

WHAT IS THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF GROWING UP IN AN ADOPTED
FAMILY?

by

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Abstract

Research in the field of adoption typically looks at risk factors and statistical outcomes for adoptees and their families while relatively little research has examined the lived experience from the perspective of the adopted person. The primary purpose of this study was to elicit a “story” from the perspective of participants about their experiences of growing up with the knowledge that they are adopted, and examine qualitatively how their life unfolds, and what it means for them. Six participants were interviewed in an open format interview using each participant’s pre-prepared timeline as a guide for the interview. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The narratives created were analyzed using the theoretical framework of descriptive phenomenology. From a content analysis, seven major and interrelated themes emerged: (1) Uniqueness – a felt sense of a qualitative difference from non-adoptees; (2) Connection – to others who share the experience of being adopted; (3) Vulnerability – to the possible content of the information they may come across if / when actualizing their curiosities; (4) Incompleteness – a feeling that there is missing information about their lives; (5) Acute or hyper awareness to similarities and differences with family members – the desire to share a genetic background or to look like someone; (6) Gratitude to / compassion for biological and adopted families; (7) Curiosity – about ones origins. These themes, in light of the current literature, identify that while there may be a formula, as in the set of common themes, it is not necessarily a formula for traumatic loss, rather an opportunity to help identify issues adoptees may need to work on through natural evolution or clinical work. Future studies will be important in adding validity to the themes identified as well

as identifying individual variables that may be important when considering their experiences of growing up in adopted families.

PREFACE

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, Counselling Psychology. The work contained in this thesis was written between September 2006 and March 2011. This thesis has been written solely by this author, with a significant portion of the text based on the research of external sources; I have to the best of my ability referenced all external sources.

This research was approved by The University of British Columbia (UBC) Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) on June 08, 2009 (H09-00094).

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background

A brief history of adoption

Adoption has existed in one form or another throughout history. The oldest recorded adoption law dates back to the 18th century BC, in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, (Cole & Donely in Lecce, 1996). While it is not the earliest evidence of written law associated with adoption, it is the oldest surviving intact (www.adopting.org). These ancient societies created laws that addressed many of the same issues that are being dealt with by modern social institutions and families, such as placement compatibility, the trauma of breaks in attachment associated with adoption, and the search and reunion of children with birth families. Stories of adopted figures searching for their origin pervade myths and legends: Moses, who forsook his royal Egyptian family upon learning that he was actually Hebrew; Oedipus Rex, who fulfilled the prophecy of the Oracle of Delphi by killing his father and marrying his mother; and of course the story of Romulus and Remus, who founded the greatest city of the ancient world. In each of these stories the common theme is a need to be reconnected with one's origins. Whether there is a mild curiosity about personal background, or a compulsive drive to understand one's genealogical history, people who have been adopted often feel as though there is some unanswered question associated with their sense of identity, some part of their story missing (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1977; Molloy, 2002; Sachdev, 1992; Silin, 1996; Westwood, 1995).

The process and practice of adoption has varied much throughout history, as well as between cultures. In North America, it has changed much over the past thirty years. Adoption has moved away from an era in which biological characteristics of families were matched, and children were often told nothing of being adopted, unless by chance they found out by accident through a discovered document or information gained from a neighbor or relative (Silin, 1996). Today adoption is more open; there are more multicultural and multiracial families than ever before. Differences between children and their parents are no longer hidden, and there are many forums in which issues arising from such circumstances can be addressed. With the area of adoption becoming more open, people are paying more attention to exactly what it means to be adopted and how it affects those affected.

A personal interest

While the idea for this research comes from an academic origin, it does hold a more personal component. From birth on January 16, I was taken into a foster home where I remained until mid-April. At that time I was taken back to the hospital for a short time, then home as part of the family I have come to know and love throughout my life. Having an older sister who was also adopted normalized my experience; I have no recollection of a time when I didn't know that I was adopted into my family as it was never hidden from me and I never questioned it. As I grew up I had curiosities about my origins and I would ponder how the relationships I had with my family compared with those of other families, but it was more of an objective curiosity than a desire to have answers. When I turned 19, my parents gave me the option to begin a search for my birth

parents, which I declined. At the age of 22 my daughter was born, which raised questions for me regarding my medical background. My parents gave me an information package, four pages that contained non-identifying descriptive information and the medical background of my immediate biological relatives. The questions I had were answered and again my curiosity waned. Since that time, my interest has risen and fallen, as it does with many other adoptees I have connected with throughout my life. I have often contemplated my history, and mused about how my story has played out, wondering what affect my circumstances have had on me.

After deciding that I would be doing research in the area of adoption, it made sense that in order to have a full appreciation of the full process I ought to complete the gambit of experiences. For me, this research was an excellent opportunity to answer some of my own questions, and increase my understanding of this field as a social institution from a relevant perspective.

Applying my experience

Having grown up with the knowledge that I was adopted, I can legitimately speak to some of the feelings that arise for adoptees. Probably the one that stands out most in my mind is the curiosity that naturally came with not having met my biological parents, whether or not I had any siblings. There was what could only be described as an innate desire to know what they are like, and what they look like.

Prior to conducting this research, a question I thought would be of significance throughout the research was the question “why?” For me, this question was answered because of information I was given early on, but I thought perhaps others may not have

this kind of information and could experience a variety of feelings as result. I felt this might be important because of the human desire to understand ‘why’ things happen to them. Ultimately, these ‘feelings’ adoptees have, that may or may not have context, develop in infancy and childhood, and can lead to ‘unfinished business’ affecting experiences later on life. Having a Gestalt orientation and some experience with this subject, I saw the possibility of unfinished business creating the potential for pathology.

Objectively speaking, there are studies that find significant differences between adopted and non-adopted children and adolescents, and there are studies that dispute such findings. I am also aware of certain research statistics: if there were only a small percentage of adoptees exhibiting pathologies, why then would mental health referrals exceed so dramatically their representation in the general population? On the other hand, I am aware that I am not one of those statistics. Ultimately, I was aware that I felt some connection with people who shared the experience of being adopted and always wondered whether they had the same kinds of experiences that I did growing up.

What’s Missing

In much of the literature in the growing area of adoption research, many questions are asked such as: How do adoptees compare to non-adopted adolescents on scales of social, behavioural, and emotional adjustment? How are relationships formed between adopted children and their families? Are they different than the relationships between children and birth families? (Hoffman-Riem, 1986; Moursund & Erskine, 2004; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998). Essentially, research typically looks at risk factors associated with adoption, and what things are wrong in families from or into which children have been

adopted. There is however, relatively little research that looks at the development of the lived experience from the perspective of the adopted person, a qualitative look at how that person's life unfolds, and what it means for them, in light of such information, and whether there are themes that can be identified. There are a number of variables in this equation, the attachments they form, their social and interpersonal tendencies, and their self concept or formation of identity. To put into context the experience of an adopted person, each of these facets needs to be explored.

Research Question

With relatively few studies being done on the subjective experience of being adopted, the purpose of this research is to fill that gap by asking the question, "What is the lived experience of growing up in an adopted family." To do so will require asking adopted people: What was it like to grow up knowing that you were adopted as a child? What events happened during development, related to this experience? What is the experience of these events? While asking these questions, it is important to consider what effect this knowledge might have on development and cognitive schemas. Essentially, the purpose of this study was to elicit a "story", from the perspective of the participants, of what their experience was growing up in an adopted family, and how that knowledge has affected their lives and development.

Terminology

The language associated with adoption within the literature varies; I have therefore included some of the terms I have chosen to use that may be unclear or unknown.

- *Adoptee* refers to a person of any age who was legally adopted into a family outside of his or her birth family.
- *Parents / Family* refers to the parents and family by whom the adopted person was raised.
- *Birth Parent / Family* refers to the biological or genetic mother/father/parent.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Current Research

Research in the field of adoption generally takes a critical look at the presenting problems of many adoptees, to examine whether there are any real differences between this population and the general population of people. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC, 2002) identifies identity formation, self-esteem, and feelings of abandonment resulting from their early loss as the major factors resulting in the maladjustment experienced by many adoptees. According to Siegel (2001), without adequate attunement and development of the social engagement system within a secure attachment relationship, “[c]hildren... are not able to create a sense of unity and continuity of the self across the past, present, and future, or in the relationship of the self with others. This impairment shows itself in the emotional instability, social dysfunction, poor response to stress, and cognitive disorganization and disorientation...” (p. 119-120). When one looks at the records of mental health clinics, one finds that adopted children have a referral rate to mental health professionals that is disproportionately, 2 to 5 times, higher than their representation in the general population. While adopted children raised by non-relatives make up approximately 1% of the general population, they account for more than 4% of children treated by mental health professionals. They are reported to have significantly higher rates of aggressive or acting-out problems, and learning difficulties (Sharma, A., McGue, M., & Benson, 1998).

Friedlander (2003) takes a different approach, arguing that "... adoption is not a formula for traumatic loss" rather, it is about "attachments to family, broken and constructed" (2003). While it is true that many children who have been adopted do display negative identity, behavioural, or attachment issues throughout their lives, it is not true that every adopted child does. What seems to be of most importance to the development of adoptees is the confidence and competence of caretakers, and a general atmosphere that is warm, consistent, and contingent on the child's needs (Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, & Waters, 1985).

One must use caution, however, when interpreting the results of studies comparing adopted to non-adopted people no matter what the conclusion. Due to possible confounds from small sample sizes, the use of clinical and non-clinical samples, narrow age range, narrow range of outcome measures, questionable reliability and validity of measurement procedures and instruments, and poor comparison groups (Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, & Singer, 1984; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998), the results of many studies are open to debate.

In a study representing methodological advancements by controlling for relevant demographics and family variables, Brodzinsky et al., (1984) drew from a relatively broad age range of the general population to ensure greater generalizability. Children were rated on the Child Behaviour Profile (CBP) and the Hahnemann Elementary School Behaviour Rating (HESB). Adopted children scored higher in psychological and school-related behaviour problems and lower in social competence and school achievement than non-adopted children. These results indicate that adopted children are in fact more vulnerable to emotional, behavioural, and educational problems. Though the adopted

children in the study did not manifest severe pathologies, they did display more extreme forms of behaviour than did non-adopted children.

Like so many others, Brodzinsky et al. (1984) has found that supporting or conflicting results indicate a need to be cautious in the interpretation and generalization of results because of possible confounds in the research, and an understanding that adoption in general has proven to be a successful alternative in cases where biological parents are unable to, or unwilling, to take care of their children.

In the largest study of adolescents adopted as infants in the United States, Sharma, McGue, and Benson (1998) addressed the question of whether adopted adolescents fare better or worse than non-adopted adolescents on indicators of emotional and behavioural adjustment. There are major discrepancies in prior research examining these factors as some studies indicate that adopted adolescents present with more social intellectual and behavioral challenges than children raised in birth families, while some show conversely that adopted adolescents fare better than non-adopted children, and still others indicating no differences between the groups. This study, which included 715 adoptive families, was specifically designed to address the three methodological concerns that have confounded possible interpretations of other studies: 1. this was a non-clinical sample; 2. all adolescents were adopted as infants, which is defined as under the age of 15 months; 3. adolescents were compared to a) birth adolescents being raised in the same adoptive family, and b) norms on the Youth Self-Report (YSR).

Youth were asked to rate themselves on syndrome and total problem scales of the YSR, and on a subset of the Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviours (AB) instruments. Also, a scale measuring identity was constructed from the adoption portion

of the assessment. By examining the differences in adjustment of adopted adolescents raised in the same home as biological children of the parents who also adopted, we get a clearer picture of whether there are any real differences between adopted and non-adopted adolescents. This research attempts to address this discrepancy by controlling for factors that may have confounded results in the other studies. By taking an empirical look at the differences in adjustment of adopted adolescents raised in the same home as biological children of the parents who also adopted, Sharma, McGue, and Benson (1998) attempt to give us a clearer picture of whether there are any real differences between adopted and non-adopted adolescents.

Results of this study indicate that there were modest differences between adopted and non-adopted adolescents on scales of behavioural and emotional adjustment with adoptees showing higher levels of Delinquent Behaviour, Licit Drug Use, and lower scores on School Adjustment. These results however, are potentially due to the large discrepancies in scores in the upper tails in analysis; differences then may be attributable to an actual difference in a very small percentage of the sample. In fact, adoptees scored better than their non-adopted siblings and the YSR norm group on scores of Prosocial Behavior, Social Problems, and Withdrawn Behaviour. Some clinicians offer speculation regarding these results that perhaps adoptive parents are more inclined towards prosocial behaviours than others. It is also possible that adoptees themselves feel gratitude and wish to repay the kindness shown to them. Other more negative explanations have also been offered indicating that adoptees may feel a need to “prove their value” to prevent potential for further loss, which implies a coping mechanism rather than a psychological outcome (1998).

Friedlander (2003) acknowledges that a severe break in attachment such as being removed from your family of origin has potentially negative consequences, as supported by much research, but highlights that there is the potential for positive outcomes as well. In a meta-analysis of 62 studies including 17,767 adopted children comparing them to their non-adopted siblings or peers who stayed behind, van IJzendoorn and Juffer (2005), found that adopted children scored substantially higher on IQ tests and they performed much better at school. Compared to their current non-adopted environmental peers or siblings, their school performance and language abilities were somewhat behind while their cognitive competency and IQ scores were similar. The idea here is that taken together, while there may be some negative consequences, there is the potential for a positive impact of adoption on children's cognitive development and competence.

