**The biographic and professional influences on adoption and fostering panel members’ recommendation-making**

Abstract

In the UK, decisions to approve adoptive parents and foster carers and authorise adoptions rest with specialist panels. While their formal role and function are clear, there is concern that their composition and the biographies and background characteristics of members could introduce bias and influence the decisions made. This article examines the validity of these criticisms with findings from a study of eight agencies, 15 panels and 22 members. It was found that the panel system achieves its aims in terms of having a representative constitution and providing considered recommendations in a timely manner to senior managers, but that individual biography affects panel members in carrying out their role to an unexpectedly high degree, possibly leading to flawed decisions. Actions to remedy this problem, at both an individual and group level, are suggested.

Keywords

Adoption and fostering panels, approving foster carers and adoptive parents, decision-making processes, objectivity and bias in childcare decisions

Introduction

Today, in the UK, almost any adult can apply to become a foster carer or adopter. However, the process of approval can be daunting and intrusive for the applicant (which can be one or more people) and involves an assessment that may take several months, culminating in a recommendation by an independent panel. Although these assessments can vary in detail specific to the circumstances of the applicant, each one involves the following stages:

Initial visit: Following initial contact with the agency, a social worker will visit the applicant’s home. This will last up to two hours and involve observation of the physical space as well as exploration of the applicant’s motivation, expectations, skills and attributes, and the support they might need to look after or adopt a child.

Assessment: If the agency and applicant decide to proceed to the next stage, a social worker will be appointed to progress the assessment. This is sometimes known as a Prospective Foster Carer/Adopter Report in the UK or, in other countries, a Home Study. Completion of the report can require between six and 12 visits to the household and everyone living there will be included in discussions, including the applicant’s own children. Statutory checks are also undertaken, including DBS (Disclosure and Barring Services), a local authority check, a medical examination and a financial assessment. The applicant will be expected to attend a preparatory training course, run over two or three days, which includes sessions on child development, trauma, safeguarding and understanding of the task. Once the report is complete, it and the applicant are presented to an independent panel.

Panel: The panel comprises an independent chair, a social worker and at least three independent members from different backgrounds and makes a recommendation as to whether approval for the proposed placement of a child should be given. This conclusion is then passed to the agency decision-maker (ADM) who makes the final decision. Panels are also responsible for various other functions, such as carrying out periodic reviews of foster carers, terminating fostering and adoption approvals and matching children with adoptive parents.

Over the years, central government has questioned the need for adoption and fostering panels. The reason for this is not clear and those working in the sector have repeatedly stressed that panels make a valuable contribution to the system, so they have continued to operate. Within a month of the first UK COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, however, the Government introduced legislation, effective from 24 April 2020 through to 25 September 2020, in what seemed to be another attempt to jettison panels; at the time of writing, it is not known whether, and to what extent, the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 will affect the system.

The intention behind this process is to ensure that, as far as possible, approval is given only to carers who are suited to the role and capable of caring for the child(ren) concerned. To help achieve this, a variety of mechanisms have evolved, including a substantial regulatory framework which (among other things) defines National Minimum Standards in Fostering and Adoption. Several authoritative reference guides are also available, such as CoramBAAF’s Effective Fostering Panels (Borthwick and Lord, 2019) and Effective Adoption Panels (Lord and Cullen, 2016). Furthermore, as a control and feedback measure, the national inspectorate (Ofsted) carries out inspections and publishes annual reports on panel performance, while the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) provides a channel for potential carers to challenge panel decisions.

All this is clear evidence that the carer approval process has developed and improved considerably over the years. Yet it is far from perfect and many aspects could be better.

One fundamental concern is the effectiveness of panels. While their aims may appear clear – namely, to make objective recommendations on the suitability of prospective adopters and foster carers – it is equally the case that panels often fail to achieve the required level of objectivity. This is because they are made up of individuals and individuals are prone to making subjective judgements without always giving due regard to evidence provided by the documentation presented. This can lead to flawed recommendations.

