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Alison Armstrong  
Re-Envisaging Erikson:  
Deconstructing Adoption  
Through the Case of Claire

## ABSTRACT

This theoretical study explored the social construction of adoption present within North American discourse and how this has impacted subsequent theoretical understandings of adoptee development. This was done with a particular emphasis on Eriksonian theories of adoptee development. This study utilized a cultural artifact, namely the character of Claire in Tim Kring's (2006) television show, *Heroes*. Claire's case is then used to compare current uses of Eriksonian theories of psychosocial ego development with possible, more comprehensive iterations of Erikson's theory. The impact and relevance to social work theory, research and practice are discussed.

RE-ENVISAGING ERIKSON:  
DECONSTRUCTING ADOPTION THROUGH THE CASE OF CLAIRE

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work

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2010

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If I knew now what I knew then,  
I'd back up do it all again.  
I'd take a bow, take it real slow,  
Take a ride down that yellow brick road  
- Raine Maida, "Yellow Brick Road", 2007

There are so many personal experiences that have helped me get where I am now, and for that I have many people to thank.

Firstly, thank you to those who have helped me complete this thesis. Florence, I couldn't have asked for a better thesis advisor: thanks for helping me get past Plan A and B and through to completing Plan C. I greatly appreciated our discussions and all of your feedback.

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Thank you to my Smithies who have helped me grow here. Michelle, I will never forget our "aha!" moments. Al and Joanna, thanks for loving the hermit in me.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Adoption as a means of family formation is centuries old (Grotevant, 1997; Leon, 2002). Historically, this institution has served many social purposes: to provide heirs or servants to families, to protect children from abandonment or harm, to give infertile adults the means to have children and as a solution for birthparents who are unable to rear their children (Grotevant, 1997; Leon, 2002). Cross-cultural studies suggest that this institution is widespread throughout various cultures, both historically and in contemporary society; however, the specific cultural context determines how it is constructed and understood (Leon, 2002).

Historically, this institution largely has served the interests of adults and society rather than those of the child (Leon, 2002). This seems counter-intuitive given that current adoption research insinuates the opposite, suggesting the reversal of this trend. Much of the research undertaken in contemporary North America concerns the best interests and optimal development of children who enter families through adoption.

This focus on the adopted child has expanded remarkably in quantity and breadth in recent years. Topics of interest have included the child within the adoptive family context, the development of adoptees and adoptee adjustment (Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998; Brodzinsky, Schecter & Henig, 1998; Grotevant, 1997). Moreover, identity formation within the context of adoptee development has become an increasingly studied area (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Grotevant,

1997; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Lash Esau, 2000; Hoopes, 1990). Additionally, while the development and adjustment of children was previously considered solely in terms of attachment theory, theoretical frameworks used in this research have widened to include biological frameworks, psychoanalytic frameworks, social role theory, family systems theory and the stress and coping model among others (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998; March & Miall, 2000).

### *A Broad Overview of Adoption and Erikson's Developmental Theory*

Given the increasingly diverse range of theories used to consider adoptee development and the emerging focus on adoptee identity, it is logical that theories of adoptee development based on Erikson's theory of psychodynamic ego development have become increasingly common (Brodzinsky, Smith et al. 1998; Grotevant, 1997; Hoopes, 1990). Erikson proposed an epigenetic model of biopsychosocial development in which identity (or the ego, as he defined it) develops in the context of and is greatly influenced by the individual's environment (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). Erikson also proposed that in the course of development, individuals must go through the "eight stages of man": basic trust vs. mistrust; autonomy vs. shame and doubt; initiative vs. guilt; industry vs. inferiority; identity vs. role confusion; intimacy vs. isolation; generativity vs. stagnation and finally, ego integrity vs. despair (Erikson, 1963, p. 247). Erikson proposed that the ego (or what we might now refer to as identity) develops and emerges as individuals master these stages across the lifespan. Thus, this theory of ego development considers, "identity as a sense of personal continuity and sameness,



personal integrity and social status, which occurs as a result of the interactions between the self and the environment”. (Berzoff, 2008, p.100).

Erikson’s theory considers the biological, psychological and social factors contributing to development and there is considerable writing concerning its application in the study of adoptee development. Therefore, Erikson’s theory of psychodynamic ego development will be one of two theories that are discussed in depth in this research.

Most writers who use Erikson’s theory to conceptualize adoptee development consider adoption to be an overlying factor that interacts with normal developmental processes. Thus, adoptee development is seen as a more complicated version of “average” ego development (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998; Brodzinsky, Schecter et al., 1998; Hoopes, 1990). The research concerning whether this more complicated version of development leads to less desirable outcomes for adoptees is mixed. Certain researchers suggest that adoptees are more likely to have negative characteristics such as pathological lying, a tendency to be manipulative, shallow attachments, a tendency to steal, a tendency towards truancy, and a variety of other negative characteristics (Wegar, 1995). Other researchers suggest that outcomes for adoptees are typically within the regular range for non-adopted peers, but that development may be prolonged so that adoptees reach maturity more slowly (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998; Hoopes, 1990). For the purposes of this research, these less stigmatizing theoretical viewpoints will form the main basis for analysis.

Adoptee development is positively impacted by multiple factors according to these less stigmatizing theoretical conceptions. These include openness of communication about adoption within the adoptive family; acceptance of differences

(such as race, ability and family structure) within the adoptive family; and parental acceptance of infertility. Likewise, factors that are posited to complicate adoptee development include difficulty with early object relations, difficulty in accepting differences inherent in the adoptive family and a lack of caretaking confidence on the part of adoptive parents. This analysis of implicated factors suggests that the family system assumes much of the responsibility in affecting adoptee development (Hoopes, 1990).

Most of the literature concerning adoptee development treats the family as central in shaping this development. However, some research critiques this focus (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Lash Esau, 2000; Wegar, 1995, 2000). These critiques suggest that within the literature discussing adoptee development, problems in individual and family functioning are solely ascribed to personal issues (e.g., the inability of parents to be supportive, individual differences or temperaments, psychological functioning of family members, etc). Wegar (1995, 2000) warns that when problems are assumed to be individualistic in nature, theorists risk decontextualising their subjects. Thus, while the literature hints at societal contributions to adoptee development, this facet of development has been largely overlooked in research concerning adoptee development (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Grotevant et al., 2000; Leon, 2002; Wegar, 1995). Moreover, there has been relatively little investigation into community views of adoption, with the little available research suggesting that adoption is widely considered to be inferior to biological kinship (Ambert, 2005; Miall, 1996; Wegar, 2000).

This oversight in research and theory has several implications. Despite apparent consensus that stigma against adoption may affect adoptee development, the literature concerning this stigma is lacking in several ways. No research exists concerning the ways

in which this stigma affects adoptee development, or the mechanisms by which this stigma is perpetuated (Grotevant et al., 2000). Moreover, there is a lack of self-reflexivity within adoption research because there is no consideration of the ways in which this stigma might interact with the very theories that purport to explain adoptee development. For instance, Leon (2002) suggests that adoption is widely examined through a framework of loss; however, there is little research examining whether this sense of loss is “natural” or whether they are created through contemporary social ideas and practices.

In light of these considerations, this thesis will attempt to examine the stigma surrounding adoption by considering how adoption is socially constructed within North American society. An understanding of the dominant discourses surrounding adoption enables one to examine the current theories explaining adoptee development – particularly those that utilize Erikson’s theory of psychodynamic ego development. Lastly, this research will offer a critique of these models and offer recommendations concerning future directions for the application of Erikson’s theory in understanding adoptee development. In critiquing and understanding current theories (and by extension, practices) this research will allow a space for a modified and potentially subversive discourse can occur. By starting this discourse, it will be possible to propose a new and more nuanced theory of adoptee development. By starting this discourse, it will be possible to propose a new and more nuanced theory of adoptee development.

*Erikson and Society: The Importance of Questioning the Social Construction of Adoption  
in North America*

As briefly described above, numerous theories have been used to examine adoptee development. Within this field, Erikson's theory of psychosocial ego development has emerged as an important contributor. Again, models of adoptee development to date generally have minimized or excluded an assessment of the importance of social context in their analysis. However, this trend may be readily examined and perhaps remedied. Ironically, Erikson's theory, which has already been widely used, may hold the key to developing a model that is more cognizant of societal factors in the development of adoptees. Berzoff (2008) suggests that Erikson's own sense of difference within his own family was the basis for his incredibly inclusive theory.

Contrary to Eriksonian analyses of adoptee development in the contemporary literature, which obscure the import of the social context, researchers utilizing Eriksonian perspectives in other areas find his theories so valuable because,

He brought social context into every aspect of psychological development, so that social contexts of oppression, disenfranchisement, poverty, violence, war, discrimination and natural disasters all interact with the child's developing psyche. (Berzoff, 2008, p.102).

This attention to the social context of development is highly visible in Erikson's writing, both explicitly in his explanation and implicitly in some of the culturally situated assumptions that he made about human development (1963). The culturally embedded assumptions within Erikson's writing may have caused some to discount his theories despite their strengths, which is perhaps this is why writers approach his theory in such a general way (Berzoff, 2008). In attempting to avoid some of the heteronormative, sexist

and racist assumptions in Erikson's writing, theorists inadvertently have minimized Erikson's crucial emphasis on the cultural context.

In order to understand current and potential uses of Erikson's theory, it is necessary to understand the social context in which Erikson's theory is invoked. To accomplish such an examination, this thesis will draw on the sociological theory of social construction. Social constructionism posits that our human environment, including both the social aspects and to a certain degree the physical aspects, is socially constructed (Alexander, 2003; Freud, 1999; Weinberg, 2009). This post-modern stance emphasizes that society creates much of what we take for granted as normal, as natural and as the truth (Freud, 1999). However, the resulting social constructs are naturalized so that they become taken-for-granted and invisible (Leon, 2002). This thesis will consider how adoption is socially constructed in our society with assumptions about adoption being produced within societal discourse.

In the case of adoption, many people assume that this social institution is static, and inferior to biological kinship, which is seen as "normal" (Wegar, 2000). However, this assumption is itself a social construction: "The cultural description of issues surrounding adoption has evolved. This evolution in itself well illustrates how ideas about adoption are cultural rather than a simple reflection of the 'natural'" (Emphasis in original. Ambert, 2005, p.3). Furthermore, it is rarely acknowledged that adoption as a means family formation is completely mediated by social forces in our society (March & Miall, 2000). Therefore, a more complete understanding of the ways in which adoption is socially constructed in our society will allow for a more critical examination of the theories used to explain the development of the adopted child.

Understanding the social construction of adoption is highly relevant to the social work field. The institution of adoption is highly impacted by the field of social work, as adoption is understood primarily within the rubric of the social welfare system. Therefore, the process is more socially controlled and mediated by the system than any other family form (March & Miall, 2000). As the proverbial gatekeepers for adoption in North America, it is important for social workers to have an understanding of both the social institution of adoption and how it is socially mediated. This does not seem to be the case at present for, “While society has begun to talk about adoption, particularly about postadoption issues such as search and reunion, the behavioral sciences has remained largely silent.” (Henderson, 2002, p.132). It has also been proposed that the silence of the mental health community, particularly in the form of limited research and dialogue, may perpetuate the lack of accurate and sensitive information available to the public (Zamostny, Wiley, O’Brien, Lee & Baden, 2003). The limited availability of accurate and sensitive information may in turn influence community attitudes and the social construction of adoption.

By better understanding the social construction of adoption, it may be possible to intercept this metaphorical social feedback loop, allowing the social work profession to be more self-reflexive in its research and practices. Research reflects the social norms of a given context and this in turn impacts the construction of research: “Research fails to ask the right questions and provide correct explanations... overall, the research on adoption obtains negative results that are actually caused by factors other than adoption itself” (Ambert, 2005, p.13). Therefore, research questioning the very constructs that are

often taken for granted will expand the way that research questions are conceptualized, which in turn may allow for greater self-reflexivity among researchers.

A more nuanced understanding is also beneficial for practice in two ways. Henderson (2000) comments that therapists who do not have an adequate understanding of adoption are more likely to echo stereotypical assumptions in their work with adoptees. In fact, research suggests that many therapists feel underprepared to navigate adoption issues in treatment (Zamostny et al., 2003). Zamostny et al. acknowledge that a lack of training in this area is a grave oversight as, “adoption experts argue that it is important for practitioners to understand the complexities of adoption practice as well as its psychological impact to better serve adoption triad members” (p.647). In this case, both benevolent and negative stereotypes can be experienced as invalidating for adoptees (Henderson, 2000).

#### *Methodology:*

As outlined above, this thesis will approach this area of research from an interdisciplinary perspective. Analysis will integrate both a sociological understanding of the social construction of adoption and a psychodynamic understanding of the development of adoptees. It is hoped that considering the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective will allow for a rich analysis, a wider breadth of discussion and results that are more generally applicable. These results will be accomplished as follows.

In order to gain an understanding of the contributions of psychological theories concerning adoptee development, an overview of the predominant theories in the field will be presented and then critiqued. Specifically, this thesis will focus on theories of adoptee development that are based on Erikson’s theory of psychosocial ego

development, as these currently are used in the adoption field. This discussion will also highlight Erikson's (1963) emphasis on the importance of psychosocial links in development, which illustrate the importance of maintaining the social component in our understanding of adoptee development. The research aims to discuss and address the lack of psychosocial factors included in current theories of adoptee development.

Further, to gain an understanding of the social construction of adoption, this thesis will examine a cultural artifact: the depiction of the character Claire Bennet from Tim Kring's television show *Heroes* (2006). Briefly, Kring's *Heroes* emerged as an extremely popular show in its first season, with the adoptive identity of Claire Bennet forming the basis for significant plot development. The fact that Claire is an adoptee and a young woman struggling to make sense of her identity as a hero remains a vital part of the show throughout the entire first season.

The ways in which the media portrays adoption is important. Essentially, media (including television) is a, "many voiced, open text ... Television imagery is a site of struggle where the powers that be are often forced to compete and defend what they would prefer to have taken-for-granted" (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes & Sasson, 1992, p.373). Thus, filmic texts such as television shows are interpreted and decoded by readers, which is not a passive process:

Popular culture is a site where meaning is made and not simply given or assumed: 'for a text to be popular... its messages must fit the discourses used by readers to make sense of the experiences. A popular text reassures the readers that their worldviews (discourses) are meaningful' (Grindstaff, 2008, p.209).

Therefore, a discussion of how the media (and television in particular) helps shape societal discourses and therefore society's cultural constructions will be examined.



Examining a cultural artifact depicting adoption allows for the decoding of messages about adoption that are constructed and conveyed through popular culture. This is particularly relevant considering the increasing influence of popular culture on both social and political spheres (Grindstaff, 2008). Additionally, while adoption historically has been seen as a “private transaction” (and continues to be seen in this light in many spheres), it has become far more visible in public discourse (Henderson, 2002, p.131). Given that media images are often used to construct reality, this public discourse – in the form of filmic texts – has the potential to both represent current views of adoption and to shape these views in the future (Gamson et al., 1992).

Through the analysis of theoretical perspectives and a contemporary cultural artifact, this research will demonstrate how the current social construction of adoption within the dominant societal discourse is highly ambivalent and often stigmatized. This results from the depiction of the adoptive family (adoptive parents, biological parents and adoptees alike) as abnormal and pathological. Furthermore, this social construction of adoption is both reproduced and perpetuated in the current theories of adoptee development. For this reason, it behooves social workers in the field to re-examine the use of theoretical perspectives – such as Erikson’s theory of psychosocial ego development – to engage in more self-reflexive and empowering practice with adoptees.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past twenty years, there has been an increase in theories concerning the development of adoptees. Whereas attachment theory previously was the mainstay of adoption and mental health workers, it has been acknowledged in the last two decades that attachment theory cannot possibly provide a nuanced understanding of all adoptions (March & Miall 2000). Contemporary theories concerning the development of adoptees are numerous and diverse. This chapter will provide an overview of these theories particularly those that are based on Erikson's epigenetic stage model. This will be followed by a critique of the predominant theories and an analysis of how the use of Erikson's model can be interpreted differently to provide a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of adoptee development.

#### *Predominant Theories of Adoptee Development:*

Brodzinsky, Smith and Brodzinsky (1998) outline in their text *Children's Adjustment to Adoption*, there are several broad categories of theories that pertain to adoptee adjustment. These include biological perspectives, psychodynamic theories, attachment theory, social role theory, family systems theory and the stress and coping model of adjustment. Additionally, Brodzinsky, Schechter and Henig (1998) have also developed a model of adoptee development based on Erikson's life cycle framework.

The biological perspective posits that the psychological risks that seem inherent in adoption are actually manifestations of less desirable inherited characteristics, or the effect of pre-natal exposure to negative environments, stress and substances. While theorists acknowledge the effect of environment in mediating these genes, the view that less optimal genetic material or prenatal environment has a negative effect on children's adjustment is certainly hotly contested and difficult to measure.

A psychodynamic perspective of adoptee's adjustment suggests that deep-seated conflicts on the part of both adoptive parents and adoptee can affect the defensive structure of the developing child (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998). For instance, parents who have not fully resolved their grief over infertility may have difficulty feeling entitled to the role of parent, which may in turn affect their ability to adequately set boundaries or to feel connected to the newly adopted child. Furthermore, on the part of the adoptee, unresolved grief over the loss of a parent or parents may cause confusion and difficulty resolving object loss. Unresolved grief and loss of biological parents also is theorized to create a prolongation of the "family romance" (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998, p.12). Simply put, when latency age children experience ambivalent feelings about their parent's behaviour (be it rules concerning homework, finishing your dinner or name-calling), it is developmentally normal to create a fantasy about being adopted and having a "real" set of parents waiting elsewhere. For children who actually are adopted, the concrete existence of a set of biological parents can mean that this fantasy is prolonged and reinforced. This in turn can affect whether or not the adoptee is able to fully identify with his or her adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998; Hoopes, 1990). Theorists also suggest that this lengthened family romance period extends the time needed for

adoptees to fully individuate and separate from their families, as tolerance for ambivalent feelings about parents takes longer to develop (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004).