Outcomes are largely influenced by subjective circumstances according to Freeark, Rosenberg, and Bornstein (2005), who, focused on gender as one such influence identifying that boys and girls differ developmentally, thus affecting how they share information about themselves and their experiences. This in turn will affect how their parents communicate with them, which begins to shape parent-daughter and parent-son relationships and communication techniques that, in relation to the communication of information and emotion as it relates to development and their adoption, favours the developmental process of girls. The different roles of the parents in the adoption process, as well as the adoption life-cycle, will also affect family dynamics, and in turn affect the environmental experience. Factors such as these are of great importance when examining the personal experience of growing up in an adoptive family because the adoption process historically has been a highly feminized social institution (2005). This feminization has

many potentially detrimental effects in the adoption life-cycle, such as the marginalization and disempowerment of adopted boys and their fathers, or the skewed perspective from which adopted people work to make sense of their relationships and the circumstances of their lives which form the roots for ongoing identity formation. No influence could be of greater importance to the subjective experience than family dynamics and environmental factors such as socialization. According to qualitative research on the experiences of non-clinical, well adjusted, internationally adopted children, subjective context of the adoption was the most important factor in the adjustment of the children (Friedlander, 2003). Other studies, however state that highly stressful experiences from childhood such as the break in attachment between the child and his or her biological parents will have long lasting potentially negative effects on the life of any person (Hoffman-Riem, 1986; Moursund & Erskine, 2004; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998).

It is here then that a distinction must be made between bonding and attachment. Bonds of various kinds can connect people without conscious effort. The kinds of bonds identified by researchers are genetic bonding, birth bonding, traumatic bonding, and transference bonding. Watson (1997) defines bonding between parent and child not as a function of genetic coding, but as a significant relationship that happens without the knowledge or conscious effort, and not as the result of a learned skill. Attachment between caregiver and child on the other hand is an emotional relationship that grows slowly through daily contact, care giving, and other forms of proximal interactions, such as cuddling, feeding, and playing (Silin, 1996; Watson, 1997). Unlike bonds, attachments do not just ‘happen’, they are the learned ability to create psychologically

rooted ties between people that give them significant meaning to one another. While in infancy, attachments to caregivers are created by necessity, as the child grows, children must learn the skill of making and breaking attachments during their first years of life and once the skill of making attachments is learned, it is transferable. Since attachments can be created by choice, they may also be ended by choice or by atrophy. This is where the theory that attachment breaks must result in trauma fails; if children did not learn the skill of disengaging attachments they would soon be encumbered with multiple attachments that were no longer developmentally appropriate, and for which they do not have the emotional resources to maintain and still form new attachments (Watson, 1997).

It is possible that multiple attachments can be made with both primary, and secondary attachment figures, and such attachments can be formed with the child's mother or father, as well as any other caregivers intimately involved in fostering the care and growth of the child (Field, 1996; Siegel, 2001; Silin, 1996). In the traditional Westernized version of attachment, a single caregiver, typically the mother – child dyad, form the attachment relationship, however, in many cultures multiple attachments are formed which is considered adaptive for the child's growth and group participation (Field, 1996). Present day Westernized attachments are changing to include the father, siblings, other caregivers, and even familiar figures, and though these are different forms of attachment, research suggests that these kinds of attachment yield similar behavioral, emotional, and physiological responses (Field, 1996; Siegel, 2001). In light of the possibility of creating multiple attachments, it is possible that as long as a consistent attachment figure is present in the life of the child, the reactive pattern of separation will be minimized, possibly eliminated as the child learns the skills of creating and disengaging attachments.

This suggests that while separation from biological families may be stressful, it need not necessarily result in the experience of a traumatic event.

Prior research examining long-term emotional and behavioural adjustment of adoptees show mixed findings. Still, even researchers who argue that adopted children can go through life without developing pathologies such as attachment disorders or PTSD as a result of being adopted cannot deny that there is, as mentioned before, a disproportionately high number of adoptees seeking clinical help. What happens prior to, or following the adoption may hold some clues to this.

In a study examining adopted children with who parents were having difficulties with problem behaviours, Howe (2003) notes that most had suffered abuse and neglect at the hands of their pre-placement parents with whom we presume there had been an attachment made, however insecure and disorganized, prior to being adopted. Children who feel repeatedly helpless and frightened because of caregivers may fall into a pattern of constant survival mode and develop controlling or hostile strategies to ensure their own safety and survival. For them, being cared for is dangerous (Hoksbergen et al., 2003; Howe, 2003), and safe and sensitive care giving tends to generate feelings of anxiety and fear that result in controlling and possibly aggressive acting out behaviours.

Attachment theory

Attachment is defined as an affective bond that one animal creates with another animal that grows slowly, over time through living interaction which binds them together in space and has lasting effects over time (Field, 1996; Silin, 1996). According to Siegel (2001), an infant is born into the world genetically programmed to connect with

“attachment figures” who are the caregivers in the child’s life. Such attachments can be formed with the child’s mother or father, as well as any other caregivers intimately involved in fostering the care and growth of the child (Field, 1996; Siegel, 2001; Silin, 1996). When a child’s caregivers are able to help them develop a secure attachment for the first time, they are facilitating the ‘psychological birth’ of that child (Hughes, 1999). If such attachments are broken, as it often is in the process of adoption, there are consequences.

According to the Bowlby-Ainsworth model of attachment, there is a predictable sequence of behaviours during the separation of an infant from its mother. The initial phase (protest) typically begins almost immediately and lasts from a few hours to a week or more. Children in this phase cry loudly and throw themselves about, and look generally distressed. They also look eagerly to any sound that might be their missing mother. Children during this phase will often cling eagerly to a substitute. During the second phase of an attachment break, despair, children show increasing helplessness; they cry only intermittently and become more withdrawn while their physical activity increases. This is a quiet state, “sometimes mistaken for recovery (Field, 1996). In the third phase, detachment, children begin to show more interest in their surroundings, smile more, and become more sociable. When their mother returns however, children tend to remain remote and apathetic.

Expanding on the Bowlby-Ainsworth model of attachment, Field (1996) includes physiological evidence based on human and primate research as support for the model's tenets, but includes a wider variety of attachment figures. Field (1996) formulates an alternative attachment model in which Bowlby’s stages of protest, despair, and

detachment, followed by a depression that is subject to environmental influence are supported and explained using the concept of psychobiological attunement.

Primate data are based on surgically implanted telemetry to monitor response to mother-infant separations. Separation was followed closely by agitation characterized by increased motor activity and frequent vocalizations of distress. Behaviours typical of depression emerged shortly thereafter and persisted throughout the period of separation: movement was slowed; play behaviour diminished; changes in heart rate and body temperature; decreased REM sleep, increased arousals from sleep and time spent awake. During the separation of two pigtail monkeys that were reared together, altered cellular immune responses were also noted that persisted for as much as 5 weeks following reunion. Other data indicating persistent separation effects is the altered cardiac activity of some infant monkeys that continued for some time after reunion.

Similar data have been reported for groups of human children during times of separation from attachment figures. Changes in heart rate, activity level, night wakings, as well as increased negative affect and periods of crying, and decreased positive affect have been observed, which are suggestive of depression. Greater clinging and aggressive behaviours, eating and toileting problems, and disturbed sleep and illnesses that persist following return of an attachment figure are behavioural changes reported by parents (Field, 1996; Silin, 1996). Examples of such behaviours were revealed in parents' comments that children wanted to be rocked and held, reverted to baby talk, whined and screamed for attention, and made threats to perceived sources of the separation (Field, 1996). This suggests that there is a long-term response to separation from whomever the

primary attachment figure is, indicating that such separation, as in adoption, is a stressful and potentially traumatic event.

Attachment is considered a nearly universal process. The physiological markers accompanying attachment behaviours – smiling and crying – are independent of parenthood, age, or sex. In the traditional Westernized version of attachment a single caregiver, typically the mother – child dyad, form the attachment relationship, however, in many cultures multiple attachments are formed which is considered adaptive for the child's growth and group participation (Field, 1996). Present day Westernized attachments are changing to include the father, siblings, other caregivers, and even familiar figures, and though this is a different form of attachment, research suggests that a break in this kind of attachment yields similar behavioral, emotional, and physiological responses (Field, 1996; Siegel, 2001).

Attachments provide a relationship in which a person will seek proximity to the attachment figure, and have a sense of safety as the presence of the attachment figure is soothing. The person will develop an internal schema of the self-with-attachment figure that provides him or her with a sense of well being and will be soothing during future distresses (D'Elia, 2001; Siegel, 2001). There are biopsychological circuits responsible for emotional and social functioning, as well as memory and coping that come 'online' during the first years of life (Joseph, 1998; Siegel, 2001). In a non-threatening event, sensory information is sent to the thalamus then to the hippocampus where spatiotemporal information is assigned and meaning is created in the neocortex (Rothschild, 2002). The hippocampus however does not fully develop until 3-4 years of age, remains exceedingly plastic, and does not complete its cycle of myelination until

well after its first decade (Joseph, 1998). Also, there is the prolonged immaturity of the corpus callosum which is the structure responsible for interhemispheric communication of the brain. While the right hemisphere and temporal lobe are dominant for the storage of emotionally laden and personal experiences, and the left for language, it may be difficult for younger people to assign language or develop narratives for events; which in turn may result in ‘feelings’ without context, creating the potential for powerful emotional reactions to certain experiences without understanding the root of these responses.

Though the attachment system is “hard wired” in the brain, experience involves the activation of neurons in the brain that respond to the sensory events from the external world – or to the internally generated images created by the brain itself (Siegel, 2001). It is in this way that we turn to Script theory to understand the implications of this information suggesting ways in which we may have long-lasting reactions to attachment breaks.

Script theory

A person comes to be an individual uniquely different from others based on experiences and relationships with others. Such relationships are the meaning and substance in which that person is grounded. People are rarely aware of how much influence the people in their worlds have on them, and the extent to which they are shaped by the relationships they have with others. What we are consciously aware of is only a small part of this, the proverbial ‘tip of the iceberg’. It is reasonable to assume that much of the most formative influences that give a person a fundamental sense of

selfhood and continuity come at a time in our lives when our ability, biologically, to make memories that have spatiotemporal context has not yet fully developed, or is even pre-linguistic (Joseph, 1998; Moursund & Erskine, 2004; Rothschild, 2002). Since we may not have words during our formative years to develop narratives for events or symbolize quality of a learning experience, those experiences are often lost to conscious awareness and may result in amnesias, or ‘feelings’ without context.

Cognitive schemas embody the rules and categories into which we order experience so that we are able make sense of it. Schemas range from the relatively simple (i.e. how to walk), to extremely complex integrations of emotions and constructs and definitions (i.e. the concept of “father”; or the meanings and implications of “whispering”); each moment of our lives is spent gathering new information and comparing it with previous experience (Moursund & Erskine, 2004). Schemas include cognitions, emotions, behaviours, and physiological responses to experience. These schemas are important because without them, we would be unable to function efficiently in a complex world.

Over time, schemas are strung together into larger patterns called scripts, which limit our ability to adapt constructively and creatively to new situations (2004). Scripts become the foundations of our behaviours, dictating the who’s, the what’s, the when’s and why’s of how we behave and react to situations. We sometimes think of them as our automatic reflexes and responses that are often useful, and sometimes hold us back from evolving new kinds of relationships in our lives.

Scripts are maintained on two levels. First, there is the absence of any other imaginable response, and second, there is the immediate psychological comfort of moving into a familiar pattern of emotion, thought and behaviour. Erskine, Moursund,

and Trautmann (1999; in Moursund & Erskine, 2004) identify four major categories: predictability, identity, consistency, and stability as the psychological benefits that maintain scripts. Script patterns in fact originate as solutions to problems. It is when these patterns become rigid, automatic, and out of conscious awareness that they become dysfunctional and interfere with our ability to grow and evolve as individuals.

Scripts are not found in conscious awareness; they are an integral part of our personality of which we are unaware. Even if we are aware of these patterns we are most often unable to give a verbal explanation of their origins or the rationale behind them. Script bound behaviours feel like natural inevitable responses to what we experience, when in actuality, such behaviours shape our world as we experience it to fit into our expectations (2004). Essentially, *'I do not see the world as it is, I see the world as I am'*.

The Effects of Attachments and Scripts

Childhood attachments, especially those with parents or caregivers, are thought to play a central role in future relationships and psychopathology because the bonds created with the original caregivers provide the working model for all subsequent meaningful relationships (Freeark et al., 2005; Howe, 2001; Hughes, 1999). Script theory (Moursund & Erskine, 2004) identifies such breaks in attachment as creating potentially debilitating patterns in life. Scripts shape the way in which we process information, so that new data are used to reinforce and harden the script rather than challenge it (2004). Understanding schemas and script theory is fundamental in understanding how any person makes sense of the world, particularly when that person has undergone stressful experiences associated with relationships, such as a break with an attachment figure, at a time when

the faculties needed to process this information in a meaningful way are not developed to the point where this is possible.

One of the basic tenets of script theory is that “a person becomes to be an individual uniquely different from every other individual through his or her relationships with others” (Moursund & Erskine, 2004). It describes the process in which positive or negative patterns emerge out of the relationships of our past, including, and most importantly, those relationships in which we form attachments. Though we may never recall “explicitly what our experiences were as infants, the experiences we have with those attachment figures in our lives have powerful and lasting effects on our implicit processes” (Siegel, 2001).

