated the profound long-term effects of adoption proceedings on mothers' lives: they have experienced not just grief and loss, but also an unacknowledged bonding with their children, as well as a sense of oppression and injustice from the legal system. The research highlighted the lack of support that these mothers received from the state, during and in the aftermath of care and adoption proceedings.

Our research also highlighted barriers such as poor communication and lack of trust in their relationships with different professionals, especially social workers. Implicitly our research raised questions, to be explored further, as to the adequacy of the legal framework to meet mothers' needs when at their most vulnerable. By revealing mothers' own voices, our study confirms how mothers may unwillingly perpetuate the negative feedback loop of grief and loss experienced via care and adoption proceedings, leading sometimes to repeated removals and adoption of children, by the state. Artists' books allow mothers to express the complex tapestry of their lives around their children's adoption, enabling them to give meaning to their experiences and feelings and find, in the process, a form of healing and empowerment.

In that sense, our research and pilot study contribute to the existing body of research on post-adoption support and underscore the importance of providing mothers with effective tools for emotional healing. This pilot study demonstrated the need for further work and plans. Considering the positive experience this study created for these mothers, we are organising additional workshops with a larger and more diverse group of mothers, including mothers outside the UK. In the future, we hope to curate an exhibition to showcase mothers' books that will raise awareness not only of their experiences, including the cycle of recurrent care and adoption proceedings, but also of the powerful role of creativity in this context.

We hope that our research will make the invisibility of mothers within legal frameworks more apparent and serve to promote their visibility and importance in the context of care and adoption proceedings. Furthermore, the findings of this study will not only benefit mothers but also inform healthcare professionals, social workers, lawyers and policymakers in developing more comprehensive and compassionate support systems for birth parents, post-adoption. We have begun collaborating with professionals working in the spheres of adoption and psychological support. Following the delivery of our workshops for mothers in 2022, we hosted two knowledge-exchange sessions in 2023 attended by barristers, social workers, counsellors, and clinical psychologists. These professionals were introduced to our research and were invited to participate in an adapted version of the book-making workshop during which they made books to reflect on their own professional practice. Our conversations during these sessions indicated the potential of the artist's book to be used as a tool for compassionate reflective practice. We have begun creating a training resource (a set of videos aimed at different professionals). In

collaboration with our project partners, we will co-design additional creative resources that will be hosted on our website.

Ultimately, this study sought to address the dearth of research surrounding the impact of the artist's book as a tool for mothers' expression and healing post-adoption. As shown, this art form can facilitate a uniquely embodied understanding – spoken, visual, tactile and performative – in communicating the complexities of mothers' experiences and the profound impact of adoption on their well-being and lives. Learning from the lessons of our pilot study and developing our project further, we hope to provide a platform for these and other women to find solace, empowerment and a path towards emotional healing.

## Notes

1. <https://movementforanadoptionapology.org>.
2. This was part of 'Artists' Books and the Medical Humanities', an interdisciplinary project at the University of Kent that explored how books, art and healthcare can be interrelated, <https://research.kent.ac.uk/artistsbooks/>.
3. Stahl's 'Book as Body' workshops guided health communities to use the artist's book format as a 'bodily proxy' to communicate difficult illness experiences in multisensorial ways. For her collaboration with Bolaki, see <https://research.kent.ac.uk/artistsbooks/.book-as-body-workshops/>.
4. Forthcoming blog by our workshop participant Sonia.
5. We are drawing on Drucker's beautiful phrase here (Drucker 2020, p. 85).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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