Attachment theory concerns itself with adoptees' ability to form secure attachments to caregivers. Numerous factors impact this ability including the pre-adoption experience of the adoptee. For instance, if a child has been living in an environment where secure attachment figures are scarce or non-existent or where adults are disorganizing or neglectful, this early experience will impact the child's ability to attach to their adoptive caregivers (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998). Even for children who are adopted at very young ages, the realization that they have been relinquished (or removed from their previous homes) can impact their attachment style. Given that secure attachment predicts a child's ability to be regulated and soothed by parents, to show affection spontaneously and to value parents' approval, achieving a "goal-corrected partnership" can create a perceived sense of secure connection. This is important in helping to form a self-image of competence and worth (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998, p.13-14). Children who are more securely attached experience healthier development (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998).

Social role theory derives from the research of David Kirk (1964). In his seminal work *Shared Fate* Kirk suggests that adoptive relationships are based on the shared fate of loss that both adoptive parents and adoptees experience – loss of fertility and loss of biological parents respectively (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998; Kirk, 1964). Social role theory notes the incongruities that exist between being an adoptive parent and a "normal" biological parent and how these differences can affect adoptive parent's acceptance of their new role as parents. It is posited that the ways in which adoptive parents cope with

these inherent differences can greatly impact the family environment, for parents who are accepting of these differences are more likely to openly communicate with their adopted children about adoption (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998; Kirk, 1964). This allegedly leads to better adjustment for adoptees as the differences in the adoptive family are accepted openly. Alternately, parents who deny that differences exist in adoptive families are more likely to reject any instance that highlights these differences. This discourages discussion about adoption. The complete disavowal of difference and the silencing of communication about adoption lead to adjustment difficulties (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998; Kirk, 1964). Further research on this subject has shown that Kirk's acceptance/rejection binary is far too simplistic. Rather, it has been shown that families at either extreme, whether highly rejecting or highly attuned to adoptive family differences significantly impair adoptee adjustment (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998).

Family systems theory takes a similar approach to adoptee adjustment, acknowledging that adoption creates a new kinship structure linking two otherwise unrelated family systems. Within this new kinship structure, multiple issues may arise. The ability of the family to help the adoptee resolve these issues greatly impacts the adoptee's adjustment (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998). Specifically, the family must consider and cope with expectations about how adoption will influence family functioning, how and when communication about adoption will occur, how boundaries between the two families will be handled and how the various family members will support one another through loss (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998). As Brodzinsky and Smith et al. state, "the success with which the family is able to negotiate the potentially conflicting process of family integration (i.e., building family connections) and

differentiation (i.e., fostering appropriate separateness and individuation among family members)” is integral to healthy adoptee adjustment (p.17).

Brodzinsky’s stress and coping model of adjustment (Brodzinsky, 1993; Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998) adopts a slightly different approach to theorizing adoptee adjustment. Rather than choosing a particular mechanism that affects adjustment, the multi-dimensional stress and coping model takes into account various developmental and contextual factors. This theory assumes that, over the course of childhood, children will evaluate certain situations negatively because they evoke negative or intense emotion or because of societal, familial or personal significance. In this vein, adoption may be viewed negatively because of social stigma, the loss experienced by the adoptee and negative emotions such as shame, confusion and anger. Brodzinsky (1993) posits that when adoption is deemed stressful because of the negative emotions it evokes, children will try to utilize coping mechanisms. These mechanisms can take multiple forms but usually fall into the categories of avoidant or direct strategies (Brodzinsky, 1993; Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998). For instance, a direct coping mechanism might include approaching parents to discuss adoption, whereas an avoidant coping mechanism might consist of a child displaying internalizing behaviour. Brodzinsky (1993) theorizes (and his research corroborates this) that more direct coping mechanisms are associated with better adjustment outcomes, whereas avoidant coping mechanisms are associated with greater difficulties in adjustment (Brodzinsky, 1993; Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998a). This would suggest that children who feel able to have open communication with their parents concerning adoption are using more direct mechanisms to cope with stress associated with being adopted. This would predict better adjustment.

Brodzinsky, Smith et al. (1998) clarify that while the coping mechanism utilized depends on the child, there are numerous factors that influence this choice. For instance, ability to cope and self-esteem are mutually influential: children with higher self-esteem are more likely to utilize direct coping mechanisms, which in turn may facilitate better adjustment. Likewise, children who have low self-esteem may be more likely to utilize avoidant coping mechanisms, which can have a self-perpetuating effect (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998). Additionally, decreased social support or negative adoptive family experiences also can impact the coping mechanisms utilized by adoptees and can adversely affect their adjustment, because negative emotions are not addressed or resolved. This claim is supported by research suggesting that “children who reported higher levels of negative affect about birth parent loss also reported higher levels of depression and lower self-worth” (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998, p.20). These theories represent diverse backgrounds and provide the basis for numerous practice perspectives.

*Eriksonian Perspectives on Adoptee Development:*

In addition to the theories outlined above, several authors have theorized about adoptee development from the perspective of Erikson’s epigenetic stage model. These researchers consider adoption to form a type of overlay that interacts with typical developmental processes described by Erikson to form a unique process (Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1998; Grotevant, 1997; Hoopes, 1990).

These authors build on several characteristics unique to Erikson. Erikson’s original writing posits an epigenetic biopsychosocial model of development that presents “identity as a sense of personal continuity and sameness, personal integrity and social

status, which occurs as a result of the interactions between the self and the environment” (Berzoff, 2008, p.100). According to this model, individuals move through various stages with each stage containing a specific developmental task. As individuals progress through these stages, their identity and level of successful functioning is determined by whether or not they are able to master these developmental tasks.

For instance, children between the age of birth and 18 months must confront the task of developing basic trust or mistrust. Toddlers in early childhood must develop either a sense of autonomy or a sense of doubt. Children from ages three to six enter the play stage and develop a sense of initiative, or a sense of guilt at their desire to do things for themselves. Children between the ages of six and twelve (during what Erikson also refers to as the latency stage) build on their sense of initiative to develop either a sense of industry and competence or a sense of inferiority. In adolescence, individuals either develop a sense of identity or else suffer role confusion. Young adulthood brings the task of fostering intimacy or feeling isolation. The middle adult years present the challenge of creating a sense of generativity or else experiencing stagnation of identity. Late adulthood brings the task of living with integrity or else experiencing despair in the face of mortality (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). While this description appears to suggest that individuals either succeed or fail in mastering developmental stages, Erikson emphasized a ratio of positive and negative outcomes for these tasks, resulting in a unique set of strengths and weaknesses for each individual (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963).

Erikson’s epigenetic model has several characteristics that make it ideal for outlining the development of adoptees with several of these characteristics being



highly visible in the work of adoption researchers. For instance, Erikson's model includes the biopsychosocial aspects of development, which allows for a developmental perspective than can encompass the social and the psychodynamic impact of the unique family structure (Berzoff, 2008). Moreover, since Erikson's epigenetic model presents development as occurring in invariant, sequential and hierarchal stages, it is structured enough to analyze the interaction of this sequence with the overlay of adoption (Berzoff, 2008). This imbues theories based on Erikson's work with some explanatory and predictive power.

Brodzinsky, Schecter et al. (1998) depict the following process in their text *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*. Infant adoptees must master basic trust versus mistrust in the context of having been relinquished by their biological relatives. This may be even more complicated in cases that involve abuse or neglect because the child may have learnt to mistrust primary caregivers (Brodzinsky, Schecter et al, 1998), in contrast to the infant who learns that his or her caregiver can be relied on to provide nurturance and care (Erikson, 1963).

Brodzinsky, Smith et al. (1998) combine children in the early childhood and play stages into one category – ages one to five – and note that these adoptees are in the process of developing language. This marks the initiation of the development of an adoption narrative. As suggested by Erikson, children at this age define their identity in relation to their social surrounding, which explains why children at this point mostly parrot the narrative defined for them by parents and other caregivers (Berzoff, 2008; Brodzinsky, Schecter et al., 1998). Parents' response to children's initiative in asking

questions about their adoption may also help determine whether children feel guilt about discussing their adoption (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al, 1998).

In middle childhood, which corresponds to Erikson's school age or latency stage, children confront the task of developing a sense of industry or inferiority. This is also the period during which a sense of selfhood starts to develop. As outlined by Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998), when children reach school age or middle childhood their social, cognitive and expressive skills continue to develop. This allows for the creation of a more nuanced personal or adoption narrative (Berzoff, 2008; Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

Usually, this self is defined in terms of concrete variables because abstract thought has not yet developed. For example, it is during this period that racial awareness begins to emerge. An adoptee's developing sense of racial identity can have implications for the narrative of families that adopt a child of a different race (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al, 1998). Additionally, since this is the stage during which logic starts to develop, adoptees must integrate the significance of their relinquishment into their self-concept (Berzoff, 2008; Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). In practical terms, this means that the child may be confused as he or she starts to grasp the full implications of being adopted. The child may realize that he or she must have been given up in order to have been adopted. A child in this stage also may start grieving for the family he or she has lost (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al, 1998).

Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998) continue with an explanation of the ways in which adoption affects the development of stable sense of identity during adolescence. Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. and other theorists (Grotevant, 1997; Hoopes, 1990) suggest

that this process may be more complicated for adoptees. Adolescents start to individuate and recognize their own unique characteristics as a normal part of development; however, adoptees may feel these differences more acutely and face the additional task of integrating their adoption into their identity. In particular, as appearance becomes more salient in adolescence, adoptees may become more aware of how they do or do not look like their adoptive families. This is particularly true for transracial adoptees.

Furthermore, normal physical changes that occur in puberty may hold more surprises for adoptees such as the onset of menarche for girls. For example, while adolescent girls in biological families may be able to anticipate when they will begin menarche or what their adult body may look like through information from their mothers, adopted adolescent girls may not have access to this type of information. On a related note, the entry into puberty presents another challenge that may be particularly salient for adolescent adoptees: the development of sexuality and sexual identity. Because illegitimacy and sexuality are so closely tied ideologically in our society, adoptees may inherit the implicit message that sexuality is “bad” and be worried that they have inherited “bad” sexuality (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998, p.110). For this reason, adolescent adoptees may internalize this sense of “badness” or fear being “bad”.

Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998) also suggest that the tension between family integration and separation can make identity formation particularly difficult for adoptees. For many adoptive families, family integration is a necessary component of family formation. While biological families may take for granted a sense of family connection because of the privilege given to biological families, a sense of family connection is not necessarily taken-for-granted in families where there is no biological tie. For this reason,

the process of separation/individuation can be particularly threatening for families that have put so much effort into establishing a sense of connection. Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. suggest that this may be exacerbated when adoptive parents do not feel entirely entitled to their role as parents. As a result of the complications that adoption creates, Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. suggest that identity development for adoptees may continue well into young adulthood.

Hoopes (1990) echoes the sentiments of Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998), combining a psychodynamic description of childhood development with an Eriksonian perspective to suggest that issues lingering from previous developmental stages complicate adoptees' identity development. These issues include problems with early object relations (during the basic trust versus mistrust stage), resolution of the Oedipal complex (during the play stage), an extended family romance fantasy (during the initiative versus inferiority stage) and genealogical bewilderment (during adolescence) (Hoopes, 1990).

Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998) continue by outlining the developmental processes and identity formation that occurs during young adulthood, with a particular emphasis on the development of healthy (or unhealthy) intimacy. At this stage, one's attachment styles during childhood can greatly affect how one is able to develop intimacy. For adoptees that had particular difficulty developing a secure attachment to their adoptive caretakers (whether due to abuse, neglect, or other reasons) intimacy and trust can be major hurdles (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Likewise this ability to create and sustain intimacy is related to the development of ego boundaries that are

strong enough to be suspended temporarily for the purpose of connecting to others, allowing for mutuality without the loss of personal identity (Berzoff, 2008).

Moreover, young adulthood is also a time when career development and employment may become very important. These developmental tasks can lead to internal or external conflict for adoptees if they have markedly different skills, capacities and interests than their adoptive family. In particular, adoptees may have difficulty navigating the integration of the expectations and desires of their family with their own desires and potential. This can also trigger old conflicts concerning feelings of being different than one's own family.

When adoptees become parents (either during young adulthood or middle adulthood), this can also have a great impact on their identity formation or maintenance. This experience can be extremely triggering and evocative, as an adoptee's child may be the first biological relative that an adoptee has ever met. Additionally, adoptees may have concerns when they have no genetic information or history to pass on. Adoptees may also be cognizant of the desire to react to pregnancy and parenthood differently than their biological parents, in essence mastering the task of generativity versus stagnation in a different manner than their biological parents (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

In midlife, the primary task is to construct a legacy for oneself. This may be accomplished through the creation of a family, but can also include the continued development of a coherent personal narrative or other contributions to one's community (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). One source of difficulty for adoptees may be the absence of a genetic or cultural background to pass on to children and grandchildren.

Alternately, this may be a stage where adoptees are able to achieve a sense of peace and acceptance towards their adoption (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

The major tasks that adoptees can expect during late adulthood include those that face all people: the aging process and coming to terms with mortality. This includes the navigation of retirement, physical decline and feeling the imminence of death. In the process of mastering integrity or despair, adoptees have a final chance to find out information about their background while constructing a life review (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Hoopes (1990) outlines what successful mastery of these stages in an adoptee's life offers: "a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of psychosocial knowing where one is going, and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count" (p.145). An Eriksonian perspective aids in understanding both the barriers and strengths that accompany adoptee development.

#### *A Critique: A Gap in Considerations.*

In spite of the comprehensive coverage of theories of adoptee development, from an Eriksonian perspective or otherwise, there are still ways in which these theories are lacking. The main critique of these theories is that they are individualistic in nature (Leon, 2002; Wegar, 1995). In other words, these theories largely consider the more personal or private aspects of adoption, failing to integrate the social context of adoptee development. Despite the fact that "the definitions of others, formed through social interaction, play an important role in the development of identity", theories that consider societal norms and attitudes are scarce (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Lash Esau, 2000, p.384). In contrast, the theories mentioned above that *do* offer a more balanced approach

between the personal aspects of development and the influence of societal norms, such as Kirk's social role theory (1964), have been largely overlooked in more contemporary research and theorization (Wegar, 2000). Ironically, while Erikson's original writings stress the importance of the societal context in shaping individual development, subsequent theoretical expansions based on his ideas have overlooked this emphasis on viewing the individual in culturally specific social contexts (Erikson, 1963).

As an example, consider the role of the family in these theories of development. All of the theories mentioned above stress the importance of the family environment: the importance of having secure attachment figures, of parents able to help children integrate multiple family systems, of parents who are able to feel entitled to parent (and by extension parents who have come to terms with their infertility), and the importance of parents who can help an adoptee develop adaptive coping strategies, to name a few (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998). While all of these factors undoubtedly are important to a child's development, and while they are environmental factors in a sense, they all rest on the individual abilities or psychological health of the parent. There is no consideration of the larger context in which the child, parent and family system fit (Wegar, 2000).

All of this begs the question of why it might matter that all of our means of understanding adoption are individualistic in their scope? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to briefly discuss what has been left out of these theories – the societal context. In particular, it becomes important to understand how adoption has been socially constructed in our common understanding. As Miall (1996) notes, any given issue or problem in society has a given social definition. In other words, the way in which

people define their world determines what is defined as normal and what is defined as abnormal or problematic.

Certain families – those that are nuclear, heterosexual and biologically created – are typically defined as normal or real, despite numerous ways in which this does not reflect reality (Wegar, 2000). This is reinforced by our society’s current focus or obsession with genes, genetics and blood ties: the “normal” family is the “molecular family” (Wegar, 2000, p.363). In this way, the notion of a having a traceable genealogy has somehow given biological family the appearance of legitimacy and primacy in our society. In contrast, families that are formed outside of ‘natural’ biological extensions are deemed implicitly inferior in quality. Specifically, adoptive families are often defined as abnormal or pathological: “The adoptive family has been socially constructed as deviant, stigmatized and ‘burdened’” (Wegar, 2000, p.363). Wegar (2000) argues that this social construction of adoption is doubly stigmatized even because adoption is associated with both infertility *and* illegitimacy.

Research conducted concerning societal views of adoption supports Wegar’s (2000) assertion, suggesting that society has ambivalent views of adoption. Adoption is seen as performing a valuable social function, however it is also seen as a second-best or inferior means of forming a family (Miall, 1996; Wegar, 2000). In research conducted by Miall (1996) concerning the social construction of adoption it was shown that people’s views of adoption are complex and integrate values and beliefs related to multiple aspects of identity such as masculinity, femininity, kinship, and biology. Miall (1996) reports several prominent explicit attitudes about adoptive families: that adopted children do not belong to their families the way biological children do; that a genetic tie is necessary for



bonding and love; that adopted children are second rate because of unknown genetics; and that adoptive mothers are inferior because they do not have a nine month waiting period. Adoptive motherhood is seen as particularly discrediting because of the “dominant societal belief that adoptive motherhood is inferior” (Wegar, 1995, p.545).