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The Descriptive Phenomenological Method

Phenomenological structure

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) famously said, "... to the things themselves (Zu den sachen selbst)". Phenomenology means "from the point of view of the behaving organism..." (Snygg, 1941, p. 406). This research method uses the familiar methodological principal that all pure scientific knowledge begins with a fresh unbiased description of its subject matter (Wertz, 2005). To do this Husserl outlined two *epochés* - a Greek term which describes the theoretical moment where all belief in the existence of the real world, and consequently all action in the real world, is suspended; essentially, they are abstentions from influences that potentially short-circuit or bias description (p. 168). The first epoché concerns the natural sciences and requires the researcher to set aside prior scientific assumptions in order to gain access to the phenomena as they exist prior to, and independent of, scientific knowledge without being tainted by expectation or preconception. The second epoché is a 'methodological abstention', with the intent of removing belief in or focus on what presents itself in the life-world (*lebenswelt*) and directs focus instead on the "subjective manners of appearance and givenness—the lived-through meanings and the subjective performances that subtend human situations" (p. 168). This epoché and the following analyses are intended to give space to empathically enter and reflect on the lived world of other persons as they recollect experiences and to apprehend the meanings of the world from the first person point of view.

Even as researchers, when we encounter familiar objects or situations we tend to see and experience them through familiar eyes and in familiar ways. In doing this we often miss seeing the novel features of familiar situations (Giorgi & Giorgi, p. 249, 2003).

Why phenomenology

By following these *epochés*, everything that presents itself can be accounted for precisely as it presents itself, it is a way of counteracting the interfering effects of past experience. In this way it is “an attempt to capture the sense of an experience” (McLeod, 2007, p. 44). Phenomenology strives to describe the essence of everyday experience. The ultimate research goal of phenomenology: To elucidate the essence of the phenomenon being studied, as it exists in participants’ concrete experience (McLeod, 2007, p. 41), and ‘findings’ being reported are reflexively contextualized and comprise ‘a’ truth rather than ‘the’ truth.

Initially this research was intended to use a narrative approach very simply because telling stories seems to be an innate part of the human condition (Riessman, 1993). Narratives are a way of providing meaning, or making sense of deviations and “examining every nuance of a moment that had special meaning” (Riessman, 1993, p. 2); they forge a link between the exceptional and the ordinary (McCance, McKenna, & Boore, 2001). While the intent to elicit a narrative through interview remained, the decision to move to a phenomenological analysis was based on the desire for not just the story, but to find meaning in it from the perspective of the participants, and to move away from assumptions about the world based on expectations. Thus, each phenomenal theme becomes tied to a particular experience-specific perspective occupied by the possessor of

the concept. As experience varies, phenomenal concept varies as well (Stoljar, 2005). For this research to be meaningful in a therapeutic setting, it is important that each representation is as accurate as possible in appreciation of the nature of the personal experience as a whole, without which, it would be incomplete (McLeod, 2007, p. 39).

This method works well with the proposed research, as it is a directed but flexible way to examine participant's experiences of their lives. This approach works well in eliciting the participant's lived experience without the bias of the research or of expectations.

Participants

Participants in this study were adults, two males, and four females, ranging in age from 32 – 42 years, recruited from the general population. The sample was a convenience sample collected through word of mouth and various other social networking methods including a general email to University of British Columbia (UBC) students, and a posted message on an internet based social networking website (see appendix 2).

The age range was intended to be between the ages of thirty to forty years. This made the most sense from a developmental perspective because it is relatively removed from adolescence, but still early enough in life that the developmental process may be recalled. Because of the broadening age range of adolescence due to the increased need for a post-secondary education, individuals below the age of thirty are comprised of a large spectrum of psychological development and identity formation. As well, people significantly over the age of forty may be too far removed from their developmental “growing up” experiences. Participants in this age range will have matured enough to

intelligently reflect back on their developmental experiences and have a meaningful understanding of their experience. They will also be at a time in their lives when they may be considering the possibility of having their own family or already have one, and their own experiences will be, or have been, revisited as they go through this process.

Once contacted by interested participants, the researcher sent an email outlining the pre-interview, preparation, and interview processes, with a consent form (Appendix 1) attached.

Through email and telephone communication, a time was then set up for the pre-interview either by phone or in person. During this phase the researcher went through the consent form in detail with the participant and answered any questions and made necessary clarifications as to the process of the interview itself.

The researcher then gave verbal instruction on how to create the timeline that would be the rough outline of the interview. Participants were instructed that the timeline should consist of a series of events in chronological order from first memory until present day that related somehow to their adoption and the knowledge that they were adopted as a child. They were asked to include a brief description of their experience of these events. Participants were informed that the timeline was not meant to be an exhaustive list of every event in their lives, but an outline to keep the interview on task from which a “story” could be created from the perspective of the participant, including their experience of growing up in an adopted family, and what effect that knowledge had for them on life events and development.

The researcher and participant then set a time and place to meet to conduct the interview.

Pilot Study / Situating the Researcher

Before the interviews were carried out to collect information for this study, I underwent my own personal interview facilitated by Dr. Marvin Westwood and Dr. Marla Buchanan. The purpose of this part of the study was to identify what assumptions and expectations I might be bringing into the research and attempt to minimize these biases as this research is fundamentally relevant to my own background. Secondly, this aided in my understanding of the interview process and helped to refine the format of the interview with respect to the initial guiding question, as well as possible probing questions during interview. Finally, this form of interview is highly therapeutic (McCance, McKenna, & Boore, 2001), and going through the process gave me insight into the internal processes of being interviewed; this is important much the same way it is important for a counsellor to understand the client role. While interviewing the participants in this research, many highly emotional topics arose and having participated as the interviewee I had a greater understanding of the experiences of the participants and was able to maintain safety within the interview.

Interview Format

Interviews were conducted in an unstructured format, using only the timeline prepared by the participant as a template for the direction of the interview. Riessman (1993), states that unstructured interviews are the most likely of the interview structures to produce free flowing narratives. With the right guiding question, and an understanding that the researcher may from time to time interrupt to probe an idea or event (i.e. “how has that

affected / impacted you?”, “what did that mean to you?”), the interviewer and participant can collaborate to fully explore the story being told.

Once the participants of the research were identified, participants were asked to construct a timeline including relevant knowledge, events, and memories of their lives that they feel are connected to being adopted. The purpose of the timeline was to have the participants begin thinking about relevant information and to prime them and increase the amount of information they might remember. The hope was to create a smoother interview in terms of the amount of information and giving the interview a direction based on the motives of the participant rather than disruption from any potential interviewer biases.

The unstructured interviews used only the timeline prepared by the participant as a template for the direction of the interview. During the interview it also served to keep the interview on task in a chronological direction and minimized tangential discussions about unrelated memories.

Before the actual interview began, a general guiding question was asked: “What was it like growing up with the knowledge that you were adopted as a child?” This happened during the setting up phase while the audio recorders were being prepared and while examining the timeline to get an idea of some of the events that would then be explored. In this way, the life story of the participant was invited and he/she was free to tell the story as it was experienced.

The interview began with casual conversation, back and forth, so that an atmosphere of safety within the interview was created. Much of the conversation was one directional, but effort was made to be open and honest about the researchers background, as each

participant exhibited a curiosity about why there was interest in conducting this research. At this time the initial question asked was “what are the first memories you have that relate to your life growing up in an adopted family?”

As the interview progressed, relevant bits of information were attended to and occasionally the participant was asked to elaborate on certain areas of an event or idea using open ended questions such as “what was your experience of that?” or “what were you aware of?” In some interviews, participants were very good at describing the events as they remember them, but tended to leave out subjective experience of the event; cues relating to the experience as opposed to the time and space memory of events with questions such as “what was the feeling present at that time?” or “what, if any, emotions came up?” were provided. As the participant’s stories concluded, they were asked if there were any experiences they wanted to include in the interview that may have been missed, or that were not adequately addressed within the interview. It was also inquired as to whether there were any new insights about the experiences discussed that the participant is aware of having reflected back on their experiences, and gave space for participants to discuss those.

Analysis

Before analysis of each interview, they were listened to and read as a whole from beginning to end. After going through the stories once, they were re-read with the researcher making notes and marking sections of the story between which there appeared to be a shift of meaning until the entire narrative was delineated into such ‘meaning units’. The next step was attributing the psychological meaning to the participant as they

exist in the stories and their units. This was done by grouping the meaning units together that highlighted similar or related experiences and explored for implicit or subtle nuances. Once the meaning units were clustered in such fashion that they identified the heightened psychological sensitivity, they were examined to see what the truly essential meaning of the experience was and themes were created to describe the psychological structure of the experience.

Risks and Benefits

This research posed two potential minor risks. The first is the privacy of the participant's identity. For this reason, participants' identity was not made known to any person other than the principal researcher, and the interviews were recorded under a sequential code. These were the codes used during member checks, and during the final analysis and write up of the research. The principal researcher kept no names in any form that could be identified with that person's interview. Names were kept on separate and unrelated files by the principal researcher for contact and reference use only.

The second possible risk was the emotional effect of the interview. To minimize this, participants were informed that the purpose of the interview was not therapy and that the role of the primary researcher was not as a counsellor. Any participants who requested were given information about current research for personal use, agencies, and / or counselling for adoptees.

Free and Informed Consent

The issue of free and informed consent was addressed throughout the process of the research. After the initial contact with possible participants was made, they were made

aware of the fact that their participation is entirely voluntary. In the consent form (Appendix 1), the voluntary nature is explicitly mentioned so as to eliminate any obligatory feelings to participate in any of the potential participants; the option to withdraw at any time was stressed. To further the notion of 'informed' consent, any questions the participants had regarding the research before, during, or after the interview were answered by the principal researcher.

CHAPTER IV

Results

Analysis of the interviews resulted in the formation of seven primary themes common among the sample of adopted individuals who participated in this research. Twelve themes were created initially based on the raw data from the interviews then examined by the primary researcher and an external source and collapsed into seven based on prevalence and similarity of content. Themes were created if each participant described the experience, the experience was impactful, and the experience was described as continuous throughout life.

The resulting seven primary themes have some overlap, are all interrelated, and have sub-themes describing trends based on specific experiences. They are: uniqueness, connection, vulnerability, incompleteness, acute or hyper-awareness to similarities and differences with family, gratitude to / compassion for families, and curiosity.

Table 3.1

Themes

Theme	Description
Uniqueness	There is felt sense that the individual is somehow qualitatively different than those who have not been adopted. There is also a belief that anyone who has not had this experience cannot understand the experience.
Connection	Adoptees feel a type of bond or felt sense of connection with others that they come to know were also adopted. Further, they feel that only those who have been adopted can truly understand what that experience is like.
Vulnerability	There are many issues related to adoption that create fears and

Theme	Description
Vulnerability (cont'd)	anxieties in adoptees when attempting to actualise some of their curiosities, or fill in information as it relates to a sense of story completion. Adoptees who initiated contact / discovery / beginning engagement with the family of origin reported fears of rejection, finding out things that may be painful, feeling overwhelmed, the possibility of disappointment of self or other, confusion, loss of control, and fear of judgement. They become acutely aware of how things may not turn out the way they would like them to.
Incompleteness	There is an experience that there are things the adoptee could still learn about him/herself because there are a lot of unanswered questions, and there is an internal drive to seek the information. This is not meant in a sense that the individual is not a complete fully actualized person, but a complete person for who there is missing information from that person's life he/she wants to know, or must do to complete their story.
Awareness	Acute or hyper awareness to similarities and differences with families – The desire to look like, or to be like someone or share a genetic background is strong. There is a question about the aetiology of traits they cannot ascribe to the nurture part of their family, especially as they are individuating and developing an identity. This may be a constant reminder that they were adopted. There is also awareness about similarities or differences to biological family when they meet that may or may not be happy about. The need to have a biological family of one's own is affected by experiences with adoption.
Gratitude / Compassion	Gratitude to / Compassion for both families – Adoptees feel as though their biological families made the right decision and that their quality of life has benefitted as a result of their adoption, though this is influenced by their experiences with their adopted family. There is also a lot of thought given to the affect their curiosities will have on the well being of both families.
Curiosity	There is a felt innate desire or need to know or experience more about one's history and/or biological family. Often the curiosity waxes and wanes throughout life. When life is very busy, adoptees have less interest, but when opportunity arises, curiosity is brought into consciousness.

1. Uniqueness – There is felt sense that the individual is somehow qualitatively different than those who have not been adopted. There is also a belief that anyone who has not had this experience cannot understand the experience.

This theme was one that was experienced in different ways by adoptees in this research, even within individuals' experiences; there was more than one understanding of this theme at different times in life and in different situations.