Of course, this kind of judgemental behaviour is not the ‘fault’ of the people concerned; it is usually unconscious and is part of the basic behavioural make-up of human beings. Individuals are naturally, and almost unavoidably, swayed by (unconscious) biases in their decision-making. This tendency is supported by a large body of research that has been carried out over the past few decades, some of which is specifically relevant to social work. Munro’s (2008) examination of the descriptive and prescriptive approaches to decision theory and decision-making in child protection is a particularly pertinent example. She concluded that it is not possible to avoid the biases of human reasoning; we can only hope to detect and minimise them. Any suggestion that human beings are instinctively and naturally objective and non-judgemental is, therefore, fundamentally flawed.

The development of mechanisms to minimise the effects of human bias would be a significant step forward in improving the objectivity of panel recommendations. To do this, however, is a complex task: initially, there is a need to analyse the workings of panels in order to understand in detail the factors that affect the decision-/recommendation-making process as it is only then that principles on which to base corrective processes can be developed. It was this aim, to understand the factors which affect panel decision-making, that inspired the research discussed in this article.

Research aim

The overarching aim of the study was to explore the judgements and recommendations of panel members as they consider the journey of individuals wishing to become permanent or temporary parents to looked after children. In particular, it set out to explore the ways in which adoption and fostering panel members’ biographies, attitudes and values influence their role and the process of making recommendations. To do this, the study investigated the underlying thinking of panel members when arriving at their decisions and the extent to which their conceptualisation of their professionalism affected their role on the panel. It also analysed the systems, methods and group processes that influence panel recommendations. It was hoped that the results would show whether panels are the best system for determining who is suitable to look after separated children and how effective matching of child to placement can be achieved.

The state of knowledge

Before fashioning the methodology, a literature review was undertaken to establish the boundaries of current knowledge, particularly with respect to the differences between individual and group-level behaviour. Of significant interest here is the work of Wilfred Bion whose original (1961) paper explored how an individual’s thinking processes change in a group context and how this alteration affects the collective thinking of the group. He defined two fundamental types of group. The first he called the ‘workgroup’ which is characterised by a high sense of co-operation and focus on the specific task for which the group has come together. However, when under pressure, workgroups can begin to operate at the unconscious level, leading to a loss of focus and co-operation. The result is the second type of group, which Bion termed a ‘basic assumption group’, so-called because its behaviour is based on a set of tacit, underlying assumptions which it uses to deal with anxiety and conflict, but which distract it from its conscious (and primary) task. This is clearly undesirable and can only result in heightening the risk of reaching a flawed recommendation.

Another group phenomenon which interferes significantly, and destructively, with effective panel recommendation-making is ‘groupthink’, first identified by Irving Janis in 1982. This concept stems from his observation that while a properly formulated group is likely to make better decisions than any individual in the group, this potential advantage is often lost when the members work closely together, as the psychological pressures created by facing a common crisis generate a strong tendency to collaborate. In short, groupthink is essentially a mode of thinking in which the desire to achieve group unanimity overrides individual freedom. Baron (1994) added to Janis’s work by showing that irrational and biased thinking is also evident in a closed group, indicating another group-level behavioural phenomenon that can, and often does, lead to flawed decisions.

Despite this, it is important to note that there are many studies that point to significant advantages that arise from group decision-making. These include better comprehension of a problem, a greater sum total of knowledge, more diversity in approaches to problems, more alternatives and higher levels of acceptance of a decision (Gunnarsson, 2010; Proctor, 2011). Groups can also enhance individual effectiveness and functioning through the process, as Tuckman (1965) memorably called it, ‘forming, storming, norming, and performing’. However, as shown by this study, these advantages are generally outweighed by the negative effects of groupthink.