Since the social construction of adoption seems to be so negative, or ambivalent at best, it is a significant oversight to exclude a consideration of stigma in theories of adoptee development. This oversight on the part of mental health professionals is complex because it is both a manifestation of the stigma against adoption and a way in which stigma is perpetuated. The stigma against adoption is further manifested in a professional discourse that includes multiple assumptions: concerning the primacy of loss in adoption; the pathology of the adoptive family form; and the individual etiology of pathology (Grotevant et al., 2000; Leon, 2002; Miall, 1996; Wegar, 1995, 2000). Understanding the societal context in which adoptee development occurs includes examining the underlying ideas implicitly embedded in the larger society’s discourse about adoption.

An example of the stigmatization of adoption is the consistent examination of adoption through the lens of loss:

Adoption as factual rejection and abandonment is predicated on the demeaned status prescribed to child relinquishment, based on the belief in maternal instinct (i.e., there must be something wrong with a mother who ‘rejects’ a child or a child who is so ‘rejected’) (Leon, 2002, p.657).

Thus, the assumption that adoption is a process of loss is based on deeper beliefs concerning femininity and the biological primacy of maternal instinct. Sadly, even writers who are relatively informed about adoption often make taken-for-granted

assertions concerning loss in adoption. Consider for instance, March and Miall's (2000) closing comment: after critiquing the cultural bias towards the primacy of blood ties, the writers encourage mental health professionals to be aware of their attitudes towards adoption because "adoption, in many if not most cases, arises out of loss which, like most tragedies, holds 'the potential for transformation and rebirth'" (March & Miall, 2000, p.395). Thus, the ambivalent tension between the adoptive family as a tragedy, and the adoptive family as proverbial phoenix, mirrors the ambivalent sentiments of the wider society.

Another element of the professional discourse concerning adoption involves the definition of the adoptive family as pathological. This discourse is manifested most basically through the involvement of the social service sector in the adoption process. The adoptive family still is understood within the rubric of the social welfare system, as a family in need of rehabilitation and social reform: "From this perspective, our involvement with adoptive families has tended to inadvertently stigmatize them as a problematic family form in need of specialized intervention." (March & Miall, 2000, p.359). The process of adoption is more socially controlled and mediated than any other family form, and as such, is defined as pathological in comparison to family forms that do not require the intervention of social authorities (March & Miall, 2000). To add to the impact on families, agency messages about adoption may contain implicit or explicit contradictions: adoption workers may emphasize the social nature of emotional attachment and bonding, but also warn about the danger of potential genetic time bombs (Wegar, 2000).

One final, but incredibly important, aspect of the professional discourse surrounding adoption are the very theories used to understand adoption. As demonstrated above, most theories concerning adoptee development focus on individual pathology and exclude the influences of cultural norms and assumptions regarding infertility, kinship, gender norms, blood relations, etc. (Wegar, 1995). Since these theories do not address these contextual factors, the resulting research does not measure or consider these factors either. Moreover, since most of the research is focused on possible negative outcomes, this may lead to the impression that only negative outcomes exist (Wegar, 1995; March & Miall, 2000). It is also interesting to note that there is very little research on adult adoptees. Wegar (2000) suggests that, “this trend might reflect the implicit assumption that adoptees are and remain children” (p.364). If this assertion is even partially accurate, this trend represents a serious deficit in the field’s understanding of adoption. It would be difficult, to say the least, to approach working with adoptees from a strengths based perspective if one took for granted that an adoptee would probably never attain developmental maturity. Alternately, there may other assumptions that implicitly impact the development of research, such as an assumption that once childhood developmental tasks are attained, adult adoptee identity becomes synonymous with “normal” adult identity.

The discourse discussed above represents a double process at work in this context: since the theories being researched are individualistic, any problems are attributed to personal factors, and this is rarely questioned because there is no research to provide alternate contextual explanations. In essence, research may perpetuate a misattribution error where “adoption becomes a catch-all for problems that might have been regarded

differently in biologically based families (e.g., adolescent angst, or poor communication amongst family members).” (Miall, 1996, p.14). Meanwhile, the lack of research concerning stigma against adoption means that the effect of stigma on development is never considered as an alternate explanation. This creates a false dichotomy between the “private troubles and public issues” relevant to our understanding of adoption; unfortunately the “public” aspect of adoptee development is often rendered invisible (Wegar, 2000, p.364).

As proposed above, the professional discourse concerning adoption has become both a manifestation of stigma and a perpetuating factor:

By decontextualizing their subjects’ experiences and behaviour, the narrow focus of the psychopathological model may have led researchers unwittingly to characterize adoptive kinship as intrinsically different, defective and pathogenic. (Wegar, 1995, p.541).

Whether experienced in the context of wider society or in a therapist’s office, this stigma can have a profound affect on adoptees for, “selves are always formed in social interaction [and] young adoptees are vulnerable to feeling ‘different’ or ‘bad’ due to the comments and actions of others” (Wegar, 1995, p.546). Stigma, in this case, is not limited to a theoretical discussion but has real consequences for adoptees.

*“Re”-Interpreting Erikson: Going Back to the Original Work.*

Despite the prevalence of theories that focus on individualistic factors in adoptee development, there are a few researchers and writers who have attempted to provide a more holistic view of adoptee development. These authors have called for further research concerning the social construction of adoption and the impact of stigma on

adoptee development; however, none of these authors have explicitly outlined how other researchers might go about this (Grotevant et al., 2000; Leon, 2002).

The writing of Grotevant et al. (2000) provides an excellent example of this alternative. The authors note that, “identities exist only in societies, which define and organize them. Thus, the search for identity includes the question of what is the proper relationship of the individual to society as a whole” (Grotevant et al., 2000, p.379). Grotevant et al. (2000) propose that there are three factors involved in the creation and maintenance of a stable sense of identity: “an intrapsychic component, a component involving relationships with the family, and a component involving the social world beyond the family” (p.381). Grotevant recognizes that the latter factor has been widely overlooked in the research concerning adoption.

Based on this analysis, however, it is possible to envision a different and more comprehensive way of conceptualizing adoptee development. Ironically, this might involve not a new theory, but a more faithful interpretation of an already widely referenced theory: Erikson’s epigenetic model of development. By remaining faithful to Erikson’s original theories, it would be possible to envisage adoptee development as Grotevant et al. (2000) propose: involving the intrapsychic, the family context and the societal.

The importance of understanding society’s construction of adoption when considering adoptee development is paramount because, as Wegar (1995) outlines (quoting Goffman),

The stigmatized person learns and incorporates through socialization ‘the standpoint of the normal, acquiring thereby the identity beliefs of the wider society and a general idea of what it would be like to possess a particular stigma’. Similarly, emotions cannot be understood apart from the social relations, forms of speech and frameworks of meanings within which they are experienced and communicated.” (p.546).

This makes Erikson’s theory of development so valuable for it enables an understanding of development that incorporates social processes, including stigma. While Erikson’s theories are sometimes criticized for being, ironically, too culturally situated in their explanation of gender, race and sexuality, they hold potential if judiciously used (Berzoff, 2008).

Further, while current perspectives on adoptee development from an Eriksonian perspective might not suggest it, Erikson’s original writings emphasize the importance of the societal context throughout the span of the individual’s life (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). Erikson proposes that the relationship between the development of the individual and society “is twofold: man brings to these institutions the remnants of his infantile mentalist and his youthful fervor, and he receives from them – as long as they manage to maintain their actuality – a reinforcement of his infantile gain” (Erikson, 1963, p.250). Essentially, individuals are rewarded with the benefits of society and social acceptance when they strive to fit into what society deems to be “normal” and acceptable, or they suffer social consequences when they deviate from what is considered “normal”. From this standpoint, stigma might affect development because it alters an individual’s ability to develop in a “normal” way, with resulting social consequences. For instance, if an adoptee internalizes the stigma against adoption, they may alter their presentation of self to be perceived as “normal”, thereby devaluing their own inherent characteristics.

Furthermore, the conscious or unconscious choice to present a genuine or false identity to fit in with the larger social context also creates internal conflict (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

This emphasis on the impact of social norms on development is evident in Erikson's writing concerning the eight stages of man. In each stage, Erikson notes a way in which social norms are crucial. In infancy, while infants are developing a sense of basic trust or mistrust, Erikson notes that parents' task is to create a sense of meaning for their children by demonstrating that tolerating the difficulties of life (such as the temporary discomforts experienced by all infants) has meaning. Parents provide meaning for infants by helping them to accept and interpret what is normal (Erikson, 1963). Presumably parents are imparting a sense of meaning that has been interpreted and formed within the social context for what is acceptable and normal is socially defined.

During early childhood, children develop a sense of autonomy or a sense of shame and doubt: "from a sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem comes a lasting sense of good will and pride; from a sense of loss of self-control and foreign over-control comes a lasting propensity for doubt and shame" (Erikson, 1963, p.254). The definition of how much self-control, autonomy and external control is acceptable is noted to be contingent on the social context (Erikson, 1963).

During the play stage, children develop a sense of initiative and guilt. During this stage, Erikson proposes that children develop a split between child-like and parent-like ways of being. Part of the development of this parent-like way of being involves the internalization of social mores and morals (Erikson, 1963). This task further supports the assertion that development is contingent on societal influences, because the content of

social proscriptions and prescriptions internalized during this stage (concerning behaviour, identity, etc) will further impact later stages, including identity development.

When children reach school age, they are increasingly recognized for their attempts at being productive. What is deemed productive is socially defined and influences whether children develop a sense of industry – being competent and potentially productive members of society – or of being inferior: “it is at this point that the wider society becomes significant in its ways of admitting the child to an understanding of meaningful roles in its technology and economy” (Erikson, 1963, p.260). This stage is also important because it is the stage at which children start to work and produce with other children, a process which develops their ability to work within a group or social structure (Erikson, 1963). Erikson (1963) notes that development may be compromised at this stage if stigmatized parts of an individual’s identity (based on concrete variables at this point in development) impact whether others see the individual as potentially competent and productive. Thus, a stigmatized component of a child’s identity (as determined by societal norms) might also impact their ability to work with their peers.

In adolescence, the “sameness and continuity” that was taken for granted earlier in an individual’s life is thrown into question as puberty causes physical and emotional changes (Erikson, 1963, p.261). Individuals at this age are concerned with others’ perceptions and must integrate all of their developmental gains in the context of these perceptions. This process is not merely mediated by interpersonal expectations. Rather, the ability to develop a stable and coherent sense of identity comes from the integration of the libidinal drives, an individual’s aptitudes and strengths, and “the opportunities



offered in social roles” (Erikson, 1963, p.261). Thus, the task of creating an identity in the face of role confusion is contingent on the roles that are socially constructed as viable. Adolescent minds are highly ideological; as they engage in a search for social values that feel relevant, their behaviour is influenced by social mores and norms perhaps even those present within a counterculture (Erikson, 1963). Erikson (1963) suggests that

The sense of ego identity, then, is the accrued confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others, as evidenced by the tangible promise of a “career” (p.261).

The promise of a socially accepted role, or “career” provides a concrete means of fitting into society in a way that will be rewarded.

This search for social inclusion and integration continues in young adulthood. In this stage, all of the previous developmental efforts culminate in the development of healthy intimacy or social isolation. Again, societal norms and mores dictate what is considered healthy intimacy – Erikson’s heteronormative and sexist assertions concerning intimacy demonstrate this point all too well. Perhaps demonstrating a case in point, Erikson notes that prejudices during this stage reflect the effort of the individual to feel secure in their identity by differentiating between me and mine and the other (Erikson, 1963). Erikson (1963) also suggests that the successful navigation of this stage allows the individual to prepare for generativity as an adult – a process that is heavily socially mediated since what is considered “generative” is highly socially defined.

During adulthood, individuals attain a sense of generativity by giving to the next generation and their community. Erikson emphasizes that having children does not constitute generativity in and of itself, but notes that, “As to the institutions which

safeguard and reinforce generativity, one can only say that all institutions codify the ethics of generative succession” (Erikson, 1963, p.267). As per the general theme, Erikson suggests that the social construction of “normal” helps determine whether an individual is considered to have achieved generativity.

Finally, an individual’s development in old age is also socially situated. The developmental task at this stage of life is to form an acceptance of one’s life course in its context within human history and to feel that one has integrity within one’s society (Erikson, 1963). Much like all of the stages discussed above, this stage is highly mediated by cultural conceptions: “each cultural entity, to develop a particular style of integrity suggested by its historical place, utilizes a particular combination of these conflicts, along with specific provocations and prohibitions of infantile sexuality” (Erikson, 1963, p.269). Successful culmination of the task of ego integrity (instead of despair) is predicated on the completion of the first seven culturally mediated stages. Moreover, as the quotation suggests, societal processes mediate even our instinctual drives within these stages. Furthermore, in order to gain social acceptance and have an ego identity that retains integrity, the individual must be able to interpret and follow the “image bearers” of religion, politics, economy, technology, the arts and the sciences (Erikson, 1963, p.269). Therefore, the individual’s ego development is inherently contingent on their ability to adapt to the social environment.

From these descriptions, it is clear that Erikson’s epigenetic model views the social context as critically important to the development of the individual. Additionally, while Erikson (1963) sees society as rewarding progression through these stages, he emphasizes that there is no one “normal” picture of development, because healthy

development consists of a balance between positive and negative outcomes at each stage. If this ratio of positive and negative outcomes is achieved, this signifies that an individual has found a balance between all of the conflicting forces acting on one's identity without distortion of their personality. In discouraging the creation of one definition of normal, and in placing such significance on the social context of development (along side the individual aspects), Erikson gives a model that allows for the examination of adoptee development without inadvertent stigmatization. In this sense, Erikson's theory allows for what Leon (2002) refers to as the reconstruction of adoption. By developing a current theory of adoptee development that takes into account the social construction of adoption, it may be possible to change this stigmatized cultural definition of adoption.

CHAPTER III  
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, *HEROES* AND ADOPTION

The social construction of adoption results in several implications. First and foremost, it demands that we contextualize our theories and understanding of adoptee development. In particular, understanding adoption as a social construct that carries great stigma for the adoptee and adoptive families is imperative to understanding adoptee identity formation. On the effects of stigma, Goffman writes:

The stigmatized person learns and incorporates through socialization ‘the standpoint of the normal, acquiring thereby the identity beliefs of the wider society and a general idea of what it would be like to possess a particular stigma’. Similarly, emotions cannot be understood apart from the social relations, forms of speech and frameworks of meanings within which they are experienced and communicated (As quoted in Weegar, 1995, p.546).

Moreover, since research has suggested that societal attitudes towards adoption are ambivalent at best, an understanding of the wider social construction of adoption will allow for a better understanding of the social support (or lack thereof) available in individual community systems (Miall, 1996).

In order to develop such an understanding, this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will provide an overview of social constructionism and analyze the relationship between the media and the social construction of meaning. The second section will be an analysis of the depiction of adoption in Kring’s (2006) *Heroes*. The storyline surrounding Claire’s character will be used to explicate how adoption is constructed in the dominant discourse in the media. This theoretical perspective will then

be applied to adoption in the media. Finally, the third section will examine the implications for adoptees and adoptive families when the dominant narrative in society surrounding adoption has been thus constructed.

### *Social Constructionism*

Social constructionism is a post-modern sociological theoretical framework positing that our social and, to an extent, our physical environment are “the product of a specific sociohistorical or social interactional processes” (Freud, 1999; Weinberg, 2009, p.283). Accordingly, social constructs include paradigms of understanding, societal values and even our conception of normality. This conception is both subjective because it is a construct and powerful because it has been deemed reality by society (Freud, 1999; Weinberg, 2009). This impacts enormously the structure and function of society as, “Socially constructed subjectivity forms the will of collectivities; shapes the rules of organizations; defines the moral substance of law; and provides the meaning and motivation for technologies, economies, and military machines” (Alexander, 2003, p.5). This notion that even our most basic understanding of the world is a construction – a reality produced through mutual agreement – may initially seem difficult to accept. Social constructionists posit that this difficulty contributes to the how social constructs are rendered invisible and taken-for-granted in every day social interactions (Freud, 1999; Weinberg, 2009). For instance, as Alexander (2003) explains, people draw on unconscious feelings, beliefs or rhetoric about what constitutes normal thought or behaviour in their thoughts and behaviours. These assumptions become a cultural

structure in and of themselves and are rendered “normal”, natural and invisible (Alexander, 2003; Freud, 1999).

Many of these cultural structures intertwine with power structures and hierarchies, with the paradigms that we use to understand our world being created and maintained by those holding a social interest in them. Freud (1999) argues that

Normality is a value-based concept; that it heavily depends on the sociopolitical economic context including the historical moment; that it is culture specific; and that there is no normality outside a particular context (p.333).

These paradigms help to maintain the power of those who are already in power. Thus, those social actors with the most power often define what constitutes normality or social problems. These claimsmakers define social constructions in a way that perpetuates and safeguards their existing power (Miall, 1996). This is referred to as hegemony – a complicated process whereby the dominant discourse (or social definitions) intertwines with and regulates the competing social definitions offered by those with less power (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson, 1992).

Alexander (2003) argues that the societal rhetoric or taken-for-granted assumptions present within the hegemonic discourse form a cultural narrative. This cultural narrative constitutes an essential component of society as social constructions serve as a type of hermeneutic device that helps individuals make sense of a complicated environment. However, these social constructions are not fixed and inevitable, but rather are constantly in flux. Moreover, social structures and social constructions are not compulsory; they gain their power through the meaning that we assign to them. These meanings are socially produced and then rendered invisible (Alexander, 2003).

Furthermore, individuals imbue social constructions with power by failing to question them (Weinberg, 2009). In questioning what is taken for granted, one may subvert the dominant discourses, definitions and social constructions.