As described in the theme itself, there is the belief among adoptees that people who grew up in biological families cannot really have a sense of what the experience is like, as participant 005 asserts, “[W]e have something that other people don’t really appreciate.” There is a duality described by adoptees regarding this experience. In some ways there is a feeling of loneliness or separateness from the rest of the world, in others there is the feeling of ‘specialness’, (001) “being a little unique”. Following discussion about how differences have made participant 003 feel somehow isolated and separate from family, she also sees it from a different perspective and feels it adds weight to her individuality. She says, “And the two sides of [being adopted] is the separateness, but also uniqueness to be able to say, ‘I’m like you but I’m not you, I’m not the same.’” This is a part of herself, despite finding difficult to cope with at times, that she appreciates, “I do definitely value part of that.” Another adoptee (006) describes specifically his experience of differentness from his social group, “... I was literally the only child in my high school that was adopted....” For him, that he was adopted was common knowledge among his family and friends. Living in a small community, he knew that there were no others in his community with whom he shared this experience. In his particular experience, he doesn’t describe this experience as a negative thing, only an awareness that it was something that set him apart.

Other adoptees too recall a similar experience, participant 001 for example states that “At some point, I can’t think of when particularly, that I figured out that I was different, that not everybody was adopted. It always felt kind of special.” She too, like participant 006 does not describe it as a negative thing, only as an awareness that her experience was qualitatively different than that of non-adoptees, “For me, I think it set me apart from just anybody else that were the natural children of the parents.” She describes it as like having a secret story that she could choose to share or not share with people she met, and something that at times made her feel special. The story to which she is referring is the story of her adoption and she describes requesting to hear it over and over again when she was young. The story was important to her because it made her feel loved and cared for, “it laid the foundation of how I interpreted myself in the family.” She describes that other than the adoption story, she was never treated differently than anyone else in her family which was made up of siblings that are biological offspring. This positive association is one many factors that will affect how adoptees interpret the experience of their ‘uniqueness’. Other stories that included these experiences of their adoption being a source of strength for them include participant 005 who asserts, “I felt unique and different and [it was] something that I could tell [others], that they didn’t have. It was like a secret.”

Another way in which ‘uniqueness’ was experienced by adoptees in this study was the feeling that simply by being adopted, something positive was added to their experience. Participant 002 asserts, “I don’t remember feeling sad I remember feeling kind of special... feeling like I was chosen.” Participant 001 describes a specific experience that adds to this experience. When she had the experience of meeting her birth mother and

things generally went well, she can't help but be aware of how having this story to tell might add some 'excitement' to her life; "I've always like being a bit different..., so this kind of added a twist, as I said, or a uniqueness."

2. Connection – Adoptees feel a type of bond or felt sense of connection with others that they come to know were also adopted. Further, they feel that only those who have been adopted can truly understand what that experience is like.

This theme follows most logically from the experience of uniqueness. Just as adoptees feel that people who grew up in their birth families cannot have a true sense of the experience of growing up in a non-biological family, they are also aware that there is a bond with those who have experienced this thing that plays a significant role in their development and experience of the world. By connecting different parts of the interview with participant 005 related to this theme, her experience identifies this feeling of connection adoptees have, as well as clearly describing the relationship between the themes of the feeling of uniqueness described in the first theme, and the feeling of connection here:

"I met lots of people that were adopted that I connected with." "[I] felt like there was always this bond between us. I never felt like other people could understand the experience, but when you met somebody that was adopted you knew they had an idea of what it was like, even though it may have not been the same experience."

When talking with people who hadn't had that experience she says, "And they would kind of minimize it, I felt it was being minimized by other people, the experience... I didn't feel like my feelings were valid around it when other people listened to the story." "But when I would talk somebody who was adopted it was always like this knowing... I have an idea of something that happened to you. Maybe I was just [projecting that]... but that's always how I felt."

As was the trend with each theme in this research, some of the adoptees interviewed described awareness of this feeling of 'connection' while growing up, while others are more acutely aware of it moving through their adult lives. Participant 001 says of her

experience in grade school, “I just somehow remember there being somebody else in the class or the school that was adopted and somehow, I’m not sure how, but we always kind of know that about each other. Like, you’d find out who the other adopted kid was.” She talks about not exactly being friends with that person, but describes the bond that is created as “something you shared with that person – It was a way to make a connection with somebody.” Participant 004 describes also being aware of this sense of connection during his developmental years, but asserts that “When you’re an adult you realized the significance of that bond that you have is kind of an unwritten bond with adoption.”

3. **Vulnerability – There are many issues related to adoption that create fears and anxieties in adoptees when attempting to actualise some of their curiosities, or fill in information as it relates to a sense of story completion. Adoptees who initiated contact / discovery / beginning engagement with the family of origin reported fears of rejection, finding out things that may be painful, feeling overwhelmed, the possibility of disappointment of self or other, confusion, loss of control, and fear of judgement. They become acutely aware of how things may not turn out the way they would like them to.**

There are many factors that can create vulnerability in adoptees mainly because there are so many unknowns involved in not having one’s complete life story. Vulnerability to emotions can come simply from being adopted, or it can be the result of some related issue, of which the most common has to do with curiosity about and potential search for birth families.

With respect to vulnerabilities related specifically to being adopted, things that came up were generally things identified in earlier parts of life. For those who had a lot of similarity to their family, or had what might be described as a positive experience, there are few issues that arise around specifically ‘being adopted’. For those who had a more difficult time growing up, or had more experience with friction within their families, vulnerability to associated feelings tended to feature more prominently. Participant 005

describes her experience: “Like I just felt like I was disappointing them.” She was acutely aware that because she was not a biological part of her family, she felt she had to try harder to win their affection, “I had to be a good choice for them.” While participant 006, who described much similarity to his family, also felt he wanted to be a good choice for his family, he didn’t identify it as stressful. A significant part of this experience for 005 had to do with her ethnic background, “I was afraid they were going to disown me because I wasn’t [fully of the same ethnic group].” This feeling of vulnerability is heavily influenced by the theme of awareness of similarity and difference between self and families.

The theme of vulnerability is also deeply rooted in the beliefs or perceptions that adoptees create for themselves, and a sudden realization that some of these things may suddenly be challenged. Shakespeare, in *Romeo and Juliet*, asked the question, “What’s in a name?” For participant 003, this question was suddenly thrust upon her when she found out that she’d had a different birth name. She reflects on it: “What was I feeling? Sort of like disbelief, maybe a little bit insecure...” and she uses the adjective ‘discombobulated’ to try to identify the experience. A name is something that most people take for granted, adopted or not. This participant describes the experience that, “my viewpoint has just sort of been turned upside down, and that makes me feel a little bit unsafe.” She identifies here the sudden realization that there are many things she cannot simply take for granted, even something as personal as her own name, and wonders what else she might find out.

Participant 002 describes an experience in which her grandmother, in conversation, indicated to her that she was adopted into the family because her mother was having

difficulty getting pregnant. This information challenged the scripts that she had created around being adopted, and she identifies her vulnerability by stating that “it never occurred to me that she adopted me because she couldn’t get pregnant... so I guess when my grandmother told me that I was disillusioned on some level.” The level of vulnerability she describes is deep, and it challenged not only her understanding of why she was adopted, it challenged her sense of self, “It made me feel at that age that maybe I was a second choice.” This experience prompted her to make some decisions about learning more about her own history, following this event she applied to find her birth parents. When she began her search, she described finding out that her mother had never begun an active search for her and began to feel disappointment and a worry, “wondering if maybe she just wouldn’t be interested in meeting me.”

Adoptees put themselves at great emotional risk when searching for biological relations for the very basic reason that there are so many unknown variables that it is difficult to emotionally prepare for all of the possibilities of what it will happen and what those events will mean. In describing this process, participants identified vulnerabilities of varying reasons and intensities.

The process itself associated with searching for one’s birth family can be very difficult. As a general statement about the experience of beginning a search for one’s birth family, participant 004 reflects on his experience of the process, and describes it as though “you’re opening up this whole potential Pandora’s Box too; you don’t know what’s going to come of it.” This is a realization that featured prominently within the stories of adoptees in this research. Participant 006 describes the feelings and being overwhelmed with receiving information about his birth mother, “... after I got a whole

swack of papers the one thing that went through me was I guess confusion and a little disturbed.” Though not everyone had exactly the same experience with the receipt of information, all participants in this research had some experience of being overwhelmed or in some way confused or surprised about how their search for their birth family unfolded. Participant 001 recounts a time in her life that she becomes active in a search for her birth family that has always been passive. As she is thinking back on the experience, she talked about concerns that came up for her; “And then there’s this fear too about doing this, what if she’s a prostitute or what if she’s a – you know, something that I wouldn’t be proud of or, you know, that kept going through my head.”

Beginning this process can be difficult and once the process has begun, the reality of what they have actually begun can set in. Participant 005 remembers “being pretty frightened and wishing I had more information than I had.”

Participant 002 talks about finding out about her birth family and stated “I’m afraid of being rejected by her, because I’ve had that in the past.” She is vulnerable to the reaction of her parents both biological and familial. Participant 003 recalls writing the initial contact letter and realizing suddenly that she is opening herself up to a host of possibilities that she is not sure she is ready for; she describes feeling “very emotional, vulnerable, like putting yourself out there and potentially being rejected.” She describes the other side of what participant 001 described; On the one hand, maybe I won’t like my birth family, or I won’t be proud of what they’ve done in their lives. On the other hand, maybe ‘they’ will reject ‘me’, again.

The vulnerability to possible rejection was actualized for one participant (003) when, after contacting her birth mother, she describes the experience of learning that her birth

mom responded “no” to being asked if she was her daughter: “I actually felt really rejected for being adopted or like a sense of real shame about this. And it was from her shame.” She describes now feeling for the first time that maybe “being adopted was a bad thing.” She also describes feeling angry towards her birth mother for “making me feel rejected and – to make [being adopted] into a bad thing, when it wasn’t a bad thing from my experience.” There are many emotions associated with this experience for this participant, but the vulnerability piece is specified by her experience that “I did feel like it was a judgment on me, being rejected for something that I had no control over, you know, being born.” She describes feeling shame and anger here for having what was a good experience turned into something negative, and feeling as though it reflected on her even though she had no control over it. She also, when searching for her father encountered a situation where the birth father contacted the adoption registry and indicated that he had no memory of the birth mother and therefore the child could not be his and that he was not interested in having contact of any kind. The participant describes the experience of learning this as very clinical. She felt that the social worker who she communicated with handled it very poorly and that this tainted her experience of the process as well as the information. With respect to the information itself, she describes “numbness of getting the sort of information that’s hard to wrap your head around and just not knowing how to feel about it.” Participant 004 had a similar experience when his birth mother, upon receiving a call from the Post Adoption Registry, had a “kneejerk reaction to say no to meeting [him].” He describes the initial sense of “shock”, “disbelief”, and “rejection”. The experience for him was like the “feeling of a door being

closed” and when thinking about the experience, he repeats the feeling of being, “pretty devastated.”

There is a combination of anxiety and excitement described by participants before meeting members of their birth families. On meeting members of her birth family, participant 005 describes her fears, “a sense that somehow I might not be accepted in that family. I remember even being worried that they liked me when I was going there.” She describes here a want of acceptance and her fear of rejection, “because I was afraid I was going to be rejected again... I already felt like she abandoned me...”

All of the people who took part in this interview had already completed a birth family search and were in relationship with at least their birth mother. Each person describes a different experience of this ranging from a good solid relationship with both families, to massive stress with both families. Each person interviewed who described feeling stress with one or both families described feeling as though at some point they were losing control of the process. Participant 005 describes feeling like “now it’s out of control. Like I don’t have control and I want control of this situation.” This sense of “not feeling secure at all” is the result of “feeling really smothered and I didn’t know where I wanted our relationship to go.” These feelings of being ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘smothered’ are shared by participant 004 who describes a similar experience in which he had to set very clear, very strict boundaries, with his birth family to the point of cutting off contact for a period of time in order to allow himself space to sort out and process his experience. Ultimately, the experience of vulnerability is couched nicely in a statement by participant 001 for whom, meeting her birth mother was a very positive experience. She describes the whole process as “exciting, and I knew my life would never be the same.” She

describes that her life had changed significantly because of new relationships and the meanings that she will ascribe to them, but she also describes the idea of solving a mystery and muses about the new challenges that will create.

- 4. Incompleteness – There is an experience that there are things the adoptee could still learn about him/herself because there are a lot of unanswered questions, and there is an internal drive to seek the information. This is not meant in a sense that the individual is not a complete fully actualized person, but a complete person for who there is missing information from that person’s life he/she wants to know, or must do to complete their story.**

While there was a range of the prominence of this theme in the lives of participants, the feeling of incompleteness is described in such a way that all participants report feeling secure with who they are in life, and feel as though there is still more they can and would like learn about their own story.

Participant 005 muses, “The fact that I was left handed was an interesting thing...” She doesn’t describe it as life changing in any way, but it raises questions for her. When thinking about physical development, she says she always wondered how it would turn out. Cultural heritage, genetic background, and the questions of why (which can be found under the theme of curiosity) were all topics that fit into the theme of incompleteness. Finding out information was important to this person because she (005) was interested in “knowing my background and having some answers about where I came from”

One experience described under the theme of vulnerability was participant 003 recalling the learning of her birth name. “I never knew I had that name” and she describes feeling as though she has learned about a part of herself she was not previously aware of, “[This] is something that I didn’t know, and I’m not completely me anymore. I’m another person too... I was [her] for two weeks and that’s a part of my life that I

don't know much about." "It didn't take away from [my] life," she says, and describes it as like realizing suddenly that the bellybutton you've had all your life is "an 'outy', and I thought my whole life that it was an 'inny'... it's inconsequential, but it's surprising nonetheless." She describes learning that name as "a little tiny piece of the puzzle has been given to me."