As the research focused on the behaviours of individuals in a panel context, it was also important to understand the scope and findings of recent research on panels. Hence, a review of relevant work over the past 30 years was carried out. This showed that several studies have set out to investigate aspects of panel workings, some of which have relevance to this one. Examples included a 1993 study by Pennie that explored how panel practice could improve, and the 2004 and 2005 papers by O’Sullivan in relation to more effective panel functioning. Another informative study was that by Clifton, Horne and Smith (2014) which analysed the attitudes of panel members under different circumstances. Despite this, however, no research was found that explicitly set out to investigate the ways in which the biographies, attitudes and values of adoption and fostering panel members influence their role and recommendation-making (although Pennie noted a need to explore this area). Nor were there any studies seeking to understand the systems, methods and techniques that impact recommendations. The current research was thus framed to address these questions.

Research method

The key element in deciding on a framework for the research was the recognition that its objective was not to decide whether individuals or groups are right or wrong or to apportion blame, but rather to examine the consequences of holding a given position. For this reason, the selected methodology was constructivist in nature, as this challenges the objectivist perspective that there is just one external truth (Crotty, 1998). The aim was to explore and analyse the conscious and unconscious influences that individuals use to construe the world and how these contribute to recommendation-making in panel. It is only by understanding the nature and impact of biography and, particularly, unconscious biases in panel recommendation-making, that the ability to control these influences will be improved.

The role of narrative

In order to gain this understanding, it was necessary to investigate and analyse the personal experiences, life histories and lived situations of an appropriate sample of panel members. For this, a narrative research approach based on Wengraf’s (2004) work on the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was used. This takes the form of semi-structured interviews and has been in use for more than 20 years. It begins by asking a single open question which Wengraf calls a ‘SQUIN’ (Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative) with further questions only asked when the interviewee has finished their story. This approach allows the researcher to build a picture of the interviewee based not only on the content of the narrative but also on the way it is related – its ‘shape’ (or ‘gestalt’, as Wengraf describes it). The study aimed to analyse each narrative individually and collectively through cross-case theorisation by exploring the similarities and differences between them, followed by identifying emerging themes.

Sampling process

As interviews were intended to be the primary data source for the study, one person was selected from each of the roles identified in CoramBAAF’s publication, Effective Fostering Panels (Borthwick and Lord, 2019). Participants were recruited by word of mouth and flyers. The response was very high and not all volunteers could be included as research participants; however, some contributed through BNIM interpretive panels.

Initially, there was an excess of data from 22 interviews, so the study sample was narrowed to those interviewees who were also observed, a modification that Wengraf (2004) suggests is necessary for cross-case theorisation. The sample was thus reduced to eight agencies, plus a ninth that was not observed. This provided a representative group in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, type and geographical region of the panel.

The data collection stage was then initiated but as the author is also a panel chair, there were risks associated with being an insider so agencies unknown to her were contacted and suspicions about motivation and use of findings aired. Other challenges were more practical: one local authority had agreed and given ethical approval but on the day of the observation, the chair and adviser raised objections, so the observation did not go ahead. In another case, despite informing agencies of the intent to audio-record the observation, two panels refused consent at the last minute. These examples illustrate the point made by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) that it is advisable and pragmatic to observe and gather information regarding where the participants are in terms of time and space.

In total, eight agencies and 15 panels were observed (all but one agency/panel was observed twice), a sample deemed adequate for the purposes of this type of research so long as sufficient care was taken to align the data collection methods with the aims of the study and analysis techniques and limits to the generalisability of the conclusions are recognised (Boddy, 2016; Malterud, Volkert and Guassora, 2015).

Sample profile

The sample profile is illustrated in Figure 1. This shows that interviewees’ work covered a range of geographical areas and professions, such as education, law and health. Approximately a third of the sample were professional social workers and 18% were retired. Participants sat both on fostering and adoption panels as well as voluntary and independent ones. The type of agencies observed also varied and included independent and local authority fostering, as well as voluntary and local authority adoption agencies. The panel agendas covered a wide range of topics, including prospective adopter reports (PARs), family and friends/connected persons reviews, prospective foster carer reports (PFCRs), special guardianship approvals, annual foster carer reviews (AFCRs), adoption and long-term fostering matches, resignations and terminations of approval.