The social construction of adoption serves as a good example of this process for ideas about adoption are not “natural” but rather are culturally created and constantly evolving (Ambert, 2005). Leon (2002) suggests that the social construction of adoption is tied closely to our societal definitions of what constitutes a “normal” or socially acceptable family. If one deconstructs social definitions of the biology of parenthood and kinship, one can examine how the adoptive family is constructed as deviant and abnormal in comparison with the natural (read: normal) biological family (Leon, 2002).

There are multiple ways in which dominant discourses perpetuate dominant social constructions. In our society, the media has become increasingly influential in the maintenance of dominant discourse. In an analysis of the cultural symbolism of television commercials, Coltrane & Adams (1997) argue that television images are cultural symbols that have the power to perpetuate family and gender stereotypes. Grindstaff (2008) supports this idea in her assertion that the media “produces (and proscribes) social representations and ideas about the world, particularly as they relate to identity formation” (p.210). Given that representations of adoption have become increasingly frequent in the media, an examination of the role that the media plays in regulating societal discourse becomes essential to our understanding of the social construction of adoption (Ambert, 2005; Pertman, 2006; Wegar, 2000).

*The Media: The Creation/Reiteration of Meaning*

While “the media” refers to a wide range of informational and communication forms, for the purpose of this analysis, this broad category will be narrowed to focus on television as a media format. With 98% of American households owning at least one television set it is impossible to deny television’s large audience. While it is unrealistic to suggest that television entirely determines the opinions of its viewers, it does influence their cultural understandings and provides a backdrop for meaning making in industrial societies (Coltrane & Adams, 1997). Furthermore, as a form of popular culture, television’s influence may be increasing even more, as popular culture’s significance in the social and political spheres is increasing in general (Grindstaff, 2008).

To understand the ways in which television images shape our views, television must be discussed from multiple perspectives. Television can be examined as a form of popular culture as well as from the perspective of media framing. Media framing refers to the tendency for television narratives to alter how information is interpreted, which contributes to the social construction of reality (Gamson et al., 1992). Therefore, television can also be viewed as a creator of discourse and therefore as a potential site of subversion of the dominant discourse. All of these perspectives complement each other to demonstrate how media portrayals are representative of the social constructions present within society.

To start, it is important to define popular culture for the purposes of this discussion. Grindstaff (2008) suggests that the term popular culture historically has had several popular or academic definitions. Primarily, popular culture has been constructed as a product that is made for the people, made by the people and in favour for the people.



This suggests that popular culture represents the tastes of the average citizen. However, popular culture has also been constructed as a contrasting with high culture, being both beneath the elite class and a means of controlling the lower classes (Grindstaff, 2008). Particularly in contemporary society, popular culture has been constructed as an important arena for shaping identity formation by privileging the hegemonic discourse that determines and defines what is “normal” (Grindstaff, 2008).

However, Grindstaff (2008) stresses that one’s definition of popular culture is less important than understanding how it functions. Popular culture, far from being static, is a fluid medium where meaning making is interactional:

Popular culture is a site where meaning is made and not simply given or assumed: “for a text to be popular... Its messages must fit the discourse used by readers to make sense of their experiences.” A popular text reassures the readers that their worldviews (discourses) are meaningful (Grindstaff, 2008, p.209).

In order for popular culture to be used as a means of control, it must appeal to and affirm the views of masses enough so as to be pleasurable. Meaning is constructed in this tension between pleasure and control.

Media images commonly are used to construct our sense of reality. This occurs through the consumption of popular culture, in this case television, and through subsequent meaning-making endeavors (Gamson et al., 1992; Grindstaff, 2008). Supporting claims made in Grindstaff’s (2008) analysis, Gamson et al. (1992) suggest that these images are rarely neutral. Furthermore, the meaning suggested by the media is related to who controls and operates the outlets, so “the special genius of the system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible” (Gamson et al, 1992, p.374). While the producers of media may

not intentionally embed specific values in their products, and while uncontested images may seem devoid of meaning, this is usually because the producers take for granted their own values and render them invisible in their depiction of what is “normal” (Gamson et al., 1992).

The construction of “normal” in media is accomplished through framing, which “plays the same role in analyzing media discourse that schema does in cognitive psychology – a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols” (Gamson et al, 1992, p.384). In essence, a frame influences which sets of beliefs and understandings viewers draw on to understand a story or narrative. For instance, in the news, viewers interpret stories differently depending on how the story is depicted: human interest stories are understood differently than stories that critique the morality of the social actors involved (Kline, Karel & Karishma, 2006). Frames “bring order to events by making them something that can be told about; they have power because they make the world make sense” (Gamson et al, 1992, p.385). Coltrane and Adams (1997) support this claim in suggesting that media frames are integral to how members of our post-modern society understand life: “people use media frames in conjunction with other types of information to simplify, organize and make sense of a very complex world” (p.324).

Moreover, viewers’ understanding of frames helps society clarify what is understood as “normal”; when viewers see certain patterns portrayed repeatedly, these patterns come to be viewed as “‘natural’ and inevitable” (Coltrane & Adams, 1997, p.325). However, just because these patterns are portrayed as “normal” does not mean that they are realistic representations of what exists (even on average) in our society.

Rather, television depicts “hyperreal” images that are almost caricatures (Gamson et al, 1992, p.387). This hyperreality depicts how we *think* people behave and think, as opposed to the reality of every day existence; however, when this hyperreality is depicted consistently, it changes what people view as reality:

The media images produced by the process can be treated as texts that take many forms – visual imagery, sound and language... some part of the meaning is ‘naturalized’ – that is, it comes to us in the form of taken-for-granted assumptions (Gamson et al, 1992, p.380).

When the same patterns and messages appear in multiple texts they then create a metamessage (Gamson et al., 1992).

This metamessage, constructed through media controlled by those in power, also functions as a means of social control. Since certain characteristics are constructed as desirable through dominant discourse, individuals who deviate from this construction (whether in terms of family formation, identity, profession, race, etc) feel social pressure to conform. “Normal” is constructed such that conformity to this ideal benefits those in power (Gamson et al., 1992).

Since hegemony often functions by rewarding conformity to social norms through social acceptance rather than through outright domination, there is room to subvert these dominant discourses of normality and desirability. The media provides

A many-voiced, open text that can and often is read oppositionally, at least in part. Television imagery is a site of struggle where the powers that be are often forced to compete and defend what they would prefer to have taken-for-granted (Gamson et al, 1992, p.373).

While the cognitive filters viewers use to construct meaning may be similar, no two people have the same experiences, reference points and social location. For this reason,

social actors give their experiences (including their viewing experiences) diverse meanings (Gamson et al, 1992; Weinberg, 2009).

Moreover, the reading of media is not a passive endeavor, but a process in which the viewer/reader (if one considers television a filmic text) decodes the meaning inherent in the text (Gamson et al, 1992). This process is a “situated negotiation of meaning” in which social actors confer meaning on the filmic texts that they read (Weinberg, 2009, p.285). Since no two social actors confer the same meaning on filmic texts, ostensibly, texts are actually produced in the context of their reading (Gamson et al., 1992; Weinberg, 2009). This productive space allows for the deconstruction of the media portrayal and, therefore, the social construction of adoption.

#### *Adoption in the Media: The Production and Editing of the “Abnormal” Family*

When considering the social construction of adoption, an analysis of the relationship between the media and the institution of adoption is essential. The most salient reason for examining this relationship concerns society’s access to information about adoption: “52% of Americans regard the media (news, books, magazines and entertainment) as their primary source of information about adoption” (Wegar, 2000, p.363). As the most widely accessible source of information regarding adoption, the media plays an integral role in shaping the social construction of adoption.

While this might suggest that the media produces the social construction of adoption, the reality is that the media both creates and reflects the conceptions of society. For instance, as former journalist Pertman (2006) explains, media creators have few ways to obtain accurate information regarding adoption because of the stigma and secrecy

surrounding adoption in our society. This creates a feedback loop where the media both draws on and reiterates, thereby perpetuating, the social constructions already present in society. This is true for television as much as for any other form of media.

Stories concerning adoption are relatively prevalent in the media, but the frame that is employed heavily impacts the message conveyed. For example, news depictions of adoption differ from depictions intended as entertainment (Gamson et al, 1992). Ambert (2005) reports that the proportion of stories regarding adoption is larger than stories concerning other means of family formation (such as divorce or artificial insemination) relative to its actual occurrence. Since the content of news reflects what will sell more than it reflects what is actually occurring in the world, this suggests that adoption holds some fascination for society (Kline et al, 2006).

As predicted by this assertion, the majority of news depictions of adoption highlight problematic or sensational stories, presumably because these capture the attention of viewers. However, this ultimately reinforces stereotypes and increases stigma (Ambert, 2005; Kline et al, 2006; Pertman, 2006; Zamostny, Wiley, O'Brien, Lee and Baden, 2003). Kline et al. (2006) report "the national news media grossly represents adoption and adoptive families through insensitive and insulting remarks, rude inquiries and general ignorance" (p.488). The language used to describe adoption is particularly influential. For instance, the language used in news stories often constructs adoptive families as unnatural in contrast to "real" biological families (Pertman, 2006, p.65).

Several other topics figure prominently in news treatment of adoption, including coverage of the debate over sealed adoption records, of the supposed identity or

emotional issues of adoptees and of contested parental rights. As Pertman (2006) suggests, overall, “stereotypes remain extensive and influential” (p.60). What is more, these stories in turn impact how adoptive families and the wider society navigate the adoptive family form (Ambert, 2005; Kline et al., 2006; Pertman, 2006; Wegar, 2000).

For example, in the case of sealed adoption records, the media depicted the fight of a group of adoptees seeking the right to information concerning their birth families. There was no media coverage of the large proportion of adoptees that never seek information on their birth families. This omission conveyed the message that biological connection is necessary for adoptee identity formation, emotional wholeness and psychological health (Wegar, 2000). Similarly, stories that portray the identity or emotional issues of adoptees fail to portray the large proportion of adoptees that do not have identity or emotional issues. This omission might lead one to the conclusion that adoptees are more prone to problems – a conclusion that has the unintended effect of making adoption less appealing to prospective adoptive parents (Kline et al, 2006; Pertman, 2006).

Finally, there is the media coverage of court cases in which the parental rights of both the adoptive and biological parents are debated. In the case of court decisions where children have been returned to their biological families, the attention received by these relatively rare events has two implications. The first implication relates to the message implied concerning the relative merit of adoptive and biological families. By deeming it to be in the best interests of the child to be raised in his or her biological family, the adoptive family is denigrated as an inferior family form. Secondly, by sensationalizing the decisions in court cases such as these, while neglecting to acknowledge all of the

safeguards against these instances that are built into adoption policy, the media conveys the message that adoption is not a secure means of forming a family (Ambert, 2005; Pertman, 2006). This cultural conception would also act as a deterrent for potential adoptive parents.

Media depictions of adoption in entertainment are even less realistic than those found in the news (Pertman, 2006). Despite, or perhaps because of their “hyperrealism”, however, these depictions provide valuable insight into the social construction of adoption for two reasons. Primarily, these depictions are valuable because movies and television, as filmic texts, reflect and reiterate the discourses of the day, including controversies, fears and desires. In her analysis of the depiction of adoption in commercial films in the latter half of the twentieth century, Gailey (2006) remarks “Movies play an important role in providing metaphors and images that people use in thinking about a range of social issues, in this case, adoption” (p.71).

Moreover, in contrast to news depictions, the form used in entertainment media allows for an even richer and more layered illustration of the metaphors and images associated with adoption. This is because the cinematic frame used by both movie and television formats creates and maintains a contained space in which difficult topics can be discussed and worked through (Gailey, 2006). Subjects that create discomfort in everyday conversation become fair game in filmic texts because they are positioned as fictional and dramatic and therefore less threatening.

On a final note, analyzing adoption in the media is an excellent way to make theory and our understanding of adoption “live” (Alexander, 2003, p.7). Despite the best intentions of the social sciences, self-reflexivity in research is a complicated and difficult

endeavor that largely has been passed by in the context of adoption research (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Lash Esau, 2000; Wegar, 2000). This lack of self-reflexivity has resulted in theories of adoptee development that overlook the societal context in which adoptees develop. By returning to primary material from popular culture – a product made for and by the “average” citizen but still controlled by dominant forces – it is possible to read the open text of television images and actively negotiate a more nuanced understanding of the social construction of adoption.

*Claire as a Hero and Adoptee: An Analysis of the Dominant Discourse on Adoption  
Introduction to Heroes (Kring, 2006)*

Alexander (2003) suggests that the most fruitful way of making theory “live” is to examine it in the context of everyday examples (p.7). *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) emerged as a critical success in its first season, garnering numerous awards and nominations, including primetime Emmy awards, Golden Globe awards and People’s Choice awards (“Heroes”, n.d.). With its large and captivating cast, *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) drawing an average of 14.3 million viewers per show in its first season (“Heroes”, n.d.).

The first season introduces a diverse group of characters; these seemingly “ordinary” people become aware that they have “extraordinary” abilities (Kring, 2006). Episodes center on the personal and professional lives of characters as they adapt to these newfound abilities and even identities (Lindelhof, 2007). One of the main characters is a cheerleader named Claire Bennet who happens to be adopted. Her newfound ability allows her to heal and regenerate from almost any wound. Simultaneously, several potentially competing interests (both individuals and larger organizations) explore the



genetic origin of these abilities. The crux of this season is the interaction between “the Company” and individual characters (Kring, 2006). “The Company”, an organization whose sole purpose is to control people manifesting these differences becomes a metaphor for the social control exerted on individuality.

Multiple factors render *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) an ideal filmic text for better understanding the social construction of adoption. As may be immediately obvious, the tagline suggests that the fate of Claire is tied intimately to the fate of the world as well as the show. As such, through Claire’s character, Tim Kring has highlighted the centrality of character development to the show, saying, “I feel that *Heroes* is, at its core, a character based saga. I’m much more fascinated by the personal struggles that these abilities present to the characters” (Lindelhof, 2007, ¶ 15). From this perspective, it is Claire’s ability to adapt to her difference, not her abilities themselves, that drive her character development. One might argue that this is analogous to the stress and coping model of adoptee development, where individual development is driven by one’s response to environmental stressors (Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998). Additionally, since there was great emphasis on detailed character development the show, which features a continuous storytelling format presents the viewer with a unique opportunity to analyze a well-developed and carefully thought out adoptee portrayal (Lindelhof, 2007).

As a form of cultural expression, *Heroes* science fiction genre allows for a narrative form that enables a sense of escape from reality. This contrasts with other textual forms such as autobiography that serve as a testament to reality (Rieder, 2007). However, Rieder (2007) proposes that science fiction narratives utilize many of the same strategies and techniques employed in life writing narratives, essentially creating an

account of witness in their own right. Given that science fiction often concerns itself with themes of identity development and performance, this use of testimony confers power on character narratives (Rieder, 2007). In the case of *Heroes* (Kring, 2006), the first scene of “Episode one” uses this rhetorical technique to set the stage for the emphasis on character development. In the very first moments of the show, the viewer is introduced to Claire through the frame of a camcorder recording a testimonial video wherein she documents her newfound ability (Kring, 2006).

Moreover, while science fiction narratives may be characterized as escapist, science fiction often presents a “utopian project”, implying an inherent commentary and value judgment (Rieder, 2007, p.x). Combined with a focus on identity, this critical commentary has the effect of creating a discourse concerning power and society, whereby “It devises a place that cannot, or perhaps only does not, exist in order to think about what does or can” (Rieder, 2007, p.x). In the case of *Heroes* (Kring, 2006), this critical commentary often concerns evolution and identity. By presenting characters who struggle with whether their evolutionary difference implies a destiny as a hero or a villain, the narrative highlights the everyday struggle of defining one’s identity in relation to biological essentialism or free will. This is closely related to continued debate concerning the biological or environmental factors that contribute to child development – a debate especially pertinent to theories of adoptee development (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998).

Yuen and Ray (2009) argue that in the context of the critical commentary on identity formation in *Heroes*’ (Kring, 2006), the show conveys the message that the survival of humankind depends on cooperation between groups of different races,

ethnicities and nationalities. This message of cooperation and tolerance perhaps reflects the social and political climate of the society in which the show was produced, thereby supporting the assertion that a medium must validate the worldviews of its audience to be commercially successful (Grindstaff, 2008; Yuen & Ray, 2009). In this sense, *Heroes* does sometimes mirror society, challenging some stereotypes while subtly perpetuating others.

With these contexts in mind, it is possible to analyze how adoption is socially constructed in *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) through the development of Claire's character. Claire is the first character introduced in *Heroes*; she is a white, heterosexual 16-year-old cheerleader living in the heart of Texas. At the age of 16, she discovers that her body can recover from unimaginable damage, which causes her to question her genetics. Over the course of the first season, viewers witness Claire request to meet her birth parents and her eventual contact with her birthmother, birthfather, biological uncle and biological grandmother. This process creates a great deal of tension as Claire negotiates her allegiance to one or both families. Viewers also witness her attempts to reconcile her identity as an adoptee with her emerging identity as a hero and as a young woman (Kring, 2006). Claire's identity formation drives the plot as she becomes central to several unfolding events that would not have occurred without her search for biological relatives (Kring, 2006).

In order to decode these events to understand how adoption is constructed in this popular narrative, it is helpful to consider the historical portrayal of adoption in U.S. commercial entertainment. In her analysis of U.S. commercial films, 1950-2000, Gailey (2006) notes that films depicting adoption may have different stories, but present several

general patterns. First and foremost, films often portray the threat associated with adoptees' unknown genetic inheritance. This is represented through the depiction of adoptees as sociopathic, evil or trouble-makers (Gailey, 2006). A related theme involves the negative consequences of adoptee initiative or resistance with adoptees portrayed as either "passive and lovable or active and evil" (Gailey, 2006, p.85). This perhaps implies that passivity prevents potentially problematic genes from being manifested, while initiative or resistance allows for the full effect of these unknown genes to be manifested.