This description of adding a piece of a puzzle is a common one among adoptees learning information about their background. Participant 003, though having described her experiences with her birth family as difficult, feels that having integrated her birth mother into her life has brought "a 'wholeness' to my life, it was sort of like that circle... sort of like integrating all of these pieces of my life and having all of it come together." Participant 001 describes discovering her French roots: "I always knew that I was French and I liked that." Learning this information became an important part of her identity so she could tell people "that I was French, or had a French background... I knew I wanted to be connected to that part of me."

The feeling of incompleteness is described in many ways by the participants in this research. An awareness of missing information featured most prominently when discussing mental health and/or medical history. Participant 005 describes being young, and as she is growing up, she contemplates what things were on her mind: "I probably thought about if I would have to wear glasses or something when I had my eyes tested." A question common to all participants at some point in life was: "is there anything that I need to know about my gene pool?" This featured as a specific concern for all participants when considering starting a family of their own. Participant 005 recalls: "at that time I would think a lot more about the mental health aspect of maybe there was

something wrong with me. [So I was] missing that information, I didn't know, I was missing out, I should have that."

When thinking about her search for members of her birth family, participant 001 recalls feeling like "I would suddenly have a bit of the missing piece that I didn't have, the mystery, solving the mystery." She is talking here of the changes that would be happening in her life, that it will not be the same as it was before. When she meets her birth family, she describes, "I didn't really 'need' anything from this relationship," which is different from her experience of some stories she had heard from others about being desperate to meet their birth families, but she describes this process as more than something simply being added to her life: "there's things I couldn't have known that I would feel." She describes a big part of this being the experience of resembling someone. Having met her birth mom, participant 001 identifies that there are things occurring that she has had no experience with, and it is a noticeable thing, "people think we're sisters or obviously we're related because we look so much alike, and I never had that experience in my life. I don't look unlike my family but I don't exactly look like them, so I'd never had that experience until I'd met her." She describes the experience of looking so much like someone as giving her a sense of satisfaction, and a feeling of belonging that she had not previously experienced. She describes the extended family that she has since met, and how "we all have this look... which is her side of the family." She recognizes it too in her own daughter who is four months old at the time of the interview, giving the family name she muses, "Look at those eyes, you know, there is a place where she comes from, I couldn't have said that before."

5. Acute or hyper awareness to similarities and differences with families – The desire to look like, or to be like someone or share a genetic background is strong.

There is a question about the aetiology of traits they cannot ascribe to the nurture part of their family, especially as they are individuating and developing an identity. This may be a constant reminder that they were adopted. There is also awareness about similarities or differences to biological family when they meet that may or may not be happy about.

The need to have a biological family of one's own is affected by experiences with adoption.

The new feeling of similarity that participant 001 feels having met her birth mother is also part of a general awareness of all adoptees (in this research) of ways in which they are similar to, and different from those in their families. This may have to do with looks, skin tone, personality traits, or any number of things, but this awareness of what those things are specifically may be a constant reminder of their adoption.

Participant 002 recalls her having dissonant experiences of this at various times in her life. When she was young she recalls, "I don't think I really believed in my heart I was adopted and actually many times my parents would say 'oh, you got your dad's forgetfulness there, or you know you got my 'this or that,' so the way we even talked about it was as if I was genetically related." As she grows up, she describes an increasing awareness of a very different experience; "I'm quite different from my adoptive family... I'm very different personality-wise and looks-wise from the people in my family." Reflecting on her experience of that awareness she becomes contemplative about her identity, "I don't know if it's that being adopted has caused me to be this way or if it's my personality."

Participant 005 recalls that "even when I was seven or something I felt very different from my family... I always felt like I wasn't measuring up and I was always trying to be more like them so that I would fit in." There were indications of differences between her and her family that she was aware of, and ongoing insecurities she had (as identified under the theme of vulnerability), "I probably thought about if I would have to wear

glasses or seething when I had my eyes tested. Maybe the fact that I was left handed was an interesting thing...” For this person, the differences were enough to create a rift between her and her family: “[I] was thinking about my birth mom a lot, like thinking I didn’t want to live at home anymore, like my parents didn’t understand me, I was different, probably my birth mom would get me, you know, if she would have kept me it would have been good ... I felt really alienated from them, really distant ... I didn’t respect their values, their lifestyle.” These differences that she was aware of created in this participant the need to be part of a different family, one in which she fit: “I don’t have to fit in and behave...because that’s not who I am, there’s somebody else in another family and I’m like them. Maybe it’s somebody that I look like too, maybe I’m really like them and, you know, somebody who has the same blood that I have.”

Participant 003 describes her awareness of the nature / nurture differences she experience in her family and reflects on experience: “Curiosity of like, you know, I’ve never had the experience of someone who, like a sibling who looks like me.” On entering what she describes as ‘the terrible teens’, participant 003 discovers “that my temperament was really different” and reflects on the emotions that she was feeling at that time: “At the time it was just, I hate these people. They don’t understand me.” She attributes the differences between her and her family to their different biological background, “like it was seriously like I was an alien.” She describes the differences in temperament, “They didn’t get frazzled, whereas I got frazzled very easily. It was like my whole family had this calm to them, this whole easy-going attitude and I couldn’t do that, like I just wasn’t built like that.” For her, there was “a sense of relief” with making the attribution of difference in temperament to being biologically distinct, but there was

also a sense of, “I’m always going to be different from them.” When reflecting on how this feeling affected her, she recalls feeling that “I’m just not the same... I think it does distance us emotionally in some way, so thinking about that makes me a little bit sad.”

Participant 003 describes an awareness of the question of how much of what she ‘was like’ was the result of her biological background and how much was the result of the nurture aspect of her upbringing: “I was in the same environment as my brother and sister, but there’s something about me that didn’t accept, or didn’t want to accept or always wanted a little bit more...” This awareness of differences affects the feeling of incompleteness in the previous theme, where this participant was aware that there were differences between her and her family, and she wanted to know if she was ‘like’ someone: “The temperament thing came up. I really sort of wanted to know if [by birth-mother] was like that as well. I wanted to know, ‘is she as high strung as me?’”

It is possible for some adoptees to use the lack of biological connection as a justification for why they are different. Participant 001 recalls such experiences: “It would have been out of frustration or something, ‘well I’m not like you because...’ and I can’t explain why I’m not like you. If I didn’t want to be like them I could sort of justify it to myself.” She [001] describes an awareness suddenly after meeting her birth mother, of the differences in interests from her adoptive mother while she was growing up, and states her feeling that “kids that grow up with their [natural parents] may have a lot more common interests or aptitudes or whatever.”

Participant 002 described her relationship with her mother as very tumultuous and ascribes this to the fact that “We’re very different personality wise.” This awareness of difference between herself and her family is furthered by her awareness of being treated

differently than her brother, who was not adopted, and an attribution of the differences in treatment to being adopted. The awareness of difference in treatment was validated for this participant by other members of her family, who indicated awareness that “there was a double standard” and had concern for her during her teenage years. As she grew up she describes the experience of realizing that the difference in treatment had more to do with the mother/son mother/daughter relationship than to her being adopted. As an adult with children she recounts, “I don’t think it’s an adoptive thing at all, I can tell with my own children [that] she gravitates to boys rather than girls.” While she has become aware of this during her adult life, she describes the experience of always being aware of the different ways in which she and her brother were treated, and trying to ascribe some kind of meaning to that experience.

For those participants who had similar qualities to their adopted family there is a different, more positive experience of this, the desire to look and be like someone is important for adoptees. Reflecting on her experience, participant 003 describes always having “felt really fortunate in being adopted into a family that – like, I look very similar to them.” She attributes a large part of her experience to these similarities, “I didn’t feel like I was different, I wasn’t treated differently, I didn’t look different.” Participant 006 describes his experience: “I fit in. I looked like my dad, you know, even though I wasn’t from him, obviously, and my personality was similar to them. The three of us seemed to fit...” The contrast in experience is described by this participant who had a sister who was also adopted but was very different in appearance in personality from her family. Describing his experience and hers he says, “I think -- I think that's -- that's what shaped who I am in a way. I could tell, like her skin was a little bit darker, her hair was a little

bit darker, and she knew she didn't -- well, she had the feeling she didn't fit in.” He looked like his family and even had some similar mannerisms and felt as though he belonged. His sister looked less like them and felt always somehow separate from the family. Even though both children in this family were adopted, and both treated well by their parents, he describes their experience within the family context as very different, and attributes the struggles that she had and continues to have in her life to that feeling of ‘not being like them’.

The desire to have a similar appearance to someone is important to adoptees and looking like their adopted family will be less of a reminder of their adoption. The experience of meeting their biological family and having a similar appearance fills that experience they’ve never had, of having a genetic bond and looking like someone. Upon meeting her birth mother, Participant 005 had the experience of feeling disappointment because her initial impression was of how different they were. She recalls: “Probably we didn’t look alike. Maybe I was thinking, oh, she was blond and she’s got fair skin, I don’t really look like her.”

The awareness to similarity and difference is not all about appearance; when she got to know her birth mother better participant 005 began to notice similarities: “She was very much like me. I was very much like her.” These similarities can be a mixed blessing. This adoptees experience was the sudden awareness of “some traits in her that I see reflected in myself that I didn’t really like.” When she perceives a quality in her birth mother as negativity of attitude and recounts, “I know I do that too and I hate hearing her. I hate hearing her say that, because I don’t want to be that way.” Participant 003 recalls a similar experience of being aware of a tendency towards negativity in her birth-mother

and reacting with some trepidation: “Maybe it’s in my DNA that I’m a negatively-oriented person...” When she reflects on how she felt as this was unfolding, she says “I guess [I was] really wanting to reject that part of me or be afraid that that’s my destiny.”

This awareness of similarity can be very positive as well, and come in many forms; it can even begin before meeting and observing physical and idiomatic similarities.

Participant 002 had the experience of sharing some correspondence with her birth mother, and immediately she was able to identify a similarity in writing style: “I thought ‘wow, she is similar to me. It was again sort of more exciting than anything.’” Within her family, she recalls being teased that her brother (a biological son) got the brains and she got the looks. When she finds out that her biological family is highly intelligent and successful people, she becomes ‘elated’ and happy. She describes being ‘fascinated’ to learn this, is ‘excited’, and has a “...desire to tell everyone. I guess more than anything, I was proud that I came from smart people.” She describes seeing pictures of her parents at various points in their lives she describes feeling an “instantaneous feeling of connection.” She also recalls the experience for the first time of being physically similar to someone: “She and I could be identical... we look the same and sit the same way and look very, very similar.” This awareness of similarity was important in her experience: “Just to see someone that physically resembled me for whatever reason was important.” Knowing that she had a French background, participant 001 describes wanting to be connected to that part of herself; “Belonging, I guess, or just like heritage and just, I guess, fitting in to that part of my past that I wasn’t connected to. Like making a connection with something that – was intangible otherwise.” Connecting to her French heritage was important for her, because “there was satisfaction in it too because I was

good at French. And I was good because I was French, like I was justified.” In describing her new relationship with her biological mother, like other participants in this research, she describes her experience as mixed because of a “tendency to clash a little bit.” She recognizes this as the tendency for people who are really alike to clash at times. This is different than the way in which she interacts with her adoptive mother who she describes as more calm.

While the theme of wanting to look like, or be like someone was consistent across adoptees, there was also the desire to have the experience of being biologically related to someone. Even participants in this research who had very similar qualities in looks or behaviour identified the awareness that they do not share a genetic background with anyone in their lives, and that they desire to know the experience of having a relative with whom they share DNA. Participant 005 recalls feeling this way: “... if you don’t meet any of your biological family then you have no one in your life that you’re related to by blood, like nobody. It’s kind of weird.” “It’s lonely, like a lonely feeling, of just being on your own. Like you’re it, that’s it, you’re different.” Participant 003 recalls a similar experience, “It would be neat to sort of look someone in the eye and be, like, I can see a bit of myself in you.” When she talks about this she is smiling and talks about the fact that it would be ‘cool’ simply because it’s an experience she has not had. The feelings she associates with that smile are “belonging”, “a feeling of [what might be] acceptance”, or “camaraderie.” During this conversation she is smiling and describes the sensation of her cheeks ‘going up’ into the smile, and just feeling ‘lighter’ at the thought of being genetically connected to someone.

Thoughts of being connected to someone biologically naturally come up for adoptees when they begin thinking of having a family of their own. For many adoptees, the experience of a genetic relative is one they've never had, so to have their own children holds special meaning. Participant 003 reflects on her relationship and her plans to have children: "I want to see a child that looks like me. I want to mingle the best parts of my husband and me and create something."

When participant 002 and her husband decided to have kids, they had trouble getting pregnant. She recalls thinking "what if I never meet anybody who's biologically related to me. If I don't have my own kids I may never meet anyone who's biologically related to me." "It's really important to me to have my own babies so I can see someone who is biologically related to me." When she reflects on her experience of contemplating a family, she feels that: "There was something in that I just felt like having that biological link. If I don't have my own biological child I may never, ever see anyone who I'm genetically related to." She describes feeling as though there is some kind of a 'different connection' between relatives who share a genetic background. She feels a 'need' to share a genetic background, or to "have someone who [looks] like me or [has] a personality like me or who was part of me that way." She describes the realization at this point in her life that the thought of missing out on that experience makes her feel very sad. "I started feeling sorry for myself and thinking it was really sad that I might not meet anyone who is biologically related to me."