Triangulation

In order to ensure the viability of the study and enable a fuller understanding of the data, a combination of methodological/data triangulation (gathering data from interviews, panel observations and documentary analysis of the panel minutes) was used, together with source triangulation. The latter involved conducting interviews in a variety of settings, such as the home, the workplace, different regions in the UK and at different times of the day and week.

Reflexivity

The study also included a full record of the researcher’s own personal values and professional experiences in an attempt to consciously identify any influences, either interactional or non-interactional, that might affect the data collection or interpretation. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) emphasise the importance of checking the researcher’s subjectivity and possible misinterpretation of the data and the BNIM model enables this by using interpretative panel analysis whereby individuals in a group – similar to a focus group – comment on each interviewee, thereby ensuring that there is wider scrutiny of the evidence. In addition, as Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain, researchers may also have life experiences similar to those of their participants, which can give insight and meaning to the narratives of participants.

Findings

Aspects of the presented self

Individual thinking

Although received with scepticism at the time, Bion’s (1962) concept of thinking capacity has proved to be relevant and consistent with modern decision-making ideas, highlighting its emotional and cognitive aspects. Building on this, Munro (2008, 2011) provides a means to explore the thinking of panel members, arguing that as intuitive (emotional) thinking is unavoidable, attention needs to be placed on the development of analytic (cognitive) skills as a means of ensuring that the recognised biases of intuition are used appropriately. This study meets this need by examining the underlying thinking of panel members when arriving at their recommendations, with a particular focus on how it is influenced by unconscious thinking processes and biases.

Only three of the participants interviewed displayed a conscious awareness of how their background affected their perspective. For example, one had been initially reluctant to become a panel member as she had a negative view of adoption based on her own experiences as an adoptee. The other positioned himself as the child of a Unitarian minister which, he believed, had significantly influenced his life although, as an adult, he no longer followed a faith. Most of the other interviewees displayed a level of personal blindness in relation to their biographies and the effect that these may have on their panel work.

Awareness of values and beliefs

Due to the use of BNIM SQUIN, no specific question regarding participants’ motives for wanting to sit on a panel was put to interviewees, but the study showed that most of them were not motivated by pure altruism. The desire for professional kudos was evident in the narratives of all but two cases and many shared a background containing personal trauma. Although experiences of trauma do not, in themselves, have a negative impact on performance as a panel member, the overall pattern of reluctance to speak openly about their lives reinforces the view that people sitting on panels consider themselves impartial – and this presumption was evident both in narratives and panel observations. Yet it was clear that panel members bring elements of their own history to the situation. The following comments are examples of statements that reflect the individual’s own biases rather than provide scrutiny of assessments (which is the panel’s role):

I think this issue with his sexuality is tied up with his race and culture. He doesn’t feel comfortable with raising culture and heritage then. I’m sure also he’s gay.

In the beginning, because I was still saying to myself that children should never be taken away from their birth families and if they are taken away from their birth families they should be allowed to be in a foster family where they retain their identity. It was all about identity really for me.

I don’t agree with the law about the way they deal with certain things with young people these days. I have sat and argued, and they had to point out it’s the actual law that this has to be done.

The self brought to panel: the consciousness/constructiveness axis

The narratives derived from the interviews underlined the generally accepted fact that people have complex histories, views and personalities and that these influence the behaviour and performance of panel members in a variety of ways. For example, most panel members were either unaware of, or not in control of, their unconscious personality characteristics, which led to the projection of their views or attitudes onto social workers and applicants. Other panel members attempted to put aside their biographies when in a work context, often leading to an arid professional stance, negating the richness of experience they could bring to their relational and emotive role. Overall, the study showed that panel members could be categorised into four groups (see Figure 2), each characterised by different levels of consciousness (awareness of their own views and attitudes) and constructiveness (the ability to take account of biography in performing their role/task). These are:

High consciousness and high constructiveness: This indicates an awareness both of the self and external factors to the level of being able to implement careful processing in decision-making. Such individuals are sufficiently aware of themselves to make an effective contribution to the panel. The narrative of these interviewees gave a clear sense of who they were as individuals and, while on panel, were able to bring this awareness to their role.