This passive/active dichotomy could be related to the tendency for likeable adoptees to be portrayed as serving the needs of others (Gailey, 2006). Far from being inaccurate, this perception likely mirrors the historic function of adoption, which was to meet the needs of adults and society by allowing infertile couples to parent, providing heirs or servants, relieving birthparents of their parental role, and preventing the widespread presence of orphans (Leon, 2002). While some might suggest that the rights of the child are now paramount, media portrayals of adoptees seem to contradict this assertion. Filmic depictions convey the message that passive adoptees fill the roles in their family and in society that they are meant to fill, while adoptees that take initiative stray from their proscribed role by meeting their own needs.

In the case of adoptive families, several themes emerge in past depictions. The ideal adoptive family is portrayed as middle-class, white and heterosexual, in contrast with working-class families who are depicted as incompetent adoptive and biological parents (Gailey, 2006). Additionally, in cases where adoption is depicted outside a stable couple, films have typically marked successful and competent single adoptive parents as heterosexual (Gailey, 2006). Another theme that adds complexity to these messages is the

depiction of the adoptive family as either romantic or dysfunctional. In this sense, families are either portrayed as succeeding despite the unknown genetic history, and therefore threat of the adoptee, or as dissolving due to the adoptee's presence (Gailey, 2006).

In contrast, several important themes routinely remain unexamined, particularly race and the life course of the adoptee. For instance, while interspecies adoption often is used as a metaphor for interracial adoption in science fiction and children's films, there have been few films that examine this theme overtly (Gailey, 2006). Films that do provide an overt portrayal of interracial adoption have proven largely commercially unsuccessful, suggesting viewer or societal discomfort with the subject (Gailey, 2006). Moreover, when interracial adoption is portrayed metaphorically, the nuances of racial identity formation and power structures are not examined. Rather, interspecies/interracial adoptees are portrayed as becoming interracial intermediaries who can foster understanding and cooperation. Nowhere in this treatment are the needs and subjectivity of the adoptee considered. This is in keeping with the portrayal of good adoptees as serving the needs of others (Gailey, 2006).

Gailey (2006) also notes that the historical sociopolitical climate greatly impacts the treatment of these themes, for movies "absorb and refract" their sociocultural context (p.84). This framing of themes can be referred to as "frame transformation", a process in which evolving attitudes and contexts impact the images that are produced (Gamson et al, 1992). In the past, the depiction of adoption in American media has been impacted by political policies (such as McCarthyism, Cold War policies and adoption policies), social movements (such as those working towards the acceptance of more diverse family

forms), social debates (such as those concerning competent parenting), neoliberal or liberal value shifts and technological innovations such as the internet, which enabled greater search and reunion (Gailey, 2006). In the present sociocultural context, there are two cultural trends that help to frame contemporary depictions of adoption: society's fascination with genes, genetics and blood ties and the shifting weight privileging liberal or neoliberal values (Ambert, 2005; Leon, 2002; Miall, 1996; Wegar, 2000).

In the case of genes, genetics and blood ties, society seems to have developed a "genetic consciousness" and the family often serves as the focus of discussions (Ambert, 2005, p.2). The "'molecular' family ideal" is now used to determine what constitutes the ideal family structure (Wegar, 2000, p.363). Within the family, attachment is depicted as commencing with pre-natal experiences and depending on consanguinal formation, instead of being formed through multiple family interactions (Leon, 2002). Moreover, the medicalization and geneticization of our personal narratives and identity formation has resulted in "DNA mystique" on an individual level (Ambert, 2005, p.5). In this context, knowledge of one's genes has become an important facet of identity. In the absence of access to medical technology, the biological family becomes the primary source of genetic information for most people (Ambert, 2005).

This is layered with the constant shifting between the prevalence of liberal or neoliberal values. On the one hand, Wegar's (2000) analysis of adoption, written in the first year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, notes that a liberal shift in values has contributed to more positive and less stereotypical depictions of diverse family forms. However, politics in both the U.S. and Canada have since become more conservative. This also impacts the depiction of adoption, as portrayals of state intervention (inherent in adoption) are

rendered more problematic as the political climate becomes more neo-liberal. During these years, state intervention – be it in the form of adoption or foster care – is more likely to be depicted as an obstacle to the best interests of children (Gailey, 2006).

### *Themes as they Emerge within Heroes*

Within Claire's narrative and character development, emerge several of the themes described by Gailey (2006). The depiction of Claire's adoptive and biological families, the depiction of Claire's identity development and the treatment of difference will be examined in the context of their social frame. Understanding the framing of Claire's adoptive and biological families first demands the outlining their structure. The *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) narrative posits that Noah and Sandra Bennet adopted Claire as a baby. At the beginning of the season, the identity of Claire's biological parents is presented to the viewer as an unknown. It is clear that Claire has no knowledge of her biological parents, but the extent of her adoptive parents' knowledge is unclear. This is thrown into question when her adoptive father arranges a meeting with her "birthparents", who turn out to be paid actors. Subsequently, Noah claims that Claire's biological mother died in a fire, but Claire eventually learns that her biological mother, Meredith, is still alive and that her biological father, Nathan Petrelli, is a prominent politician. To round out her biological family, the viewer is also introduced to Peter Petrelli and Angela Petrelli, her biological uncle and grandmother, respectively.

The first season of *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) addresses the societal assumption present in adoption research that adoptive parents are not "real" parents (Miall, 1996, p.5). This theme is touched on chiefly through the depiction of Noah Bennet. Noah,

Claire's adoptive father has the most prominent relationship with Claire out of any of potential parental figures. He is referred to alternately as the man with the Horn Rimmed Glasses, Noah, Mr. Bennet or Dad (Kring, 2006). This variety of labels is fitting, as his character is alternately portrayed as being duplicitous, manipulative, secretive, sinister and dangerous to his family or as loving, protective and resourceful. The tension between these two portrayals creates a tension between Mr. Bennet and Claire that helps drive her search for her biological parents.

An innocent paper salesman in the eyes of his family, Mr. Bennet is actually an agent for the Company – an organization whose sole purpose is to control individuals with abilities (Kring, 2006, Episode 17). Initially, Mr. Bennet is portrayed as a paranoid adoptive parent who hides information from Claire regarding her ability and her origins out of fear of the dissolution of his family. Mr. Bennet even goes so far as to order that Claire's memories of her ability be erased so that she will feel like she fits into the family. This serves as a powerful metaphor for the rejection of adoptive family differences (Brodzinsky, Smith et al, 1998).

Eventually, his status as a "company man" is revealed to his family. The viewer learns that Mr. Bennet was "assigned" to parent Claire. When he is taken off this assignment, however, he resists. This changes the depiction of Mr. Bennet to that of loving parent fighting against social expectation and social control (represented by the Company) to protect the girl who has become his daughter. This is evidenced by Mr. Bennet's admission that "I've worked very hard. I've done some things that I am not proud of to keep you safe... I just wanted you to have a normal life" (Kring, 2006, Episode 11). Through Mr. Bennet's description of the desire for a "normal" life for



Claire, viewers are given a powerful message about the undesirability of differences – including the difference implied by adoptive status.

Sandra Bennet is a less complicated character than her husband, but important nonetheless. She initially is portrayed as a vapid housewife who is more concerned with the breeding eligibility of her Pomeranian than with her daughter's adolescent struggles. Kind, but incompetent, Mrs. Bennet represents the stereotypical woman who is defined by her reproductive status and the domestic sphere – leaving all of the important matters to be dealt with by Mr. Bennet. As the season progresses, we learn that she is wiser than she appears. She may be content in her role as mother, but she also expresses regret at her loss of potential experiences and cares deeply for Claire's well being:

I just don't think that you should be so worried about fitting in all the time... I don't want you to make the same mistakes like I did. I wanted to be someone more interesting than I am... my point is that you should know who you are and know that it's enough. 'Cause who you are is special (Kring, 2006, Episode 1).

In the context of the first episode, Claire perceives this advice as well intended but trite, having just rescued a man from a burning train wreck. However, it is revealed later that Mrs. Bennet is fully aware of Claire's abilities, despite Mr. Bennet's best attempts to keep them secret. In this context, Mrs. Bennet's words become more meaningful, conveying sadness for lost opportunities but also a hope that Claire can feel valued for her unique identity.

It is also notable that in keeping with the aforementioned themes, this adoptive family is middle-class, heterosexual and white. Moreover, while Claire's adoption sometimes is portrayed metaphorically as an interspecies adoption, since people with abilities are often described as the next step in evolution, Claire is white enough to

preclude an overt discussion of race within adoptive families. Additionally, the Bennet family alternates between the romantic (including the almost oedipal relationship between Claire and her father, as well as family loyalty, cooperation and integrity), and the dysfunctional (including acts of espionage, attempted murder and betrayal).

The role played by Claire's biological mother is miniscule in the first season of the show. Meredith makes an appearance in only two episodes, but is depicted in a powerfully negative way. When Claire first meets Meredith, the latter is living in a trailer park. This provides a fairly overt example of the way in which low class families are depicted as containing incompetent parents. Moreover, Meredith is on the run from the law, unbeknownst to Claire. Thus, Meredith's morality is thrown into question, which further confirms the stereotype of the amoral, "bad" birthmother, carrier of potentially unsavory genetic material.

In fact, Claire has inherited some of Meredith's genes: Meredith also has abilities, although hers manifest as pyrokinesis. The viewer learns that Meredith thought Claire died in the same fire that was presumed to have killed her – a fire that Meredith started. The only reason that Claire survived the fire was her ability to heal. This violent separation of mother and child reinforces the stereotype of adoption as a traumatic abandonment. This fits with the

Usual interpretation of adoption [that] inaccurately connotes birth parents who desert their child, potentially endangering the child's welfare (as opposed to birth parents who make an adoption plan that ensures the care they are unable to provide) (Leon, 2002, p.656).

In this case, Claire is both endangered and abandoned, while Meredith is portrayed literally as having burned and abandoned her biological child. To compound the

depiction of her questionable moral and genetic material, Meredith then contacts Claire's biological father and requests money to remain silent during Nathan's campaign for Senator.

Claire's biological father, Nathan, who willingly pays Meredith to protect his political career from scandal, is also depicted in a negative light. In contrast to Meredith, Nathan is a powerful figure concerned primarily with his wealth, influence and political position. He also has an ability to fly but is also portrayed as being complicit with the Company. As a parental figure, Nathan is portrayed as remarkably unconcerned with Claire, with his callous disregard conveying the message that biological fathers are 'ne'er do well', unconcerned men indifferent to the fate of their progeny.

Ironically, the Company's agenda for Nathan entails placing him in a position of power so that he can act as a leader and savior figure for a troubled nation and world. Nathan appears unsure about this responsibility, however. In one scene, Mr. Bennet corners Nathan, as he has been instructed to reveal the Company's agenda to him. At this point, Nathan is unaware that his main political donor runs the Company and so to evade capture, he flies away. This creates a metaphorical tension between determining one's own goals and aspirations and submitting to social control. Another example of this tension occurs when another protagonist calls Nathan a villain for being complicit with the Company instead of heeding his destiny to save the world. This positive portrayal of one's call to biological destiny adds yet another layer of complexity to the discussion of identity.

Nathan's sole redeeming quality is his love for his younger biological brother, Peter. Peter is portrayed as the caring, compassionate opposite to Nathan's cold,

calculating personality. When Peter and Nathan must team up to save New York City from a nuclear explosion in the last episode of season one, the bond that these brothers share overcomes Nathan's weaknesses. This relationship becomes a metaphor for how a blood tie can overcome all differences and separation including those presented by adoption.

The implied importance and power of blood ties is also immediately clear in the relationship between Peter and Claire. Peter plays an integral role in saving the cheerleader, although he does not know that Claire is his niece. When they meet for the first time after Claire's rescue, Claire learns that Peter has abilities too, declaring "All this time, I thought it was just me. Now there's you... you're totally my hero" (Kring, 2006, Episode 11). The depiction of their meeting suggests that there is something inherent in genetic connection that creates a special bond. Additionally, Peter's power is the ability to absorb other people's powers. Later in the season, Claire revives Peter by pulling a shard of glass out of his skull; he has absorbed her power to heal, which allows her action to save him. Their reciprocity and the revival that they both experience is a powerful metaphor for Claire's rebirth into and connection with her biological family.

In the context of this family environment, Claire actively searches for her identity as both an adoptee and hero. Therefore, Claire must make sense of both her role in her family and in the larger context of society. As she struggles to discover the truth around her adoption, Claire searches for a personal narrative that ultimately conveys several messages about adoption.

Much like Mr. Bennet, Claire is portrayed as having a dual nature. On the one hand, Claire is invincible and her strength is portrayed as potentially dangerous. On the

other hand, as suggested by Yuen and Ray (2009), Claire is objectified as something to be pursued and protected. She appears to be lost and searching in an almost childlike way. This is in keeping with the tendency to view adoptees as perpetual children, as exemplified by lack of research on adult adoptees and lack of fictional portrayals of adult adoptees (Gailey, 2006; Wegar, 2000).

When quarterback Brody accidentally impales Claire's head on a piece of wood while trying to rape her, Claire is portrayed as a victim – both sexually objectified and helpless – but she recovers. Seeking revenge, she offers to drive Brody home from football practice and crashes the car into a brick wall at high velocity. Again, Claire recovers, but viewers witness the murderous potential of her rage and her genetically inherited abilities. This reinforces the image of Claire as an empowered and invincible subject, but also conveys that Claire's genetic inheritance is hazardous to those around her.

In keeping with yet another theme however, Claire only decides to act on her anger after learning that Brody has raped other girls. This is an interesting twist on the dichotomy between passive and active adoptees: Claire takes initiative and both resists and punishes a rapist, but not because of her own needs. It is a complex portrayal wherein Claire's genetic inheritance gives her incredible strength and a murderous potential, but is utilized only in the service of others. This suggests that adoptees may overcome their problematic genetic inheritance if they channel it towards socially acceptable ends.

In contrast, when Claire is stalked by a serial killer who can absorb her powers by killing her, Claire's resistance is depicted as more problematic. In the scene preceding the serial killer's attack, Claire confronts a peer who has ostracized her, criticizing her for

betrayal. This peer is killed in the following scene and Claire feels responsibility for this: “Jackie died because of me. He thought she was me, didn’t he?” (Kring, 2006, Episode 11). These scenes subtly suggest that when Claire resists or takes initiative on her own behalf, her powers become dangerous and people around her get hurt.

Claire’s abilities are also depicted as capable of rupturing the very fabric of her family. When Claire’s little brother Lyle (the biological son of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet) discovers her abilities, Claire begs him to keep her secret: “Don't you get it? If they found out, Mom and Dad would think it was a mistake to ever adopt me. We wouldn't be a family anymore. Please.” (Kring, 2006, Episode 7). Claire fears that her abilities are an insurmountable difference. The magnitude of this difference might prevent her family from maintaining the façade of a “normal” non-adoptive family.

These treatments of Claire’s ability are among the many examples of how *Heroes* addresses the concept of biological essentialism (Kring, 2006). In particular, the narrative creates tension between biological essentialism and free will by contrasting characters’ abilities with how they choose to use their abilities. The show explicitly labels character development a genetic imperative:

Evolution is an imperfect and often violent process...A battle between what exists and what is yet to be born...In the midst of these birth pains, morality loses its meaning. (...) The question of good and evil reduced to one simple choice: survive or perish (Kring, 2006, Episode 6).

This suggests that characters’ destinies are determined by their genetics and that morality has little to do with it. However, the show also presents an implicit argument against the inevitability of genetic influence. Some characters view their abilities as a call to a predetermined destiny, while others view their abilities as empowering, imparting agency

and a chance to change the future for the better. Claire struggles with this agency, both excitedly claiming Peter's call to take up her destiny as a hero and claiming that "the future is not written in stone!" (Kring, 2006, Episode 23). In the context of this struggle, Claire's search for identity becomes connected intimately to the meaning she gives to her genes and her family – both biological and adoptive. As suggested earlier, the autobiographical tape used at the beginning of the first episode serves as a metaphor for Claire's attempt to construct a sense of identity and a personal narrative. This tape provides a witness to her story and a means of "truth-telling", thereby making Claire's experience real (Rieder, 2007, p.x). It introduces the idea that Claire's identity is somehow contingent on her understanding of her abilities, and therefore her genetic inheritance. This precipitates Claire's search for her biological parents and sets off a chain of events integral to the plot.

In addition to the thematic treatment of the liability of Claire's genetic inheritance, the theme of biological ties also emerges from Claire's search narrative. As suggested by Wegar (1995), Claire's narrative strongly implies that adoptee identity is contingent on meeting one's biological relatives. This assumption stems in part from the presence of genealogical bewilderment – a sense of not knowing the origins of one's characteristics (Brodzinsky, Smith et al., 1998). This contingency is also implied by the societal belief that biological ties are necessary for bonding and love between family members (Miall, 1996). Claire's exchange with Mr. Bennet exemplifies the desire to know the origins of one's characteristics:

CLAIRE: ... you mind if I talk to you about something?  
MR. BENNET: You pregnant?  
CLAIRE: What? No.  
MR. BENNET: You doing drugs?  
CLAIRE: Dad!  
MR. BENNET: Actually ... I already know what it's about.  
CLAIRE: You do?  
MR. BENNET: It's about wanting to know who you really are. Your mother told me that you've been asking about your birth parents.  
CLAIRE: Well, I think it's time that I knew.  
MR. BENNET: Well, I have a few questions first. Not the least of which is why now?  
CLAIRE: I'm just wondering, that's all. You know, what they're like, what they can do.  
MR. BENNET: What they can do?  
CLAIRE: Yeah, like hobbies and ... skills.  
MR. BENNET: You know, I don't ... mean this to be condescending. Even though you're gonna say I'm being condescending. But I really do believe that this is an adult decision.  
CLAIRE: You're right. That is condescending.  
MR. BENNET: Claire, there are gonna be issues. You're going to have issues. They're going to have issues. It's very complex, emotionally.  
CLAIRE: Yeah, well, so am I.  
MR. BENNET: Well, exactly.  
MR. BENNET: Look, here's my advice, if you'll indulge me. Just ... keep things light and fun as long as you can. Like cheerleading ... I just don't want you to be in such a hurry to grow up, okay? Trust me. I actually know a few things.