6. **Gratitude to / Compassion for both families – There Adoptees feel as though their biological families made the right decision and that their quality of life has benefitted as a result of their adoption, though this is influenced by their experiences with their adopted family. There is also a lot of thought given to the affect their curiosities will have on the well being of both families.**

Throughout this research, though experiences with adopted-family and birth-family varied among participants, none of the participants doubted that their adoption had something to do with a decision that was based on their best interests, and they all described appreciation to their families for raising them. The experience of participant 003 was that "... being adopted wasn't a bad thing and it didn't mean that someone didn't want me and that they really wanted me..." Participant 001 reflects on her life and describes "being thankful to have those parents that were supportive, knowing that I know other people that have had bad experiences." She also identifies the support her family gave her throughout the process of meeting her birth mother, and recognizes that it may have been a difficult process for everyone. Participant 006 recalls a similar experience: "I'm really appreciative of what I was offered." This appreciation that the decision made was the best possible one is sometimes influenced by adoptees experiences once they've met their birth families or been given information around their adoptions. Participant 001 describes feeling "no resentment toward this birth mother that had given me up, I didn't really see it as a bad thing." She credits the 'very solid upbringing' and abundance of equality, fairness, and love she felt in relation to siblings that were the biological offspring of her parents, and realizes that her life could have been a very different one: "I feel really fortunate to have been in that, I mean, I could have gone anywhere. And that occurs to me too!" When going through the process of meeting birth family, she recognizes and appreciates their openness to her process. This is something that varied across people's experiences from loving support to complete detachment. In this case, she describes "feeling fortunate to have been brought up by them." At the same time, she recognized the choice made by her birth mom and appreciates the decision as

the right one, “She’s a great person, but I don’t wish that I had an 18-year-old-mom that had, you know, no direction or no stability or no job... I don’t wish that upon myself.”

Participant 006 recalls a similar realization upon meeting his birth family: “... now I can understand how fortunate I am, how lucky I am to have been brought up in such a wonderful family.”

This experience of appreciating their families for raising them is paralleled by their understanding of what the experience may have been like for their birth parents, most often their birth mothers. The participants in this research all identified the realization that it must have been difficult for their birth-parent(s) to make such a decision.

Participant 001 thinks about her own experience as a parent and reflects: “I have always thought, wow, she must be a great woman, that’s a hard thing to do. I’ve had children now. I could never give them up.”

This understanding and appreciation was described as coming at various times in life. Participant 006 describes his feeling prior to meeting his birth mother that he wanted to ask her why she gave him up. When he meets her and they spend some time together, he reflects on his process around it: “And the more I thought about why she did this, why this, why that, the more I realized that I don’t want to know why, because I’ve had an amazing life.” He describes being aware that the reasons don’t matter to him, instead, “...it was more like a relief to know that I had such a great biological mother that made the best possible choice, that gave me the best possible life...” Participant 003 describes a similar experience: “I realize that my life as an adopted person was much better than it would have been.” When she reflects on how this realization affected her, she recognizes her positive sense of self, and attributes much of it to her mother’s decision and how she

wanted her to know that even though it must have been a difficult one, it was the right choice: “I think I also felt a sense of pride too. I did feel like, you know, I’m a good person. I’m at 20 and I am a good person and I turned out well and I do have a good family and I sort of wanted her to know that, and that she made a good decision and that I don’t hold it against her. I guess I just felt some empathy for her as well.”

This desire to let birth families know how it turned out was common among adoptees in this research. As participants reflect on their birth parents making the right choice even though it must have been difficult, they also add that they would like somehow of them to know that everything worked out for the best. Participant 006 is most precise when he states, “I just wanted to let her know I was okay.” Participant 002 recalls a related experience early on that affected her perspective; she describes a friend in university who gave a child up for adoption and being with her through that process. As a result she describes realization that as a parent she would wonder what happened to her child, whether it went to a good home or not. She made the decision to contact her birth mom largely while thinking about the fact that her mother probably still remembers her on her birthday and wonders what happened to her – “I should let her know that, if anything, at least get the information out there that I’m okay, that she did the right thing.”

The desire to pass on the information about the way things turned out was pervasive, but it was also clouded by adoptees in this research wanting to maintain stability within their families. Participant 006 recalls a similar experience: “I want my parents to be happy, but I also want my biological mother to know that I turned out well and she made the right decision.” It seems that there is awareness amongst adoptees that their interest in their birth family will have an emotional effect on their family. Participant 005 recalls

thinking about seeking out her birth family, and a significant question that came up for her as she was considering this: “[D]id I even really want to know this stuff? I did, but not at the expense of hurting my family.” Within the group of adoptees in this research, the recognition that the formation of new relationships will impact already existing relationships creates was an important factor in the decision making process for everyone. Participant 001 describes her experience thinking about this issue and exploring what it might be like for her family of which she says “they are my main family and they always will be.” She is aware that everyone has their own reasons for what they want in their relationships, and for her she says of her birth-mother, “she’ll never replace my family,” and adds, “And I know some people are looking for that.” She highlights here how the experience is very powerful and how the process can be viewed in many different ways.

When participant 002 and her husband decided to have children she describes feeling “interested in finding out about the medical piece.” As she reflects during her interview, she admits that maybe she ‘couched’ it in curiosity about medical background, but discloses that at that stage there was increased curiosity in knowing more about her own birth family. This follows the pattern of curiosity increasing over time and life experience with most adoptees, and for her, embedding this curiosity into her need for medical information felt like a safer way to bring up the discussion with her family, her mom in particular. She describes feeling “a little bit trapped in the middle” not wanting to make either family sad or upset. Participant 006 echoes her sentiment in his exclamation that “I didn’t want the family to be broken up.”

The disruptions described by participants were not just about the actual meeting of the birth family, but there is also the experience of integrating family lives. Participant 001

identifies that there can be friction that happens when new relationships happen and recalls her birth mom now wanting her to come over for holidays and special occasions, “loyalty kind of issues came up a bit.” Participant 004 recalls that “we needed to have some set boundaries, because it was uncomfortable...”

7. Curiosity – There is a felt innate desire or need to know or experience more about one’s history and/or biological family. Often the curiosity waxes and wanes throughout life. When life is very busy, adoptees have less interest, but when opportunity arises, curiosity is brought into consciousness.

Of the themes developed in this research, curiosity seemed to have the feature of being the most interconnected to the others, waxing and waning both in relation to, and independently of, life events as they relate to all other themes identified in this research. Also, there was almost endless variation in content with respect to description and aetiology, and there was a trend within this theme of having fantasies about alternate lives, and how they may have unfolded if the adoptees had stayed with their birth families.

While curiosity is an experience in and of its self, it is also intrinsically related to the other themes in that the level of curiosity described by adoptees throughout life affects greatly, and is affected greatly by, the experience of the other themes. Uniqueness brings awareness that the adoptee is somehow different and may result in that person’s natural curiosity to find out more about what makes them different and why. The connectedness adoptees experience with one another, depending on the stage of life in which one finds this connection, often results in conversations about how much each they know about their background, about whether there has been a search for biological family, and why or why not. This won’t likely result in any instant decision to want to know or to find out more, but may prompt many adoptees to wonder about their histories and foster their own

natural curiosities about their background. The more their curiosity promotes contemplations about their lives, the more they may begin to feel a sense that there is still more to learn, as in the theme of incompleteness. Thinking about these things can be a catalyst for considering the interesting things, but also about possible truths that might be painful or harmful to the individual. The awareness of similarities and differences between the adoptee and the family have been described as triggering an interest in knowing more about how and why those things are the way they are. If the adoptee has met their birth family, as all participants in this study have, they also begin to immediately recognize ways in which they are similar to and different from those individuals, creating questions about how and when different parts of their own identities developed, and from where. The theme most distantly connected to curiosity would be that of gratitude to the families of the adoptee. In this case, the connection is based on the adoptees experience of the question ‘why?’ as in ‘why was I adopted?’, and ‘why did this family adopt me?’ In this research, participants all had a positive experience in pondering this question, but there was thought involved, and each time a question was answered in this respect for participants, they described having new ones to replace them.

The simple experience of curiosity, about learning more about themselves, was explicitly stated by all adoptees who gave their own reasons and descriptions of the pattern this theme took in their lives. For example, participant 005 says of her experience of being adopted in general, “What was I feeling? Curiosity, I was definitely curious.” Participant 006 gives his explanation of this same feeling by stating, “I think it’s just human curiosity, it’s a simple answer, that’s who we are.” Participant 005 reflects on her experience, she states the common question of why: “Well, I think I felt -- I had always

wondered, ‘why didn’t she keep me.’” Participant 006 echoes this with his assertion that natural human curiosity plays a significant role in wondering about one’s background, and identifies his belief that “... everybody wants to know the why.”

Life circumstances played a role not only in waxing the curiosity factor for those who identified a reason to want to know more, but also reasons to experience a waning curiosity. Participant 001 describes when she was young having “a curiosity, but not an intense one that during my elementary [years]... I didn’t think about it a lot”. She recalls being 19 years old and having never really focused on the fact that she was adopted, “I was really happy with my family, like I didn’t feel like there were big holes in my family life, so it was never because of that.” She identifies awareness that she was adopted, but because she experienced that as a good thing it never triggered her desire to know more about her history or her birth family, “It was more curiosity.” Participant 002 also describes a warm caring family, so when given the option to be given records relating to her adoption she describes feeling very “neutral” about it and, “At that point I don’t think I even thought about it that much, to be honest.”

Friction within families during development created questions as to why tension might be happening, and possible attributions to being adopted. For some, these tensions led some to create childhood fantasies about how their lives may have been different. Participant 003 describes that, “throughout my life before then I’d always has some curiosity, of the romantic sort of Orphan Annie sort.”

Of the factors that fostered curiosity in adoptees in this research, opportunity seemed to be the one that came up most persistently over the course of people’s experiences. Participant 003 recalls suddenly being old enough to get apply for her background.

Fostered now by opportunity due to age she recalls: “And so I was curious, I just sort of thought ... how cool would it be to get the records of my adoption.” She describes simply wanting to “find out more about what happened or where I came from.”

Commenting on an experience that created opportunity for him to know more about his biological family, participant 006 recalls feeling “excitement, curiosity now because, you know, the door had been opened just a little bit, where I had always left it locked and didn’t even care about looking at it.” Participant 002 remembers “snooping through [her] parents’ filing cabinet to find adoption records with her name on them.” Upon finding papers with her birth surname on them she describes “feeling kind of guilty about that, but sort of guilty excited at the same time.” Though she had not felt the compulsion to do this previously, upon learning that it was a private adoption and that her parents still had the records, she actively began searching for papers with her name on them in her parents’ filing cabinet. Even though she describes feeling guilty about looking through her parents files to find information about herself, she also describes a level of “excitement and a little bit of wonder” as she learns the surname of her birth-family for the first time. Following this experience, she stops thinking about it. She describes the feeling as almost surreal, as though it didn’t really happen - in fact, she discloses that she never told anyone ever about searching through those files and finding out her last name.

Even if there were other circumstances that created awareness, as identified in each other theme identified in this research, adoptees sometimes used those circumstances to justify or rationalized their already existing innate desire to know. Participant 001 identifies wanting to look into her biological background because, “I wonder if my son really looks like his grandpa?” While this question sounds as though it might belong

more in the theme related to awareness of similarity, the similarity is not about her, it is about her son and it is not really about similarity, but simply what he looks like: “maybe I should really look into this again, I’m kind of curious, mostly curious to see what he looks like more than anything.”

As part of natural curiosity, many adoptees have fantasies about what their lives would be like had they grown up in their birth families that influences their experiences of being adopted. One participant (003) who learned the name she was given at birth describes her experienced of having thoughts of a parallel life: “I could have had this whole other parallel life where I could have continued to be [called by her birth name].” Each participant described directly or indirectly that at some point in their lives, they pondered the question of what their alternate life would have been like: “half of me (participant 002) wonders what it would have been like to be raised by her.” Participant 001 recognizes ways in which she and her birth-mother interact now that they have met and describes the experience of pondering, “I wonder what it would have been like if we’d grown up, would we have fought a lot when I was younger, or a teen, you know, during those interesting years.” Participant 005 states very plainly about a thought she has often had: “I wondered what it would have been like had she kept me?” and participant 006 discloses a question he has contemplated at various times in his life, “which life would I have preferred?”

Fantasies and curiosities of this kind may or may not be about positive things, but at some point in life for many adoptees, all who took part in this research, there is an idea of what things may have actually been like. In this way the reunion with a birth mother or

other family member can be somewhat difficult. As one interviewee states, (003) “meeting [her birth-mother] was a little bit bittersweet and there was some disappointment in that and I think part of that was having to give up my fantasies of like, I came from this wonderful perfect family, and realizing that she was just a human being like anyone else.” Finding out this kind of information influences the natural wonder many adoptees identify about what makes them who they are; participant 002 poses the question, “I don’t know if it’s that being adopted has caused me to be this way or if it’s my personality.” Participant 001 muses about having not thought about this much, but being questioned about some of her insecurities by her husband creates questions about her adoption and who she is. She reflects on some of these questions, such as ‘do I need to find stability and security in someone’ and describes an awareness that, “It’s totally possible that I approach my relationships now in a different way because of [being adopted].”