High consciousness and low constructiveness: This characterises a self-aware individual who chooses not to use their awareness in undertaking their role. These interviewees would generally be considered to be professionals and, as such, good practitioners who are able to get the job done. They appeared to deal with issues in a calm and considered way and did not bring personal issues to work. In their narratives, most in the group shared little about themselves, appearing at times distant and detached. While this may seem desirable, such individuals may not come across as personable and empathetic when faced with the difficulties of others.

Low consciousness and low constructiveness: These individuals are not fully aware of their internal influences and are more influenced by subtle stimuli, both internally and externally. They are not aware of how internal factors impact their role and function and have unregulated emotions and thought patterns that can impair their effectiveness.

Low consciousness and high constructiveness: Individuals in this category are less aware of themselves and so can appear distant and detached. However, they understand their role function and perform tasks effectively. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the study found no one in this category as, while a theoretical possibility, it is a relatively unusual combination.

The ‘wounded healer’

For many, the notion of the wounded healer invokes an image of someone who has experienced trauma or suffering in their own childhood and has therefore joined the caring profession with a desire to relieve the suffering of or ‘rescue’ others. Jung (1961) argued that adverse experiences can provide unique insights for the wounded healer which can be used empathically in the performance of their role, as long as the individual concerned is aware of, and can manage, their conscious and unconscious emotions. This raises the question of whether personal biographies can be used constructively and effectively in panel recommendation-making. The study shows that several (7) panel members were sufficiently aware of themselves to either make an effective contribution to the panel or be supported and trained to make a more effective use of self in performing the panel task. Figure 3 shows how panel members were distributed across the wounded healer axis.

In summary, all those interviewed were able to articulate clearly their understanding and expectations of their role. However, this understanding did not always lead to objectivity and analytical behaviours in decision-making. The study also highlighted the fact that panel members tend to have an idealistic view of themselves and the functioning of their panel; very few reflected on areas where their panel might improve.

Results from the panel observations

The observations of panels showed that, overall, panels were representative in the constitution of their central membership lists, although further research is needed to explore the impact on their decision-making based on their ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, social class and gender. There was also a significant level of evidence to support the contention that the competence and skill of the chair plays a crucial role in determining whether the panel remains focused and is able to complete its task in a concise and relevant manner. It was also noted that panels that used an independent (professional) adviser in partnership with the chair were more effective in ensuring that the panel formulated clear and concise questions and was transparent in its recommendation-making. While some local authority fostering panels no longer have a panel adviser, the evidence from the study strongly implies that this omission often leads to time-inefficiency.

Safeguarding children

None of the narratives from the study flagged any direct concerns about the ability of panels to safeguard children. However, a number of observations highlighted that panels were frequently distracted and lost sight of their primary function. Some members seemed unable to ask direct questions that would assist them in making recommendations and instead raised queries that appeared to relate more to personal curiosity. Panels should provide an appropriate level of challenge, and the work of Janis (1982) and Bion (1961) is again useful in demonstrating the difficulties that can result if groups do not remain on task. As Alyson Leslie put it: ‘Such vigorous scrutiny is required for the sake of children whose major life choices are determined by the decisions of professionals.’ (Leslie, 2001: 29).

Panel comparisons

The study also shows that adoption and fostering panels perform a valuable function for their major stakeholders – children, adopters or foster carers and agencies – and provide insight into how panels operate. The conscientiousness of panel members, in return for relatively low or no monetary reward, is heartening. It was also clear that members came to meetings prepared, were passionate about improving outcomes for children and were, in the main, considerate towards adults.