(Kring, 2006, Episode 2)

This exchange reiterates the idea that one must have a biological tie “to know who you really are” (Kring, 2006, Episode 2). Combined with Claire’s fear that her difference has the power to rupture her adoptive family, this provides Claire with a powerful incentive to find her biological parents. Given the primacy assigned to biological ties, Claire feels that her biological family will be able to survive her difference. This creates a family romance fantasy in which Claire’s biological family is idealized as being ‘all good’ and Claire’s adoptive family is devalued as being ‘all bad’ (Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1998). It is only through a more nuanced understanding of the relative importance of both



her genetic inheritance and the bonds she shares with her adoptive family that Claire is able to tolerate ambivalence towards both her adoptive and biological parents. This understanding eventually gives Claire the support she needs to integrate her sense of difference into her identity.

Claire's difference emerges in two ways in her narrative, as both the difference she feels because of her abilities and the difference she feels because of her adoption. As the narrator of the show intones,

We are, if anything, creatures of habit ... drawn to the safety and comfort of the familiar... But what happens when the familiar becomes unsafe? ...When the fear that we have been desperately trying to avoid finds us where we live? (Kring, 2006, Episode 9).

*Heroes* gives a prominent place to discourses of difference, noting how difference is stigmatized and feared, especially when the difference in question has the power to upset the status quo. Claire's difference is the first thing that the viewer sees: she is depicted as "other" and perhaps even as inhuman because of her ability to destroy herself, twist into grotesque forms, and then recover. Claire's narrative examines both her own perception of her difference and the perceptions of others. Claire's personal perception of her difference is one of alienation:

Popular? Who said anything about popular? My life as I know it is over, okay? I've got the Bishop game next week, SAT's in October, homecoming's three weeks from today, and I'm a freak show! ... I have busted, like, every bone in my body, stabbed myself in the chest, I've shoved a two-foot steel rod through my neck, and I don't have a scratch on me! (Kring, 2006, Episode 1).

Claire immediately recognizes the profundity and significance of her difference relative to the differences experienced by other adolescents. Ironically, her invulnerability makes her feel incredibly vulnerable to the perception of others. As an adolescent, the reactions

of her peers are particularly salient to Claire's sense of identity, with their reactions ranging from respectful, accepting and loving to hateful.

For example, her close friend and confidante Zach affectionately calls her "Little Miss Miracle Grow" (Kring, 2006, Episode 4). Zach also affirms that despite her feelings of being alien, "You've got to embrace your inner freak. Because the only thing you'll ever regret is denying who you really are" (Kring, 2006, Episode 9). His comments speak to the importance of finding a reference group – in this case the freaks – as a means of developing a coherent identity. In contrast, other peers react with fear and disgust when they learn about Claire's abilities:

BRODY MITCHUM: Because she crashed my car on purpose. She's a freak!  
She's ... not human.

MR. BENNET: I'd put more stock in her humanity than I would in yours. You tried to rape my daughter.

BRODY MITCHUM: I didn't touch her.

MR. BENNET: Well, it's her word against yours. And from my perspective, she's the more reliable witness.

BRODY MITCHUM: You don't know your daughter.

MR. BENNET: I know her better than even she does.

BRODY MITCHUM: I don't have to listen to this.

(Brody reaches for the nurse call button. Mr. Bennet grabs him and covers his mouth with his hand, muffling his cry of pain.)

MR. BENNET: Shh.

(Brody grunts and gasps.)

MR. BENNET: Claire is a very special girl. It's confusing what's happening to her, and she doesn't need some punk making her life any more difficult. Do you understand me?

(Kring, 2006, Episode 5)

As suggested by this exchange, the fear and hatred Claire faces are mitigated by social supports in her environment, for there are people in Claire's life who understand her humanity and the complexity of her identity development. Moreover, this exchange demonstrates the tension between the "othering" of those who are different and the

recognition that those “others” may be more similar than different. For instance, Brody objectifies Claire as female and “other” (relative to his male identity) to justify raping her. Then, Brody tries evading responsibility for his actions by highlighting the “human” status that he shares with Mr. Bennett, in contrast to Claire’s “inhumanity”. He seems to believe that this will have more importance than the familial bond shared by Claire and Mr. Bennet.

Likewise, Claire’s peers exhibit a range of reactions to her adoptive status. In some cases, her peers’ reactions devalue her adoptive family, as when Brody declares, “Jackie told me you wanna meet your real mom and dad” (Kring, 2006, episode 3). As in newscasts, this peer’s comment positions Claire’s adoptive family as fake, unnatural and inferior. As such, her status as a member of this family is also devalued. In contrast, other peers possess a more nuanced understanding. When Claire is preparing to meet her biological parents, Zach offers support:

CLAIRE: How am I supposed to ask someone if they're a freak when they're probably just gonna lie about it like I do?

ZACH: Why don't you just ask them what happens when they cut themselves? Or you could just cut them and find out.

CLAIRE: Uh-huh. Probably just think I was all bitter because they gave me away.

ZACH: You're a little bitchy sometimes, but I don't think you're all that bitter. About the adoption thing, I mean.

CLAIRE: I'm not. I mean, I'm curious about it. And it's a little weird and maybe a little sad, but I'm not mad. I mean, I love my parents.

ZACH: What if your biological parents raised you, though? It'd be an entirely different scenario.

CLAIRE: What if they can do what I can do? What if they're like me?

ZACH: Well, I hope they're not. No offense, but I like -- I like that you're the freak. It makes you more ... special or whatever.

CLAIRE: Are you flirting with me?

ZACH: No. Believe me, no. Um, look, do you plan on coming out to your parents? I mean, the ones who raised you?

CLAIRE: No. My dad would unspool. He's a really simple guy. He'd never be

able to wrap his mind around something like that. It would break him.  
ZACH: (sing-song) He's gonna find out.

(Kring, 2006, Episode 6)

This exchange is telling for two reasons. Zach uses language that constructs Claire's adoptive parents as her rightful parents, perhaps more entitled to know about her abilities than her biological parents. Zach also normalizes Claire's reactions to her adoption when he validates that she is not bitter. This is in contrast with Claire's sarcastic comments, which suggest that Claire has internalized the idea that adoption is tantamount to abandonment. Her comments also reiterate the idea that her difference is so profound that it might destroy her adoptive family.

After analyzing the reaction of Claire's peers, it is interesting to take another step back to examine the depiction of social control of the adoptive family. In the case of adoptees' search for biological relatives, this process has often been depicted in the news media as a triumph of nature over an oppressive source of social control. The necessity of this search for identity formation is also framed in the context of society's discourse of self-discovery, which is in itself a notion that is socially constructed (Ambert, 2005). In addition, Wegar (1995) notes that adoptive families are often given ambivalent messages; emotional bonding is deemed a social process, but adoptive parents are warned about the influence of genetics. In *Heroes*, the Company is a metaphor for both the gaze of society and the control of the adoptive agency over the adoptive family (Kring, 2006). The portrayal of the Company seems to be cast in a neo-liberal light, for it is portrayed as dangerous and evil; an institution that seeks to control the individual and deviant

“others”. The Company in fact exerts control over both individuals and difference, thereby violating the most basic and important right given in a neo-liberal society.

As mentioned previously, neo-liberal depictions of adoption tend to position state intervention as inherently problematic (Gailey, 2006). An example of this is the Company’s involvement with the Bennet family, whereby Claire is given to Mr. Bennet as an assignment. He is ordered to turn Claire over to the Company for experimentation if she ever manifests abilities, and Mr. Bennet is put on death row when he defies this order. They chastise him for thinking of himself as a father, reminding him that Claire is an assignment, not a daughter. There are two messages in their commentary. The first claims explicitly that adoptive families serve a function, but are not real families, with Mr. Bennet being punished for taking on a role that does not belong to him. The second implies that adoption is not a secure means of constructing a family, as only biological bonds are secure. This commentary also contains a neo-liberal critique of control and power, as it positions the adoptive family as intrinsically inferior because state intervention is inherent in the adoption process. An analysis of the narrative development in the filmic text of *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) enables one to render visible the social construction of adoption as will be explored in the following section.

*The Cornerstones of the North American Adoption Narrative: The Ethic of Reciprocity  
versus the Ethic of Self-Discovery*

A focus on the analysis of the character of Clair in *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) demonstrates a heightened, ongoing ambivalence towards adoption in the North American psyche. Despite acknowledgement that adoption performs an important social function, it is still seen as an inferior familial form (Miall, 1996; Leon, 2002; Wegar, 2000). This ambivalence intertwines with several societal discourses, but as outlined by Wegar (1992), two competing cultural narratives emerge as essential to the cultural construction of adoption: the ethic of reciprocity and the ethic of self-discovery. Additionally, Wegar argues that several of the dominant stereotypes about adoptive families materialize in the context of society's inability to tolerate the resulting ambivalence or ambiguity.

The ethic of reciprocity and the ethic of self-discovery are not inherently mutually exclusive, however, they can create a dilemma. The ethic of reciprocity suggests that individuals are responsible towards others (Wegar, 1992). This might include family, friends or community, but in the context of adoption, this ethic supports the assumption that it is adoptive parents are entitled to the individual adoptee's loyalty and gratitude (Wegar, 1992). This connection between the individual's responsibility towards others and the adoptee's responsibility towards his or her adoptive family has emerged with the recent focus on adoption meeting the needs of the child; since adoptees are "rescued" by adoptive parents, they are assumed to be indebted towards their adoptive parents (Wegar, 1992, p.98). While it seems counterintuitive to suggest that the focus on the needs of the child should leave adoptees indebted, this may be artifact of the gradual transition

between the historical functions of adoption, which was to meet the needs of adults. This reinforces a social environment that supports the desirability of the “passive and lovable” adoptee who meets the needs of others (Gailey, 2006, p.85).

In contrast, the ethic of self-discovery concerns the individual’s responsibility to him or herself. This ethic underlies the current moral entitlement to understand oneself, which has created a “morality of self-actualization” (Wegar, 1992, p.99). This moral entitlement has led to very specific socially sanctioned ways of talking about the self, including the “adventure” of self-discovery and the imperative to form one’s own identity on an *individual* journey (Ambert, 2005; Wegar, 1992, p.99). This creates a focus on independence over interdependence and challenges the importance of interconnection explicit in the ethic of reciprocity.

In the context of adoption, the ethic of self-discovery has also had very specific implications. The most obvious of these implications is visible in the media attention paid to the adoptee movement towards greater access to birth and biological family records. In this context, access to biological information has been portrayed as integral to adoptee identity development, which is in turn portrayed as a basic right (Ambert, 2005; Wegar, 1992). The ethic of self-discovery is referenced as an important reason to change the laws surrounding access to information. The consequences of this discourse however, are much more subtle to the outside observer. By reframing their struggle for identity formation as an issue of basic rights, these adoptees and adoption advocates inadvertently perpetuated the stereotype that biological bonds are essential to identity formation and obscured the presence of any ambiguity or ambivalence in the motives of adoptees (Wegar, 1992).

This concealment of ambiguity reflects what sociologists have described as society's incapacity to accept or even tolerate ambiguity or ambivalence. This difficulty perhaps stems from the pervasiveness of enlightenment ideals in society, which privilege and legitimize the positivist ideals of objectivity and certainty (Wegar, 1992). In this context, it may seem counterintuitive to suggest that society's attitudes towards adoption are inherently ambivalent, since ambivalence is socially disdained. However, it is virtually impossible for the individual *or* society to eliminate the competing ethics, discourses or attitudes that create ambivalence or ambiguity in the first place; this necessitates other means of managing the resulting societal (or individual) discomfort (Wegar, 1992). In the case of the social construction of adoption, the management of ambivalence creates an unmistakable tendency to 'split' or portray various categories as antithetical. As *Heroes* demonstrates, this polarization greatly impacts how adoption and members of the adoption constellation are portrayed. *Heroes* (2006) demonstrates two main examples of how the social construction of adoption evidences 'splitting' as a means of reducing ambivalence: through the portrayal of adoptive and biological parents and through the portrayal of adoptee identity and development.

In the case of parenthood, the social construction of adoption creates a split between "bad" biological parents and "good" adoptive parents. Biological parents are constructed as social undesirables who are inherently flawed as human beings (Ambert, 2005; Gailey, 2006; Leon, 2002). In research of community attitudes concerning adoption, attitudes questioning the competence of biological parents are not uncommon: "The natural parents may have a personality defect... If the birth parents were responsible, they would have used birth control" (Miall, 1996, p.10). Their aberrance is



portrayed as both biological and social: their “unnatural” lack of maternal or parental instinct is seen as monstrous, while they are seen to contravene “normal” social expectations because of their bad sexuality, immorality, and the illegitimacy of their children (Ambert, 2005; Brodzinsky, Schecter et al., 1998; Leon, 2002). Additionally, biological parents are portrayed as simultaneously ungrateful and irresponsible, because they do not want the children who they bear and therefore abandon them (Leon, 2002).

In stark contrast, adoptive parents are portrayed as “good” parents, both through their misfortune and their acceptance of their social function. Since infertility is stigmatized, adoptive parents generally are constructed as disempowered victims of infertility (Wegar, 1995; Wegar, 2000). However, since adoption plays a vital social role, they are simultaneously constructed and portrayed as empowered, socially sanctioned parents who “rescue” children from “bad” biological parents (Wegar, 1992, p.99). The omnipresent portrayal of socially sanctioned adoptive parents as middle-class, white and heterosexual affirms that the social construction of adoption also occurs within the hetero-normative, classist and racist discourses of our society (Ambert, 2005; Gailey, 2006)

This is exemplified par excellence by Claire’s adoptive and biological parents: Claire’s biological parents are barely developed as parental characters – seemingly deemed to be incompetent in this regard. In keeping with negative stereotypes of biological parents, Meredith and Nathan are portrayed as morally questionable and as completely oblivious to their “natural” duty towards their daughter. They put her safety at risk in multiple contexts and generally abandon her. It is also interesting that Claire’s biological parents are also portrayed as non-middle class. Meredith represents the lower

class and Nathan represents the upper class, precluding both of them from the role of socially sanctioned middle-class parents.

In contrast, Claire's adoptive parents perfectly fit the middle-class, heterosexual and white mold created by the social construction of adoption. They perform their socially sanctioned parental duties quite well, especially in the context of their daughter's threatening genetic inheritance. Claire's adoptive family emerges from the first season as a bastion of strength and support, in keeping with a romantic view of the adoptive family:

The romance of adoptive families generally in the movies is the romance of resistance: refusing to fear the unknown histories or a child's difficult past, or to accept that the basis of "real" kinship is genetic connection (Gailey, 2006, p.86).

While Claire's negotiation of her relationship with both her adoptive and biological families creates a tension that drives the plot forward and rivets the viewer, Claire's adoptive family is portrayed as her "real" family. In the end, Mr. Bennet metaphorically links his adoptive family to the cultural sanctity of the domestic hearth and home when he remarks that, "Home is anywhere our family is together" (Kring, 2006, Episode 23). Similarly, a wise character tells Peter that, "in the end, all that really matters is love" (Kring, 2006, Episode 23).

The adoptee, children to both sets of parents, is also portrayed in a manner that minimizes the discomfort of ambivalence or ambiguity for the viewer, and by extension, society (Wegar, 1992). The social construction of adoption creates two potential roles for the adoptee, which can be understood within the context of the dichotomy that has been created between "nurture" and "nature", or the environmental or genetic components of development. Aptly, these roles are split into "good" and "bad" roles (Gailey, 2006).

The role of the “bad” adoptee is constructed through the lens of biological essentialism, with the adoptee’s problematic identity seen as a manifestation of his or her inferior genetic inheritance or “nature”. Essentially, the “bad” adoptee is seen as a “bad seed” (Gailey, 2006, p.73; Miall, 1996) The “bad” adoptee is “active and evil” (Gailey, 2006, p.85) and places priority on his or her own need for an active quest for self-discovery and self-gratification, as opposed to meeting the needs of those to whom he or she is indebted (Wegar, 1992).

In comparison, the role of the “good” adoptee is not constructed entirely through the lens of biological essentialism, as identity formation is impacted by the “nurturing” of the environment. While it is taken for granted that adoptees have inferior genetic material, the identity of the “good” adoptee is validated because they are able to overcome their inferior genetic inheritance (Miall, 1996). The “good” adoptee is both “passive and lovable” (Gailey, 2006, p.85) because he or she does not act on his or her own desires and impulses, but meets the needs and expectations of those to whom he or she is indebted (Wegar, 1992). In this context, it becomes evident that the ethic of reciprocity is privileged over that of self-discovery when it comes to socially acceptable behaviour for adoptees, and the former becomes aligned with the environmental factors in development. However, this does not mean that adoptees escape the pressure to conform to the ethic of self-discovery as well, which becomes aligned with the idea of their essential “nature”.