Other findings

While the themes in this study were based on description by all participants, there were findings that were described by most as important, and significant in their impact.

Because of the age range of this population, all participants had some experience with thinking about having their own families. While the thought of having a family was part of the themes of “Incompleteness”, “Awareness, and “Curiosity”, most also described their adoption as affecting their views on adopting children of their own, or even having children at all. One family (participant 004) adopted a child, feeling like they wanted to and maybe responsible to do so because he was adopted. Another participant (003)

describes wanting to have biological children: “Adopting a child wouldn’t be enough. I want to have that experience.” She discloses her feelings of conflict about this and worries that this desire might be “devaluing the relationship that can come from adopting a child.” Participant 002 reflects on a time when she and her husband decided to have kids and having trouble getting pregnant. She recalls thinking, “what if I never meet anybody who’s biologically related to me. If I don’t have my own kids I may never meet anyone who’s biologically related to me.” Rather than feeling as though she is devaluing adoption as a choice, she describes simply feeling strongly that: “It’s really important to me to have my own babies so I can see someone who is biologically related to me.”

Another participant (005) describes a time in her life when she had abortion because she didn’t want to bring a child into the world that might have mental health issues, and would not put a child up for adoption because: “I hated that that had happened to me, I always felt abandoned and I swore I would never do that.”

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The primary goal of this research was to fill in a significant gap in current research on the adoption experience by looking at the actual lived through experience of adoptees. Research in this area tends to be directed towards statistical outcomes while overlooking the actual experience of the individuals that the data represents. While statistical outcomes are important for understanding a phenomenon, outcomes can only be truly understood in light of what has created them. By identifying the lived experience of adoptees, this research intended to create a set of themes that are likely to be shared in experience in some form by all adoptees. Creating a set of themes of this kind creates a base from which researchers and clinicians alike can examine the ongoing debate about outcomes for adoptees, and offers direction to clinical applications.

There are experiences well known to occur for adoptees at various points in their lives. Based on the idea that there is a primary trauma in adoptees in the form of an attachment break, clinical information (NAIC, 2002) identifies commonly observed developmental markers, and models of attachment identified earlier define a well documented set of external and internal physiological and behavioural responses (Field, 1996; Silin, 1996), but says nothing about what that experience is like for the individual involved. There has never been a study done that has looked at creating a set of ongoing, lived through experiences shared by the general population of adoptees. Further, the debate in the literature is not about why all adoptees are doomed to negative outcomes because this simply isn't the case. The more prudent question is about why are adoptees in some

studies are statistically more likely to have negative outcomes than those who grew up in their biological families.

Some research (Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998; van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2005) shows that adoptees actually have better outcomes than non-adoptees. Through the present study we are able to look at the outcomes for these individuals and are able to see through the lived experiences of the adoptees themselves how they relate to the themes that have been created, and gain insight into why their outcomes have been what they have been.

Not all participants in this research had the kind of adoption experience that would indicate the likelihood of positive outcomes; in fact some identified a relatively negative experience for some or much of the time. If they are well adjusted, despite a negative experience then there is evidence contrary to the adoption myth. Looking at the themes in relation to their experiences, and in light of other research, we have clues as to the why this might be. In the theme of 'Awareness', more frequent and significant observed differences between self and family were a factor that contributed to more negative descriptions of related experiences. Despite some participants having negative experiences as they relate to the theme of 'Awareness', participants described a positive overall adoption experience, and attributed their overall experience largely to their appreciation of having grown up in a warm caring environment as identified in the theme of 'Gratitude / Compassion'. This finding supports and expands on Friedlander's (2003) research identifying that context was the most important factor for well adjusted, internationally adopted children.

Clinicians in Sharma, McGue, and Benson (1998) accounted for increased YSR scores of Prosocial behaviour, Social Problems, and Withdrawn Behaviour, indicating that this may be the result of being raised by parents more inclined towards prosocial behaviour, the repayment of kindness, or the need to 'prove value'. To some extent, both the positive outcomes and the positive and negative accounts of why this might be were all identified in one way or another by participants in this research, again, under the theme of 'Gratitude / Compassion.' Explanations for this vary with some clinicians describing this phenomenon as a coping strategy rather than a psychological or developmental outcome, and while to some extent this may not be entirely incorrect, it is important to take context and related outcomes into account. Participants identified a number of experiences that could be identified this way, such as the desire to be a 'good choice' for their family, or due to 'Awareness' that they are in some way qualitatively different in looks or behaviour from their family, they must put in extra effort to fit in. For those who identified these experiences, despite having some negative associations, overall positive psychological outcomes were identified by all participants.

Studies showing that highly stressful experiences during early childhood will have long lasting potentially negative effects (Hoffman-Riem, 1986; Moursund & Erskine, 2004; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998) tend to look at experimental data that identify negative statistical outcomes such as disproportionately higher referral rates to mental health professionals, higher rates of aggressive or acting-out problems, and learning difficulties. While these results may be representative of the sample of the population from which they were taken, this study supports the conclusions of Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, & Waters, (1985), with participants indicating that what was of most

importance in their experience was confidence in the competence of their caretakers, and the feeling of a general atmosphere that was warm, consistent, caring, and contingent on their needs.

Limitations

The results of this study are intended to have high fidelity to the experience of adoptees and be universal in nature. To ensure that this was met, the interviews were analyzed by the primary researcher and informed by input and feedback by a third party. Trustworthiness of the results would have been stronger by having other parties analyze the narratives of the interviews separately from the primary researcher and comparing results to identify similarities and differences. To offset the absence of inter-rater reliability that would have been present by separate analysis and in attempt to add fidelity of the results to the experiences of participants, the audio recording of the interview as well as the raw transcription were made available to all participants at the time the themes were sent to them for feedback.

Future Research

Because this research is basic, and the themes created are intended to be broad, each individual variable not specifically looked at in this research is one that might hold clues both to the individual experience, and to identifying implications for outcomes.

Unfortunately some of the variables that would affect experiences and outcomes are very difficult to determine, and even harder to attribute meaning to. Identifying outcomes without knowing the truth of pre-existing conditions other than that the individual was

adopted does a disservice to the institution of adoption. Data supporting myths that adoption is an early childhood trauma that *will* result in attachment disorders and various other negative behavioural and psychological outcomes do not consider variables such as the age of adoption, or the treatment of the child prior to adoption. This is a critical time for children's development in terms of their ability to understand relationships on a subconscious level so any maltreatment can cause long-lasting negative associations and possibly the kinds of pathological behaviours that lead to the creation of the adoption myth. There is also the question of teratogens that may or may not be known or understood by the biological family of the child, and any information may or may not be passed on. Also, the experience of adoptees in the context of their biological or pre-placement foster families will have an impact on emotional and behavioural patterns to follow.

The range of possible outcome measures in this study was not limited and there was no need for comparison groups since the only variable is the lived experience of those who took participated. Future research could be informed by using this group as a comparison group, identifying similarities and differences with attention paid to contributing factors. The most logical next step following this study then would be to attempt to identify the generalizability of results by surveying adoptees to determine whether a statistically significant percentage of this population identifies with these themes. In this future research, examination of patterns based on demographics such as age, gender, ethnic background, age of adoption, family experience, medical and mental health history, in relation to the themes identified would shed light on the meaning of the

statistical outcomes identified in other studies and add weight to the validity and generalizability of the themes developed in this study.

Implications to Counselling

The themes identified in this study are rich in their possibilities for clinical application, and more directly for use as a tool within the family. Not only do the themes apply to adoptees, there is there possibility for applications to any individual who has the experience of growing up without biological members of his / her family since the experiences we have within our families will be varied no matter what kind of family they grow up in. These themes can be useful as a set of ideas from which anyone can gain some understanding of experiences of adopted individuals, and can aid adoptees in identifying what they may be experiencing, only by identifying our scripts can we begin to change them and move down the path towards health (Moursund & Erskine, 2004).

For parents of adoptees these themes will offer an indication of what may their child may be experiencing, even if the children themselves are unable to identify what those experiences are. Frearke et al. (2005) identify that children are often unable to communicate the emotional impact of their experiences associated with adoption since these conversations often take place initially at a time in life when an abstract concept such as this one is still too complex for the brain to comprehend. This is particularly difficult for boys whose linguistic abilities tend to develop slightly later than for girls, and who are less likely due to gender differences to channel emotions specifically through facial and verbal modes of expression. Parents then are able to use the themes identified here to help their children explore the feelings they may have and indicate to them

possible reasons as to why this might be and to help them identify and name their emotions. These themes may be useful for these very same reasons for children who are involved in mixed or otherwise changing family dynamics. Though the etiology of the feelings may be different, the basic similarity is the loss or disconnection from family resulting in a lived experience that is different from the one that would otherwise occur.

The possibilities for individual clinical work are similar to those identified within the family context; the themes identified in this study may be used by clinicians as a guide to helping adoptees (or others with non-traditional family compositions) to understand their experiences and to help with identifying the accompanying emotions. Clinically, there is also great potential for group work to be done as well.

With a set of themes in place, groups can be created to allow adoptees to support each other in a number of ways. Two themes identified in this study were ‘Uniqueness’ and ‘Connectedness’ and it is based on these two themes that group work would be especially powerful for adoptees. While trying to make sense of emotions and meanings associated with their adoption, adoptees generally have few people with whom they can speak who will have an understanding of what they might be experiencing. To create a group in which adoptees will be surrounded by others with a similar experience would give adoptees a sense of familiarity and of belonging. In a group like this, adoptees would be able to use one another as sources of information and support. The thoughts that cause anxiety or emotional pain are more likely to be welcomed and understood in a group of people who may have had the same or similar thoughts or experiences. Here they would be free to honor the reality of some of their experiences including the individual experiences related to the themes identified in this study. A sense of familiarity would

give people in groups like this a community of support and connection. There is also the possibility for people to be pro-active in preparation for experiences they have not yet had but may want to, such as re-connecting with birth families. By having a support group around who have been or are currently in various stages of such an experience, adoptees can find out about how the process works, and what peoples different experiences are like. They may feel freer to discuss their fears and insecurities with a group who has some understanding of their experiences than any other group of people. By having the set of themes created in this study, adoptees in a group context can describe their individual experiences in relation to another person's set of very different events while maintaining a sense of connection knowing that while their stories are quite different, they share a set of experiences.

My Story

My story begins a long time before this study began. As I mentioned earlier, I was given up by my birth mother at birth and placed in foster care for 4 months and then adopted by the people I now call my family. I had a happy childhood, all of my basic needs were met and I was well cared for and felt loved by my family. For all intents and purposes, I've had a good life. How my story relates to this study is that while I've had a positive experience in my life, I have known about my adoption for as far back as I can remember, and since I've known, I've had questions and feelings that I was never able to fully understand or explain. Having now conducted this study I can say that there are certain times when life would have been much easier to navigate had this information been available to me; looking back on my history, I see many experiences I had where

one or more of the themes created in this study applied to me even while conducting this study.

Growing up, I recall the feeling of being somehow ‘different’ from my friends. When I was young, almost into adulthood I recall that when I saw them with their families I wondered if their relationships with their families were the same as mine, and feeling like maybe they weren’t. I don’t recall thinking of this as better or worse, just different. I also remember thinking that there was something special about me that my family ‘chose’ me. This feeling wasn’t a phase, or momentary, it continued on throughout my life until I was old enough to understand why I was having those kinds of experiences. Even then, they didn’t really stop having this experience; I just had a better understanding of what I was feeling and was better able to put those thoughts and feelings into words. The more I was able to discuss this feeling with people I trusted, the more I realized that they really didn’t have an understanding of the feeling I was trying to describe. This sense of ‘Uniqueness’ has been pervasive and ongoing right through to the present.

While I was growing up, I didn’t have any friends who were also adopted, but I do recall occasionally hearing about somebody else who was. While there weren’t any close friendships, and whether there is truth to the feeling or not, I do recall the experience of those people and I having some sort of unspoken connection that we never talked about, just acknowledged each other even though we weren’t friends. This feeling wasn’t continuous; it came and went throughout the course of my life, resurfacing when some related event reminded me of it. The first time I remember having a close friend who was also adopted was in my early twenties, and it was at that point that I really understood what that feeling of ‘Connection’ felt like. I was finally able to talk about some of the

feelings I'd had throughout my life with someone who also described feeling the same way. I was able to ask the kinds of questions that friends in the past couldn't relate to, and describe feelings and experiences that nobody I'd talked to until that point really seemed to understand. I am still in contact with her today, however distant our relationship is and recognize it as one that allowed me to feel a kind of familiarity that I hadn't felt with a group of friends before.

I feel like I could write a treatise on each of the other themes and how I experienced them throughout my life, but having already identified how I experienced the themes of 'Uniqueness' and 'Connection' early on, and throughout life, I feel the action that most adds to this study would be to describe how I experienced the remaining themes in relation to the development of this study and my own parallel process and state immediately that the entire process relates to the theme of 'Incompleteness', not because I feel or felt incomplete in any way, but because I was excited to learn more about my story.

Upon making a decision to conduct research in this field, it was suggested to me that in order to have a true grasp on what the experience of adoptees is, that I ought to continue through the processes that adoptees face. I had thought about doing this on several other occasions in my lifetime, but for some reason the timing never quite felt right. On this occasion, for whatever reason, my 'Curiosity' piqued and I became eager to let the process unfold; shortly after beginning this study, I contacted adoption services in Regina, Saskatchewan and requested to have an adoption search done.