Panel membership

In line with current legislation and guidance, it was evident that agencies seek to ensure that their panels are broadly representative in terms of personal experience and professional roles. The study did, however, highlight that recruitment is flawed as many panel members are enlisted by invitation or word of mouth rather than advertising. Additionally, many panels showed symptoms of groupthink, described by Janis (1982) as an illusion of invulnerability, together with closed-mindedness and stereotyping of non-group members. This creates a tendency towards homogeneity produced by direct pressure on member(s) who express dissenting views. The result is a shared illusion of unanimity, evidenced in the study by the almost complete absence of disagreements on recommendations.

Panel effectiveness

Although the study clearly showed that panel members read their paperwork, some panels appeared chaotic and unstructured, at times seeming to meet to justify their existence rather than to fulfil a purpose. While it could be argued that time limitations did not always enable full discussions, it was also clear that the panel’s function was often hindered by poor facilitation or management by chairs. This echoes the research of Hender (1994) and Pepys and Dix (2000) who found that where the panels were not well facilitated by the chair, they lacked focus and did not remain on task. However, while the study principally highlighted the fact that panels are often prone to failures in structure and/or management, it also provided evidence that they can function well. Two panels in this study supplied examples of how transparency and openness in terms of informing presenters of questions and giving recommendations in front of attendees could be very effective and lead to unanimously positive recommendations. In general, the study showed that where panels were well managed, they were also more transparent and less prone to ‘groupthink’ – the tendency to suppress individual freedom of expression in the interests of group cohesiveness (Janis, 1982). In these well-managed panels, ideas were critically and thoroughly examined, allowing further time for discussion, where necessary, before finalising decisions.

Panel delay

The study’s findings do not support the view that panel processes lead to delays for any of the stakeholders. Panel members and panel recommendation-making are not always as logical and rational as they should be, but nothing in this study casts doubts on the overall accuracy and reliability of the systems in place to support the decision-making of the agency decision-maker. There was no evidence of delay on the part of panels in hearing the cases on the agenda, and all had a sufficient number of available panel members to facilitate extra meetings if needed.

Panel function

In relation to panel functioning, the study identified four principal themes by which panels could be compared:

Task focus (ability to remain on task versus going beyond the panel remit): While some panel members in the study had a good understanding of their role, the majority tended to make value judgements and subjective statements as they engaged in care planning rather than asking probing questions that would help them make recommendations about suitability.

Structure (organisation pre-, during and post-panel): All panels had clear agendas and timings for cases, allowing time for pre-panel discussions. There were examples of panels that had no order to the pre-presentation discussions and where members interjected randomly. Additionally, many panels used long and unclear questions that failed to elicit clear answers, generally due to poor phrasing. While all panels were initially well structured in terms of agendas and timings, many lost this structure while in session.

Professionalism (professional versus unprofessional): The panels in the study operated with varying degrees of professionalism. While some were extremely formal in their manner and processes, others adopted a very casual approach, with some panel members behaving in an unregulated manner and some chairs being over-familiar with presenters or dominating the meeting rather than facilitating discussion.

Scrutiny (good quality assurance/scrutiny versus a conveyor belt/rubber stamping of recommendations): It was clear from the study that all panel members had prepared adequately, read the relevant paperwork and had a good sense of their quality assurance role. Only one panel appeared to be ‘rubber-stamping’ rather than questioning carers appropriately. However, the study also found that the process of panel recommendation-making varies with a number of factors, such as who comprises the panel, the chairing style, the time of the meeting, the timeframes allotted per case, the relationship between the independent chair and the panel and the quality of the paperwork presented.