This slight ethical priority afforded to the influence of environment over that of genetics can also be seen in the context of Claire’s identity development. In the first episode, Claire tells Mrs. Bennet, “I think I’m old enough to know who my real parents

are” (Kring, 2006, Episode 1). This labels her adoptive parents as “fake” by extension and challenges their parental entitlement and authority. Even within the context of adolescence, this act of resistance is portrayed as putting the family at risk. This initially positions Claire as a “bad” adoptee, although an exceptionally likeable protagonist. Yet, by the last episode of the show, she defies Nathan and Angela Petrelli, refuting their claim to her as family: “I already have a family!” (Kring, 2006, Episode 23). This departure from her identification with biological family represents her return to the role of the “good” adoptee because, though she is active and engages in adventure for self-discovery, she eventually acknowledges and identifies with her adoptive family and negates and denies the importance of her biological family and genetics. Claire’s emergence as a hero, coupled with her prioritization of her adoptive family, make a powerful statement about where the loyalty of adoptees should lie.

Finally, the continued importance of Claire’s character throughout the first season of *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) attests both to the power of these two dichotomous socially constructed roles for adoptees and to the compelling need for ambivalence and ambiguity to be mitigated. Both the ethic of reciprocity and the ethic of self-discovery are socially sanctioned, and yet they are portrayed as mutually exclusive. As a captivating protagonist and central character, it is possible that it is Claire’s ability to resolve this tension that really makes her a hero in the eyes of her viewers.

*Implications:*

As previously described, television is an important venue for discourse in our society, because it allows for the presence of tension between the perpetuation and subversion of hegemonic interests (Gamson et al, 1992). Additionally, hegemony should not be mistaken for a static societal element; rather, it is constantly in flux and rewards social conformity through the positive feelings generated by social acceptance (Gamson et al, 1992). As such, the hegemonic discourse intertwines with capitalist interests. For example, “negative and/or biased images of adoption and adoptees will in all likelihood continue to permeate the mass media as long as such images can be used to elicit emotions and capture audience attention” (Wegar, 2000, p.368). Since sensationalist images of adoption are commercially successful, there is less incentive for producers of media to change their depictions. People – and different family forms – are often more alike than different; however, to maintain the privilege of certain people and family forms, distinctions between “different” categories are “produced and maintained through cultural practices” (Coltrane & Adams, 1997, p.327). Cultural imagery has the potential to perpetuate these distinctions by defining the “other” in contrast to “normal”.

However, given that film is most successful when it echoes the worldview of its audience, it can also be used as a tool for subversion (Grindstaff, 2008). Filmic texts that capture subjective experiences outside of the “normal” can serve to challenge our definition of what is normal and amplify dissent. When a critical mass of voices raises its critique of the dominant discourse, what was considered deviant may be reconstructed as “normal” and socially acceptable (Freud, 1999). The more the experiences of the “other” are represented through the media, the less the “other” is conceived as alien: “contact

with stigmatized groups through the mass media has been identified as useful in reducing stigma” (Kline et al, 2006, p.496).

Moreover, given society’s ambivalence towards adoption, this may form the basis for further subversion of stigma. Assessments of families based on their functioning and not their means of formation is on the rise and “we can recognize and appreciate the genetic tie without making it the determining connection” (Rothman quoted in Ambert, 2005, p.2). Media can potentially play a role in this transition as it can “simultaneously invoke and resolve multiple competing cognitive and emotional frames” (Coltrane and Adams, 1997, p.331). Depending on the treatment, this means that television has the potential to disseminate new cognitive frames with which to understand adoption.

From this perspective, multiple interpretations of media, including both normative and subversive understandings, have the power to create a subversive dialogue. Since, “In this era of momentous changes in all areas of living, the concept of normality is forever being newly constructed and reconstructed” (Freud, 1999, p.333), understanding narratives within popular culture through subversive discourses has the potential to contribute to this reconstruction by creating new and more inclusive dialogues.

CHAPTER IV  
THE INTERSECTION OF ERIKSON AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF  
ADOPTION

As demonstrated by the analysis in the previous chapter, theories of adoptee development that do not account for the societal context are inadequate, given the marked ambivalence towards adoption inherent in the social construction of adoption. As proposed earlier, even theories that are based on those of Erikson have overlooked this important aspect, which is ironic considering that Erikson emphasized the importance of social context (Erikson, 1963; Grotevant et al., 2000; Wegar, 1995).

It is possible that these theories intended to address some of the critiques of Erikson's model by excluding the aspects that were culturally situated. For instance, Erikson's writing displays a remarkable gender bias and many heteronormative assumptions and mores that reflect his era (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). Critics of Erikson's theory also argue that it neglects the role of attachment and relationships, both of which greatly impact adoptee development (Berzoff, 2008; Brodzinsky, Schecter & Henig, 1998). Moreover, from a post-modern perspective, critics of Erikson's theory posit that the linear and hierarchical nature of stages is unrealistic and that Erikson's development of a singular identity excludes the possibility of multiple of identities (Berzoff, 2008).

In excluding the culturally situated aspects of Erikson's theories however, theorists have removed the very characteristic that could be used to examine an often

overlooked aspect of adoptee development. By carefully examining Erikson's original writings, in conjunction with an understanding of the current social construction of adoption, it is possible to uncover an additional – and integral – dimension of adoptee development.

*The Relevance of Erikson's Theory:*

For multiple reasons, Erikson's theory of psychosocial ego development serves as an ideal basis for understanding adoptee development. As a start, Erikson's theory is ideal because it is already widely used as a basis for understanding adoptee development. In this respect, it is possible to build on the comprehensive work done by previous researchers, theorists and clinicians (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Grotevant, 1997; Hoopes, 1990). By integrating a consideration of the impact of the social construction of adoption, it is possible to use these pre-existing theoretical insights to develop a richer, more nuanced understanding that is needed.

To accomplish this, it is necessary to reconsider and re-establish Erikson's original emphasis on the social context of development:

He brought social context in every aspect of psychological development, so that social contexts of oppression, disenfranchisement, poverty, violence, war, discrimination and natural disasters all interact with the child's developing psyche (Berzoff, 2008, p.102).

This social context also includes the prevalent moral and ethical discourses (Wegar, 1992). Adding this dimension to our understanding of adoptee development would also help to address critiques of current perspectives, which suggest that the current focus on the biological and psychological factors – to the exclusion of social factors – of adoptee



development are pathologizing (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Lash Esau, 2000; Wegar, 1995).

It has been suggested that one of the strengths of Erikson's original theory is that it considers healthy ego development to consist of an ideal ratio between positive and negative outcomes at each stage (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). This implies that situations conceptualized as pathogenic do not create individual pathology in and of themselves, rather mastery of difficult situations can result in healthy development (Berzoff, 2008). In the context of adoption, this implies that even if the adoptive family form continues to be stigmatized, a more inclusive theory of adoptee development allows for the possibility of adoptees being seen as non-pathogenic.

Finally, it is important to note that Erikson's original writings also allow room for the discussion of the impact of hegemony in development (Erikson, 1963). Hegemony involves "structures of everyday thinking" that create, maintain and evolve the dominant discourse and this struggle over power and meaning involves the definition of what is acceptable, normal and successful (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson, 1992, p.381). This echoes Erikson's assertion that each culture places more or less emphasis on certain stages, which then impacts what "normal" or ideal development looks like (Erikson, 1963).

In this manner, society and the individual interact in a process whereby progression through developmental stages in a certain way is rewarded by society. Individuals who are defined as successful then acquire the power to define what is acceptable. Therefore, a group of individuals defined as inherently unsuccessful has limited power to change societal definitions. However, far from eschewing society's

control, most individuals seek societal rewards because abiding by societal norms is constructed both as desirable and often necessary to survival. For example, an individual who does not successfully individuate is not accorded much respect in society, which in turn impacts his or her ability to engage in socially acceptable roles, such as employment and social relationships.

*Revisiting Erikson: Theoretical Expansions beyond Familial Factors*

In the current conception of adoptee development, there are many examples of how the exclusion of social context defines adoptees as less successful in their development. Current exclusive explanations (hereafter referred to as exclusive theories), such as the extensive writing of Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998) suggest that the most critical factors in explaining adoptee adjustment are gender, age at adoption, adoptive family structure and dynamics, and the parenting style, psychological adjustment and parental attitudes of adoptive parents. The consideration given to the environment within the adoptive family acknowledges the importance of attachment and relationships, which has been critiqued as a consideration that is sorely lacking in Erikson's original writing (Berzoff, 2008; Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Erikson, 1963). However, the current theoretical expansions still have not gone far enough in situating adoption in a larger social context, beyond that of the familial or immediate community levels.

A more inclusive theory (hereafter referred to as an inclusive theory) that accounts for this social context will allow for a richer, more nuanced understanding of adoptee development. Presently, few theories of adoptee development have made explicit the effects of 'adoption' as a socially constructed entity on the development of the

individual (Ambert, 2005). As the individuals' ability to develop is contingent on our ability to adapt to the social environment, a more expansive theoretical view which can better account for the societal pressures acting on the individual and the family will allow a fuller and more realistic picture on adoptee development (Erikson, 1963).

As outlined in Chapter 2, Erikson's theory posits that individuals move through eight different stages across the lifespan, encountering and mastering different challenges and tasks with varying levels of success (Erikson, 1963). This model has been used to explain adoptee development, with adoption regarded as a factor that overlays normal developmental processes (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

#### *Stage One: Trust versus Mistrust*

During the first stage of development, Erikson (1963) proposes that the infant's main task is to gain a sense of trust, coming to experience caregivers as reliable. Erikson also viewed a certain level of mistrust as healthy, noting that an infant must learn to trust in others, while also learning to trust in him or herself as able to cope with the surrounding environment (1963). In the current application of Erikson, the events leading up to adoption as well as the adoption process itself are seen as potential detriments to the formation of trust in caregivers. For instance, in cases where neglect, abuse or some other trauma has occurred before the adoption, the infant's ability to trust in adoptive parents is seen as potentially compromised, complicated or delayed (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). This argument is valid, but limited.

Exclusive iterations of Erikson's theory contain no acknowledgement of the impact of the social construction of adoptive kinship. For instance, given the assigned

importance of consanguinal ties, adoptive families often are viewed as less capable of forming relationships, with the lack of blood ties presented as a barrier to attachment and the formation of trust in caregivers (Wegar, 2000). This affects adoptive families in that parents who have internalized the idea that adoption is second best may have difficulty forming a secure attachment to their children. Their fear that their adoptive children will reject them or be unable to form meaningful bonds because of the lack of genetic tie may lead to decreased parental investment on the part of adoptive parents. This in turn creates a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ambert, 2005; Leon, 2002).

Additionally, given the pervasive societal messages that adoptive parents are somehow inferior because of their infertility, adoptive parents may have difficulty developing a sense of parental entitlement (Ambert, 2005; Miall, 1996). The intense scrutiny experienced by adoptive parents during the adoption process may accentuate feelings of parental inferiority (Ambert, 2005; March & Miall, 2000). Decreased feelings of parental entitlement have numerous consequences; however, during the earliest stage of the infant's development, adoptive parents may feel as if they do not deserve to have a child love them (Ambert, 2005). Furthermore, when adoptees are old enough to absorb and internalize social cues, the pervasive message that their adoptive parents cannot love them as much as biological parents could also causes distress for children (Ambert, 2005; Leon, 2002). This creates a situation wherein children who might otherwise form healthy attachments may question their attachment, their caregivers and their self-worth.

### *Stage Two: Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt*

In the second stage of development, Erikson (1963) proposes that the main task facing toddlers involves gaining a sense of autonomy while overcoming feelings of shame and doubt. This is accomplished through mastery of the body, the environment and caregivers (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). This stage encompasses the terrible twos when toddlers may actively challenge their parents' authority. An exclusive application of Erikson's theory recognizes that adoptive parents may find this emerging sense of autonomy threatening to their sense of parental entitlement, painting this as a normal process for all families. However, exclusive theories also posit that a parent's ability to provide behavioural regulation may depend on how connected an adoptee feels to his or her adoptive parents (Grotevant, 1997). This seems to implicitly question whether the attachment between adoptive parents and children is as secure as the bond between biological parents and their children. This is a valid question, to be sure, but a question that should explicitly factor in the context of social factors affecting attachment and parental entitlement.

Additionally, it is recognized widely that children become aware of race during this stage of development (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Erikson, 1963). Exclusive theories acknowledge that children's burgeoning recognition of racial difference within their adoptive family can have implications for family functioning and that parents must approach this issue with sensitivity and awareness to promote the healthy development of their adoptive children (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). This point, while essential, discussed mostly within the rubric of familial difference, with racial difference treated as a factor forcing families to confront the differences inherent in adoptive family structure.

Short of the use of denial, racial difference within an adoptive family prevents adoptive parents from rejecting family differences (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

This analysis, however, fails to account for the ways in which racism impacts family functioning, including racism within the family, racism from without the family and the effect of internalized racism in the adoptee. An inclusive theory would consider the intersection of the social construction of adoption with other identity referents. For instance, transracial adoptees are more likely to identify themselves as adopted (McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982). If transracial status renders adoptive identity more salient, this creates the potential to amplify any effects created by the social construction of adoption.

Additionally, research suggests that in order for transracially adopted children to experience the best outcomes possible, adoptive parents must possess a high level of cultural competency. The attributes necessary for cultural competency are not necessarily inherent in adoptive parents. Rather awareness of the impacts of racism is necessary to motivate adoptive parents to develop the appropriate attitudes, skills and knowledge base to give them the ability to support their children with racial identity development and when their children encounter racism (Vonk, 2001) For instance, adoptive parents may not know how to deal with racism themselves; they may advise their children to ignore incidents of racism rather than helping them to develop active coping skills (Vonk, 2001). If understanding and feelings of pride in one's racial identity are considered elements of mastery over one's body, then it is possible that when transracial adoptees are taught unintentionally to ignore racism, and therefore their difference – as opposed to actively coping with others' reactions to their difference – they may be taught metaphorically that

their bodies (via their race) are uncontrollable and should be ignored rather than mastered. Finally, one must consider the embodiment of adoptees. It is possible that adoptees – whose unknown genetic material is constructed as a proverbial time bomb, might have more difficulty mastering a body that is constructed as alien, other and uncontrollable (Gailey, 2006; Wegar, 2000). This would hold true for all adoptees, even those of the same race as their adoptive family.

### *Stage Three: Initiative versus Guilt*

In the third stage of development, Erikson proposes that the main task facing young children is developing a sense of initiative while resisting the feeling of guilt (Erikson, 1963). An integral component of this task involves identifying with one's parents, which allows children both to identify with someone who has a productive role in society and to internalize moral values. Children thereby start to develop a sense of moral responsibility and an ability to make enduring commitments (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). Additionally, during this stage of development, children's language starts to develop and children begin to create a narrative of self (Berzoff, 2008).

Exclusive theories of adoptee development emphasize several important developmental milestones that occur during this stage of development. In particular, the development of language heralds the emergence of an adoption narrative (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). At this point in development, cognition is still developing, so most adoption narratives are merely mimicry of what adoptive parents narrate: adoptees copy what their parents say, therefore, parents become a source of self-narrative and self-definition (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). This explanation emphasizes the family as

the primary source of messages about adoption, but neglects a potentially relevant point: the adoption narrative imparted to adoptees contains not only explicit facts but implicit messages too. These implicit messages do not merely emerge from thin air within the adoptive family, but are highly influenced by the internalized messages present within the family (Ambert, 2005). In this manner, family may act as a conduit between the adoptee and the wider society.

Exclusive theories also suggest that the main task of this stage – identification with parents – may be hindered by adoptees’ fantasies about biological parents (Hoopes, 1990). The suggestion is that since adoptees may have difficulty identifying with adoptive parents, the development of their sense of moral responsibility may be delayed or impaired. There are two assumptions implicit in this assertion. The first implicit message reflects the societal assumption that biological ties are necessary for the formation of attachment – therefore identification with adoptive parents, who are not related by blood, must be more difficult. While adoptee fantasies about biological parents may make identification with parents more difficult in some instances, it is important to note that internalized social norms and mores may also be responsible for this occurrence (Ambert, 2005; Leon, 2002). The second implicit assumption is that since adoptees have difficulty identifying with adoptive parents, they must be morally inferior. This is yet another way in which adoptees are constructed as inferior to biological children. These messages have created a rhetorical link that perpetuates the misconception that adoptees are inherently inferior or defective.

For instance, Leon (2002) notes that the earliest instances of feelings of loss in adoptees often emerge during the initial telling of the adoption narrative. Notably, these



feelings of loss often are related to regrets at not having been gestated by one's adoptive mother. It is only during later stages, once adoptees have internalized society's construction of adoptive parenthood as inferior, that loss of biological parents arises (Leon, 2002). In this vein, exclusive theories overlook how the construction of adoption and the assumption that adoptive parents are inferior might impact adoptee identification with adoptive parents (Wegar, 1995).

Likewise, exclusive theories also overlook how the construction of adoptees as inherently different or inferior might impact the development of a sense of initiative (Wegar, 1995). If society views adoptees as potential genetic time bombs, then the development of initiative might be regarded with less enthusiasm than in other children. For example, if adoptees are either "passive and lovable or active and evil" (Gailey, 2006, p.85), this creates a double bind for adoptees. Adoptees can either develop a sense of initiative but internalize that this initiative is bad, or they can forestall the development of a sense of initiative and be regarded as benign, as well as developmentally delayed. Additionally, it is important to note that according to Erikson's developmental task, becoming a productive member of society is an end goal for this stage of development; therefore, this double bind also creates a situation in which adoptees may experience internal conflicts as they are being barred from becoming productive members of society (Erikson, 1963). This could certainly lead to feelings of guilt.