Two weeks later I received a package of information and papers needing to be filled out which I completed and sent back. I was informed in the package that the process

would take approximately 6 months to a year. During this time I informed my family about the process that I was about to undertake and they were very supportive. For me, this process was a little uncomfortable. While I knew that my parents and sister were aware of the research I was planning on conducting, and also that they had been very open about my background and about adoption, I still felt hesitant to want to say anything about actually searching for my biological relatives for fear of somehow hurting feelings. I was always a little confused about feeling this way since they had always spoken to me openly and encouraged me to do what I felt I needed to. At the time, I thought it had more to do with the awkwardness I felt about the conversation than about how they would react. Looking back now, it feels more like mixed up feelings about ‘Gratitude / Compassion’ for my family. I knew that no matter what they would support me, because they always have, but I felt that I didn’t want to affect them negatively. I felt compelled to downplay how it was affecting me, and to reassure them that this experience would have no bearing on my relationships with them, nor how I viewed them (i.e. mother / father). I feel like I was genuine with my family in how I framed what I was doing, but I never really identified the emotional impact it had on me. When it did come up that this was going to be an important undertaking in my life, I acknowledged the reality of this but never really talked about how it affected me.

After I spoke to my family about what I was doing, my dad informed me that he had a package of information that I had never seen before; in it were some of the legal documents associated with the process of my adoption and he offered to send it to me. I agreed and thanked him and received it in the mail a few days later. This was the first time since I was much younger, when I read a brief synopsis of my family medical

history and some personal information, that I felt anxiety about anything having to do with being adopted. Despite this awareness of my sudden ‘Vulnerability’ to what I might find out, my ‘Curiosity’ was very strong about the new information I might learn. What I did learn caught me completely by surprise; I learned my birth name. I also (re)learned that I had lived with a foster family that cared for me for four months between the period of time that I was born and the time I was placed with my adopted family, and realized that during that time, I was called by my birth name. It hadn’t occurred to me before this time that I might have ever been called by any name other than the one I currently have, and the knowledge that my name was changed brought up some very difficult identity questions for me. For the first time in a long time I felt anxious about the true nature of who I was.

Until this point in my life, while there were always questions I had, I felt very secure in who I was. Upon learning my name was changed at some point after which it had been used for a portion of my life, I began to question whether the person I am now is the same person that was called by that name. As I mentioned already, at this point I was truly ‘Vulnerable’, I became confused about whom I was in those first months. Was I the same person that I am now? Did that person cease to exist when I was renamed and began a new life with a new family? What happened to that name and that identity? They weren’t passive questions; they were on my mind almost obsessively, creating feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and discord within me about who I am. It was a strange feeling that took some time, and some therapeutic work to come to terms with. Through a form of group therapy, and with the help of some very special people, I was able to assimilate the “two parts” of me in to the person I believed myself to be. Since that time

I have had no difficulty with my identity, and a new appreciation for the feeling that a shaken identity can create. Through this process, I also became aware of why I'd been hesitant to speak with my family about searching for my biological relatives. In a way, I think I was afraid that while our roles as a family had always been stable, by adding new variable such as blood relatives, I might be changing the dynamic. Fortunately, this was not the case and my family was very supportive about the process. I am aware though, that this could have just as easily have been a very difficult experience.

After this process, my curiosity waned to some degree, though I was consistently involved in the process of working on this study, my attention moved away from my own process. Eighteen months later, not having heard anything, I contacted adoption services by phone to inquire about my file. Apparently there had been a back-log thanks to budget cuts to the ministry, and a significant increase in people wanting adoption searches done with the remittance of fees for search of biological relatives. I was assured that my case would be reviewed quickly and again my attention moved away from the search.

In January of 2009 I had a conversation with a social worker from post adoption services; she informed me that she'd had a chance to review my file, and that the registry had already had an address for biological mother. My response was again one of increased 'Curiosity'. The first thing to jump to mind was to question where she lives currently. This was quickly replaced by a sense of shock when the social worker also mentioned that I have a brother. The fact that I had a brother wasn't the surprising part given the age of my biological mother; she was seventeen when I was born. I thought and hoped that I might have some siblings from later on in her life. As it turns out, my brother is older than I by almost two years. I was then given a choice to initiate contact

with my mother or begin a search for my brother. I chose the search for the brother. I think the reason I made this decisions was that while I have always held curiosity about my origins I am also very interested in the idea that there exists someone who might look like me or might be like me ('Awareness'). I also wondered how much we might be alike given a common genetic background but completely separate developmental environments. It also occurred to me that I wasn't interested in having a negative experience with my mother and then possibly having to report that to a sibling I've only just met, though this was more an awareness than a factor in my decision.

I sent a letter tailored to give a synopsis of my life to the post-adoption registry in Regina to be passed on. It was difficult to try to describe my life and who I am in a one page letter. A few months after that I received a letter from him that was very positive. It was around this point that everything suddenly became real for me – there was actual movement towards meeting a blood relative, and the excitement set in.

I was very struck by how much our life stories seemed to parallel each other even though we'd grown up apart. I then sent a letter with pictures and contact information and an invitation to get in touch with me if and when the mood struck. In April of 2010 my brother sent me an email with pictures, some information, and an invitation stay in contact as well as to meet during an upcoming trip to BC.

During April, I also received a package of information about my adoption process, complete with dialogue between social workers, family members, and medical professionals. There was a lot of information I had never known about, and a lot of information blacked out and I wanted to know what that information was. I hadn't really

thought too much about this kind of information before, but having discovered it, I was realizing more and more how much I didn't know about my own life story.

During this period of time, with things falling into place with my brother, and more and more information coming to light for me, I contacted the post-adoption registry to let them know I would like to continue with the task of contacting my birth mother. It was a very short time later, less than a week, that I received a phone call from adoption services to let me know that my mother had been contacted. I had some apprehension as to what the news might be because the social worker was again explaining the process of this as she had many times before. She explained that when they had called her she was at work and unable to talk at that time. When she inquired as to whether it would be okay if my birth mother would accept a letter from me she responded hesitantly but positively, and indicated that she might be interested in having contact. They also informed her that I'd been in contact with my birth sibling and that he may be part of this process as well. According to the social worker, she still showed interest and I was informed that they would send her my letter and wait for a response.

There was a long pause before I received a letter from her, which she described in the letter as being the result of some anxiety and excitement about the evolution of this process. Reading the first letter was very strange, it was like reading a story that I ought to know but didn't. The only analogy I can create is the experience of being told a story that you'd been told in some distant childhood past, but have no memory of. I suppose it was the feeling that this story 'should' have been familiar because of the connection it is associated with. Had this study been completed by this point in history, I would have been able to identify it as part of the feeling of 'Incompleteness'.

Receiving the letter was an experience full of excitement, but it also had a placating effect. Another mitigating factor in my attentions was the fact that I was going to meet my brother for the first time only a few days after receiving it. Once I read it, I felt no urgency to expedite the process. To this effect, knowing that I was now to write a letter in return, my attentions turned to other areas in my life. While I considered writing the letter on many occasions, and even drafted one to be edited, it took almost 3 months to finish and send the letter to the post-adoption registry. The letter I sent contained more pictures, and identifying and contact information. Eventually she contacted me via telephone and email and we arranged a time to talk for the first time. The experience was similar to the one I had with my brother, which was a strange feeling of familiarity, and wonder at the number of similarities of style and experience. Since that time, I have met her also on a number of occasions and we have an ongoing relationship that is difficult to define.

I don't feel like this process is at an end for me; my relationships with my birth family are still developing and it's difficult to say where they will go, and I have yet to meet at least one immediate birth relative, my birth father. Similarly to the rest of the process, I don't feel any urgency to expedite this process, and while my 'Curiosity' about him and his life are elevated, I feel that the past couple of years have been rich in information about my story and I will allow myself (and my respective families) to process the events that have already happened, and continue when the time feels right. I am looking forward to completing this process, and though I didn't have the advantage of the results of a study such as this one guiding me through my process, I feel blessed to have had the support of my colleagues, friends, and family, in making it a possibility. I also hope that

this study is useful to others who have had the experience of growing up in non-traditional families.

Conclusions

It is the belief of this author that this study was successful in entering and reflecting the lived world and experiences of participants as they recollect them. I also believe that the themes created based on the narratives of participants accurately and empathically attend to the meanings of their experiences.

This research supports the idea that adoption is not necessarily a formula for traumatic loss. It does not give a definitive answer on this point, rather, it supports the assertion of some research that outcomes are based in the subjective experience of each individual, just as is the case for those that grew up in the homes of their biological families.

While the intent of the research was to focus on the lived through experience of adoptees, it feels to some degree like the focus of this research has been on reunion with family. This is mainly because not only was it a major and very impactful event for all participants in this study, but also because it has been the ongoing experience of this author throughout the study. Objectively, this is only one piece of the results of this study, and having a sample of participants who have been through the process of meeting their birth families, their experience aids in informing the development of the themes that have been created.

A question I initially expected would be of significance for adoptees was the question of “why?”. I was surprised to find that it only came up a couple of times and that it was important only in the context of other themes, such as curiosity, or incompleteness. For

one participant, prior to meeting his birth mother this was a question he identified specifically as significant, but stated that it became irrelevant because of his feelings of ‘Gratitude / Compassion’ once he’d met his birth mother.

One thing I found very strange about this experience was that while the feelings of my family members were acutely present while making decisions and acting, I considered them very little as the process was unfolding. I wondered if perhaps I had been deliberately omitting that information from my life out of concern for their feelings. The conclusion I eventually came to was that I didn’t consider them because I realized I didn’t need to. In my mind, though they are the family I was adopted into, they are my family – they have been there as long as I can remember, and will continue to be there. This experience is one I feel very fortunate to have since the experiences of those interviewed during this research were varied on this point.

I am aware that adoption can have both positive and negative effects, the magnitude of each dependent on relative circumstances. My experience for the most part has been a positive one, even with its share of difficulties. In the end, having now had the opportunity to examine the experiences of others, it still ‘feels’ right to me to say that ‘being adopted’ will play a significant role in the life experience of adoptees, perhaps not as trauma or as pathology, but may create some difficulties with natural questions such as “who am I?”, “where do I fit?”, “what do I do with my life?” which are not easy questions to begin with. What I can say with confidence is that my process would have been much easier to navigate had the themes identified in this study been made available to me throughout my life; making sense of content and context would have made a world of difference.

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Appendix 1

Consent form

The Lived Experience of Adoptee Life Story

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Principle Investigator: Kevin Lutz, B.A. (hon.), Graduate Student, University of British Columbia.

Information and Purpose:

This study is part of a graduate thesis of the principle investigator as a prerequisite for a Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology. The purpose of this study is to elicit a “story” from the perspective of the participant of what growing up with the knowledge that you are adopted is like and what effect that knowledge has.

Procedures:

Prior to the interview, participants will be asked to construct a timeline including relevant knowledge, events, and memories of their lives that they feel are connected to being adopted. During the interview, the participant will be given a guiding question then allowed to freely tell his / her story without interruption except to attend to relevant pieces of information. Following the ‘story’ some questions will be asked to attend to missed opportunities during the interview to attend to relevant information.

Risks and Benefits of Participating in the Study:

There are no known risks associated with participation in this case study. When each interview and analysis is complete, you will have full access to the results, as well as the interpretation of the information by the principal investigator.

Costs and Compensation:

There are no fees charged to participants in this research project. Expenses for analyses and reporting will be charged to the research project.

Records, Confidentiality, and Publication of Results:

You can access the results of the study by contacting the primary researcher once the research is completed (Dr. Marvin Westwood or Kevin Lutz; tel.604.xxx.xxxx or 604.xxx.xxxx).

Your participation is totally voluntary, and you have the right to refuse. Should you choose to participate in the study, you have the right to withdraw your participation and / or any information that has been collected from you at any point in the interview. Should you decide to withdraw, your decision will be honored and respected without any consequences. Under no circumstances at any time, before during, or after participation in the research will your name or identity be made known to any person other than the primary researcher. If you have any questions regarding the details of the research, you may contact Dr. Marvin Westwood or Kevin Lutz (604.xxx.xxxx or 604.xxx.xxxx).

Statement of consent:

You will receive a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

I have read all the information provided in this consent form.

- I have received answers to all of my questions.
- I have freely decided to participate in this case study.
- I understand that I am not giving up any of my legal rights.
- I consent to participate in this case study.

Participant's name (printed)

Participant's signature and date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent / Witness

Date ____/____/____

Appendix 2

Recruitment Message

The following message was sent as a general email to UBC students and posted on an internet based social networking website:

~The study is a qualitative look at the lived experience of individuals who have grown up in adoptive families with the knowledge that they were adopted. The purpose of this study is to elicit a “story”, from the perspective of the participant, a qualitative look at how that person’s life unfolds, of what growing up in an adopted family is like, and what effect that knowledge has on life events and development.

If you are an individual who was raised by an adoptive family and feel comfortable sharing your story, or know someone who might be interested in participating, please contact me at ~~xxxxxxx~~@telus.net.

The subsequent thesis will be submitted for completion of the degree of Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology at UBC. Confidentiality will be respected and no identifying information will be released.