Risk of intrinsic bias

A key theme of this study, therefore, relates to the fact that human beings are fundamentally judgemental and that unconscious bias operates not only at an individual level among panel members but also at a group level where the desire to achieve group unanimity overrides individual freedom. This ‘groupthink’, whether at an individual or group level, is obviously undesirable as it can, and often does, lead to flawed panel decisions. For example, there is considerable research into court hearings that shows how individual members of juries often make up their minds at the start of the trial before hearing all the evidence and are not acting as objectively as the legal process ideally requires. All of this calls into question the anti-discriminatory values and practices of those working in the care sector and highlights failures to recognise the issue. As things stand, the qualification for contributing to a fostering or adoption panel is the individual’s personal or professional experience – but this is of little use if individuals are not self-aware in terms of their own prejudices. The question is therefore: what can be done to promote such self-awareness and combat unconscious bias?

It was this concern that inspired the author to develop an awareness process called ‘Effective Personal and Professional Judgement (EPPJ)’. This enables panel members to be more conscious of their own biases and thus help them make non-discriminatory recommendations.

Effective Personal and Professional Judgement

The starting point in developing EPPJ was the recognition that the notion of being non-judgemental is a fallacy. The aim then becomes to support, empower and educate people to be consciously aware of unconscious biases in making professional judgements so that they can be significantly more effective in undertaking their role and function. Thus, one of the central aims of the study was to understand what it means to be ‘conscious’, acknowledging that two types of awareness create this consciousness: (1) self-awareness of one’s internal processes and bias, and (2) the external processes of the professional world and systems. The theory generated from the research maintains that the functioning and recommendations of a panel rely on the efficient use of personal beliefs and values. But how can this be achieved?

The research findings support the contention that historical material can be seen as a continuum from undermining and chaotic to informative and enhancing, that is as a tool for challenging what may otherwise be unconscious bias, depending on the individual and the organisational understanding and management of the material. The difficulty therefore lies not with the biographical material per se, but with its individual and organisational containment. Thus, the responsibility for the management of personal beliefs and values lies with both the individuals and the professional system in which they operate. The research supports this view with the finding that panels that were securely managed and chaired were more successful at containing individuals’ own personal material and displayed enhanced overall functioning.

The consciousness/constructiveness axis discussed earlier provided the foundation to develop the EPPJ model. This essentially encourages decision-makers to recognise, analyse and adapt personal values and preferences to help them become more professionally proficient, particularly in relation to decisions about others. This approach could have wider application, such as when considering the membership of a team and the balance of individuals in the various categories within it, so that the strengths of some compensate for the weaknesses of others, and vice versa. For example, those in the reflective and professional quadrants can be helped by individuals in the low consciousness/low constructiveness group to develop some personal and professional distance from their internal drivers. They need to cultivate the capacity to self-manage and should be assisted by the panel chair in self-regulating. ‘Good’ panels and teams, ‘held’ by a panel chair or manager, can be supported in using their personal biographies to enable them to function effectively. Similarly, some members are guarded about what they share yet demonstrate an ability to remain on task; however, they need encouragement to be more empathetic through the appropriate sharing of their experiences and selves that should help them to develop a less officious manner. The understanding and use of more EPPJ is a first step.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which personal biographies, attitudes and values influence the role and recommendation-making of members of adoption and fostering panels. While there is evidence from the literature that, in many contexts, group decision-making can have advantages over individual decision-making, a significant body of work indicates that these strengths can be overridden by a mixture of unconscious biases and collective thinking. It is possible that in the specific context of adoption and fostering panels, this can lead to flawed decisions. The research set out to investigate the extent to which this is the case.

But before discussing this specific weakness of panels, it is important to acknowledge a general strength. The study provides clear evidence that the panel system performs a valuable function for its major stakeholders; it certainly achieves what is intended in terms of having a representative constitution and providing considered recommendations in a timely manner to the ADM.

It is also important to reiterate that the sample used in the research, although small, is enough to draw some significant conclusions. These will now be discussed.

The analysis of the evidence led to some conflicting implications concerning the benefits of the current panel structure. On the one hand, factors such as the clear differences in the conduct of panels, the frequent sense of meeting for meeting’s sake, the ‘niceness’ of some of the discussions and the possible lack of rigorous challenge raise serious questions about their structure and legitimacy. On the other hand, the narratives of the panel members, together with their professional and personal experience, highlight the importance of having different people involved in making recommendations concerning stakeholders’ lives.

There is certainly no evidence from the study that suggests that panel members are passive participants in the process. However, it is also clear that existing panel members need to be more aware of the unconscious processes that inform their recommendations, and agencies recruiting new members need to develop systems that facilitate the recruitment of individuals who are able to do this from the outset.

A more specific finding of the study, with implications for agencies, concerns recruitment, as it was found that many panel members are conscripted rather than appointed by a process of formal application. This can lead to panel membership being drawn from a rather narrow group of people already known to the agency (Lord and Cullen, 2016). While this can work well, there is a strong case for agencies to develop more robust recruitment and selection processes for both internal and external potential panel members.

Another significant finding concerns support and guidance. As noted earlier, most panel members were either unaware or not in control of their unconscious personality characteristics and how these led to the projection of their views or attitudes onto social workers and applicants. On the other hand, an analysis of panel member profiles showed (see the consciousness/constructiveness axis, above) that most of them have high consciousness and low constructiveness. This implies that supervision and training could prove a valuable tool in helping them to mitigate or eliminate the effects of biography and unconscious bias on their decision-making. Currently, however, there is no process in place to offer support and guidance on a regular and structured basis, other than informal discussions and annual reviews. Therefore, there seems to be a strong argument in favour of increasing formal support, guidance and training structures. For example, member training could be increased to twice a year with one of these sessions comprising an annual update on the role and function of panels, looking at conformational bias, groupwork and anti-discriminatory practice. Furthermore, all the individuals involved, whether social workers, team managers, panel members or ADMs, should be trained in EPPJ, as discussed above. While the relatively small sample informing this study might enervate general conclusions, it has been shown elsewhere that in a general childcare context ‘… the more supervision is used to monitor managerial concerns, the less practitioners will be helped to reflect on their thinking and to be critical’ (Munro, 2008: 25).

A related but different point to that just described is the question of motivation and suitability for panel membership. As seen earlier, most panel members are not motivated by pure altruism – indeed, the desire for professional kudos was evident in the narratives of all but two of those interviewed. This would suggest that agencies should implement rigorous processes to assess the characters and mindsets of potential members and examine their motivation for wanting to sit on panels.

The study was not able to explore motives due to the use of BNIM SQUIN methods, so further research is needed. But in the absence of robust evidence, it seems both reasonable and practical to require that panel membership interview questions should include those recommended 20 years ago in the Warner Report (Department of Health, 1992). As a further measure, panel membership should not be viewed as a job or role for the benefit of the role holder, as is the case with paid volunteering, as this can make it difficult for agencies to challenge practice; they do not wish to appear unsupportive of members who are deemed to be helping the agency. Hence, there should be a return to fixed-term panel membership as opposed to the current indefinite term.

Finally, it is worth noting that the results also reinforce several standard but important practice points concerning panel structure and member roles. These have not been covered as they are described in detail in CoramBAAF’S guides.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the panel system achieves what it is designed for in terms of having a representative constitution and providing considered recommendations in a timely manner to the ADM. However, it was also found that individual biography affects panel members to an unexpectedly high degree in carrying out their role. A number of actions to remedy this problem, at both an individual and group level, have been suggested.

Despite some potential and significant drawbacks to the current panel system as a result of personal biographies, the study found there is no merit in returning to a pre-1984 system where one or two individuals decided the fate of others; the subjectivity of individuals would be magnified if the panel process was not there to provide a balance and check on individuals’ thinking. For this reason, it is concluded that panels remain the ‘best’ social structure for determining who is suitable to foster or adopt and to match children’s needs with provision.

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