#### *Stage Four: Industry versus Inferiority*

The development of a sense of initiative is furthered during the fourth stage of development, during which children must develop a sense of industry or productivity (Erikson, 1963). If a sense of industry is not developed, then feelings of inferiority may arise (Erikson, 1963). This stage roughly coincides with latency, during which many skills and abilities start to develop (Berzoff, 2008; Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). For this reason, children receive recognition through production and demonstrate newfound competence with their skills. Most importantly, many of these skills are exercised and displayed through cooperation with peers. For this reason, the importance of peers increases, in the sense of both integration with and acceptance by peers (Erikson, 1963). The most important skills developed during this stage include expressive and cognitive abilities, the result of which is the development of a self-narrative (Berzoff, 2008). Additionally, as cognitive skills improve, children's thinking becomes more logical (Berzoff, 2008; Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Finally, mastery of this stage sets the basis for adolescent identity development, out of which the first signs of individuation emerge (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). This includes increased displays of autonomy; children who are praised for these self-sufficient attempts at productivity will develop a sense of competency, while children who are either negated for these attempts or who fail to develop the skills deemed appropriate for their age may develop a sense of inferiority (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963).

This stage has numerous implications for adoptee development, with both personal and familial manifestations. From the standpoint of exclusive theories, the development of logical thinking and cognitive skills means that adoptees inevitably

realize that they have to have been given up to have been adopted. This can threaten adoptee identity and create feelings of loss (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Exclusive theories also recognize that adoptive status may be a salient way in which adoptees feel different than their peers. These feelings of difference are posited to set the stage for adoptees initial figurative search for their biological parents (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., (1998) argue that adoptees should actively be encouraged to use their newfound expressive abilities to discuss their adoptive status and that open communication about adoption should be supported and encouraged in the family. This is purported to help adoptees cope with feelings of difference and loss and support healthy development (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

Exclusive theories also incorporate the concept of the family romance fantasy, which is theorized to emerge at this stage. As postulated by early psychoanalysts, the latency age child increasingly desires autonomy and fantasizes about a family that does not curtail the child's growing sense of competence and autonomy through limits or rules (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Latency-age children imagine that this "real" family will eventually rescue them from their tyrannical, limit-setting parents. In biological families, children usually outgrow this fantasy as they develop the ability to hold ambivalent feelings about their family. For the adopted child, however, the resolution of this process is complicated by the actual existence of a second set of parents (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). This may lead to the use of splitting as a defense, with one family construed as all good and one as all bad. This also may be mirrored in the adoptive family itself, whereby a family narrative emerges in which all a child's good or bad traits are attributed to one set of parents (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Adoptees may

maintain this tendency to use splitting as a defense mechanism well into adolescence.

While most adopted children eventually do resolve the family romance fantasy, exclusive theories suggest that the prolongation of this fantasy may predispose adoptees to a preference for the defense mechanism of splitting for the rest of their lives (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

The exclusive perspective of this stage raises many relevant points, yet some key social factors that impact development during this stage are missing. Specifically, this perspective overlooks the impact of how adoptive parenthood socially constructed as inferior and the impact of peer relationships on adoptee development. These factors have consequences both for adoptees' growing sense of autonomy and competence as well as for family functioning.

As suggested briefly above, adoption is constructed as a loss in which adoptees are given up (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Leon, 2002). Adoption is also constructed as an inferior means of family formation. As adoptees develop increased cognitive ability and focus on peer integration, they also necessarily become more aware of social definitions. As a result, adoptees may internalize the idea that adoptive families are inferior and question the permanence and/or validity of their family: "The extent to which biological parents are constructed by the child as the 'real' parents may directly determine the magnitude of the loss and, at the same time, undermine the authority of the functionally real, but invariably discredited adoptive parents" (Leon, 2002, p.654). The definition of adoptive parents as unreal would certainly impact both the extent of parental authority and the devaluation of the adoptive family, especially when contrasted with a fantasied biological family (Ambert, 2005; Leon, 2002). Exclusive theories assume that

the prolonged family romance fantasy is a naturally occurring psychological – and therefore individual – process that stems from the literal existence of a second family but neglects the impact of social definitions of the family on the individual psychological process (Wegar, 1995).

Moreover, exclusive theories also overlook the double bind inherent in their description of the family romance fantasy. Resolution of the family romance fantasy is portrayed as a key part of healthy development; ideally, the adoptee will overcome his or her tendency to split families into all good or all bad. However, as suggested during the description of the third stage, adoptees also are expected to identify with their adoptive parents in order to achieve healthy development (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

Given that biological parents are socially constructed as selfish, irresponsible pariahs, it would be considerably harder to reconcile both the positive and negative aspects of biological parents (Ambert, 2005; Gailey, 2006). This essentially creates a situation in which adoptees can develop the ability to experience ambivalence concerning both families and be considered mature *except* adoptees are also expected to internalize the prevalent societal assumptions about their adoptive and biological parents so that they can identify with their socially acceptable adoptive parents (Erikson, 1963).

Additionally, exclusive theories suggest that adoptees may have different skills and abilities than their adoptive families, but do not expand this idea to examine how this might impact the development of a sense of competency (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Therefore, it is not recognized that adoptees competency may be questioned if their adoptive family possesses and validates skills and abilities that are not genetically inherent for adoptees.

Family is not the sole means by which the social construction of adoption impacts development during this stage. Exclusive theories do not adequately consider the impact of peer relations on adoptee development, especially given the importance assigned to peer integration by Erikson's theory (Erikson, 1963). For instance, exclusive theories assign importance to adoptees' feeling of difference (in contrast to their non-adopted peers) but do not discuss how peer reactions can mitigate these feelings. Ambert (2005) notes that it is common for adoptees to experience pity and ridicule from their peers and that this creates feeling of shame, fear of rejection and desire for secrecy. Wegar (1995) supports this assertion in writing that "young adoptees are vulnerable to feeling 'different' or 'bad' due to the comments and actions of others" (p.546). This suggests that adoptees experience the stigma attached to their adoptive identity in their immediate peer interactions.

Erikson (1963) remarks that stigma can impact a developing child's ability to feel or see him or herself as competent. For this reason, an inclusive theory would take into account that not only do adoptees have to master their newfound skills and abilities, they have to do this within the context of a stigmatized identity. Therefore, an adoptee must learn to cope effectively with emotions aroused by stigma, since they may feel different because of their adoptive status when they are in social interactions with their peers (Grotevant et al., 2000). Inevitably, conflicts can arise for the adoptee as incongruent experiences may add confusion as to how an adoptee should experience him or herself vis-à-vis others: while open communication within the family is considered a part of healthy adoptee development, an adoptee's growing ability to express their feelings and personal narrative is not necessarily adaptive within the context of a stigmatizing peer

group (Ambert, 2005). For this reason, adoptees may be encouraged to express themselves, while also develop the idea via their immediate experience that they will only be accepted and seen as competent if they remain silent regarding their adoptive identity.

### *Stage Five: Identity versus Role Confusion*

During the fifth stage of development, Erikson proposes that adolescents must create a sense of identity or else risk role confusion (1963). Double binds and mixed messages form the background for this next stage of development as the adoptee forays into society. Erikson (1963) theorizes that the integration of skills, abilities and masteries gained during previous stages all culminate in the “promise of a ‘career’ [in which adolescents integrate] the opportunities offered in social roles” (p.261). The basis for this promised role in society lies in the individual’s efforts to define his or her identity, which happens when the adolescent falls in love with other people or groups and ideas (Berzoff, 2008).

Exclusive theories of adoptee development emphasize that identity formation is more difficult for adoptees for a number of reasons (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Hoopes, 1990). Exclusive theories outline both biological and social factors, but only those that occur within a consideration of the individual and family system. These include the importance of genetics to identity and the role of the family in supporting identity formation (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Hoopes, 1990).

First and foremost, these theories emphasize that a lack of genetic connection with adoptive parents can create “genealogical bewilderment”, described as an insecure self-image that results from the absence of feelings of security and sense of belonging

engendered by biological ties (Hoopes, 1990, p.152). This psychological crisis is posited to occur when adoptees are not able to identify with their adoptive parents; therefore, identity achievement is complicated because the adolescent adoptee does not have social role models on which to base their mastery of social roles (Hoopes, 1990).

Despite this apparent devaluation of adoptive family bonds, exclusive theories also emphasize the importance of the adoptive family in supporting adolescent adoptees, specifically the family's ability to help the adolescent deal with questions about his or her adoption and identity can greatly impact identity achievement (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Grotevant et al., 2000). Factors associated with positive identity achievement outcomes include open communication about adoption within the adoptive family, the acceptance of differences between family members, and the acceptance of infertility by parents (thereby, implying good "caretaking confidence") (Hoopes, 1990, p.151).

Exclusive theories suggest that adoptee identity formation is highly contingent on the quality of adoptive parenting (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Hoopes, 1990)

However, exclusive theories also characterize adoptive families as possessing several characteristics that hinder individuation and identity formation. In keeping with the assertion that parenting is a major factor, some theorists suggest that adoptive parents' feelings of inferiority stemming from their incapacity to bear children may cause disproportionate stress during their adolescents' strivings for independence (Hoopes, 1990). This may cause "infantilization" of the adolescent and prevent individuation (Hoopes, 1990, p.165). Hoopes (1990) posits that adoptive families are less individuated in general and have more difficulty acknowledging each family member as a separate, discrete unit. Therefore, the individuation that occurs as a normal part of identity



formation may be complicated by the tension between individuation/separation and family integration. Adoptees may fear that their individuation threatens the security of the family, since adoptive families are seen as having to work especially hard to form bonds of attachment (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Hoopes, 1990).

Additionally, exclusive theories posit that the family romance fantasy continues well into adolescence for adoptees (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). As a result, adoptees continue to use the relatively immature defense of splitting, which can impact the family environment, depending on which family is cast as the good or bad family. It can also become a factor in the development of sexual identity, as outlined below (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

From the standpoint of physical development, adoptee identity formation is further complicated by the absence of genetic information (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Exclusive theories acknowledge that social norms influence this, for the stigma against illegitimacy and the “bad” sexuality associated with biological parenthood may cause adoptees to fear that they have inherited their biological parents’ “bad” sexuality (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). If adoptees’ genealogical inheritance is shrouded in mystery, fantasies about the legitimacy of their conception, or the sexual activities or histories of birth parents may emerge. As adolescents are inevitably struggling to make sense of their own sexuality at this stage of development, having to confront or question their birth parents’ sexual history will add burden to the task of defining one’s sexual identity. Exclusive theories emphasize that the greatest threat to adoptee’s identity is the internalization of this sense of being bad, which may be exacerbated by adoptees’ dependence on splitting as a defense mechanism (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

Finally, exclusive theories suggest that it is normal for adoptees to start considering a literal search for their biological parents at this point in their development (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). It is posited that this is related to both the personality traits of the adoptee and the degree of openness in communication about adoption within the adoptive family (Hoopes, 1990).

As may be apparent, this stage of development is one of the most thoroughly examined in the adoption literature (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant et al., 2000; Hoopes, 1990). Despite this, exclusive theories fail to examine several elements critical to identity formation by neglecting the majority of social factors relevant to this stage of development. Social factors are highly influential at this stage of development, yet exclusive theories entirely overlook this at the personal, family and social level.

Erikson (1963) suggested that all stages are impacted by social norms and mores, but that the importance of social norms and mores becomes highly visible during adolescent identity development. This suggests that the impact of the social construction of adoption would be especially visible at this point in development. Since the social construction of adoption is so ambivalent, and potentially very negative, it also makes sense that adoptee identity formation is complicated. However, this is not necessarily because of pathology on the part of adoptees or adoptive families, for “By the very nature of the institution of adoption, guilt and shame and rejection may shape the adolescent’s emerging sense of self and identity” (Grotevant, 1997, p.144).

Moreover, while an inclusive theory of adoptee development might build on the pre-existing understanding of adoptee development posited by exclusive theories for most

of the previous stages of development, this is one instance where the pre-existing exclusive theories of adoptee development are highly shaped by the unexamined social factors. How the larger society perceives and reacts to adoption has a direct influence on adoptee identity development because unanswered questions about adoptive identity can complicate an already complex stage of development. Adolescent adoptees may be particularly vulnerable and sensitive to stereotypes because the main task of this stage is to find a place to fit into society.

Consider for instance, “genealogical bewilderment” (Hoopes, 1990, p.152). This psychological crisis is predicated on the necessity of biological bonds for adequate identity formation, almost explicitly claiming the inadequacy of adoptive bonds. While exclusive theories acknowledge the impact of social norms and stereotypes on the development of adolescent sexual identity, few question the inevitability of an adoptee’s struggle with societal assumptions (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Most of the theories do not describe the process by which adoptees receive this message, nor the impact of other people’s assumptions of adoptees’ supposed sense of “badness” (Ambert, 2005). Exclusive theories also fail to include a discussion of how this might prohibit adoptees from seeing themselves in socially acceptable roles.

Similarly, descriptions of the role of the adoptive family within exclusive theories reiterate the dominant view of what constitutes a normal family (Wegar, 2000). Adoptive families are portrayed as an inferior environment in which to develop, with the manner whereby these family bonds are formed being seen as inferior and not vigorous enough to withstand separation and individuation (Hoopes, 1990). Exclusive theories fail to acknowledge that the predominant ethic of reciprocity frames the adoptive process, for

adoptees receive the implicit message that they have been “rescued” and should therefore be grateful to their adoptive families (Wegar, 1992, p.98). As a result, adoptive parents may view adolescent rebellion ungrateful behaviour on the part of the adoptee. In addition, adolescent adoptees may also view adolescent rebellion as a threat to the family if they feel it implies that their family is inferior.

Likewise, the assertion that it is normal for adoptees to search for biological relatives obscures the large proportion of adoptees that do not search for biological relatives, thereby implying that these non-searching adoptees are somehow abnormal (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Leon, 2002). The not so subtle implication is that healthy development requires knowledge of biological origin (Ambert, 2005). This creates yet another double bind: if adoptive families do an adequate job, then adoptees should not need to search in order to achieve identity formation. However, since adoptive bonds are considered inferior and genetic knowledge is considered essential to one’s identity formation, such a search is deemed imperative. This double bind forms within the tension that exists between the ethic of self-discovery and the ethic of reciprocity (Wegar, 1992). Ironically, it is suggested that searches for biological family are often initiated to satisfy the curiosity of those around the adoptee. Adoptees may search so that they have enough information to answer other people’s questions, suggesting that the ethic of self-discovery is in some ways a fallacy, or that even while engaging in an appropriately individualistic way, adoptees are still meeting the needs of others (Wegar, 1992, 2000; Gailey, 2006).

All of this suggests that adolescence is one stage needs more careful consideration. An inclusive theory might consider all of the manifestations of social

expectations more carefully, considering the personal and the family environment, as well as the ways in which the social impacts both of these. Given that our society is so concerned with individual identity development, it seems critical that our theories of adoptive adolescent identity development leave more pathways in which adoptees can be seen as maturing in non-pathological ways (Wegar, 1992; Grotevant, 1997).

### *Stage Six: Intimacy versus Isolation*

Erikson (1963) proposed that once adolescence is passed, young adults must master intimacy or face isolation during the sixth stage of development. Developing the capacity to be emotionally and physically intimate with a partner consists of mutuality without the loss of identity (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). This requires the individual to be secure enough in his or her identity or ego to temporarily merge with another person. Erikson also theorized that once the identity is secure enough, individuals develop the ability to think dialectically. In contrast to adolescence, when the individual may engage in all or nothing thinking to defend against identity confusion, the young adult in this stage may have more capacity to tolerate ambivalence (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). As implied above, success in this stage is contingent on mastery of the previous stage, as are most of the stages (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963). Additionally, the capacity for intimacy is contingent on successful mastery of even earlier stages, such as the capacity for trust developed during infancy (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

Exclusive theories of adoptee development discuss this stage almost as thoroughly as that of adolescence. This extra attention stems in particular from the view that adoptee development is more complicated, meaning that identity formation is often prolonged

through young adulthood instead of being completed in adolescence (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). In part, this is presented as sequelae of delay or impairment in earlier stages. This is also presented as affecting the tasks normally mastered during young adulthood. For instance, exclusive theories suggest that adoptees have sometimes resolved the family romance fantasy by young adulthood. From this perspective, an adoptee that has mastered the task of identity formation should be able to tolerate ambivalent feelings about both adoptive and biological parents. However, the prolongation of this psychological process is also theorized to create a lasting predisposition to splitting as a defense mechanism, thereby affecting the development of dialectical thinking (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Another example involves the development of the capacity for intimacy, which exclusive theories propose may be affected by an incomplete development of the capacity to trust due to compromised attachment stemming from trauma during infancy (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

Exclusive theories also suggest that the prolongation of identity development can impact several other areas of life and functioning during young adulthood, such as the development of a career and professional identity and the task of starting a family (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). The development of a professional identity is an important and potentially complicated task for all young adults. Exclusive theories suggest that for adoptees, this process can be even more complicated because of tension within the adoptive family system. Adoptees may have different capabilities, interests and skills than their adoptive parents because of their different genes, while still contending with the desires, expectations and values of their adoptive parents, just like biologically related children (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

The development of identity in the context of new parenthood is also posited to be more complicated for adoptees because their children may be the first biological relatives they have ever met (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Additionally, exclusive theories posit that adoptees may have the desire to react differently to pregnancy and parenthood than their biological parents (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Finally, exclusive theories suggest that adoptees' parental identity may be impacted by the lack of genetic history that adoptees are able to pass on to their children (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

As with many of the other stages, exclusive theories establish a good basis for an understanding of adoptee development during young adulthood. However, these theories once again fail to account for the social context of adoptee development. As with the previous stages of development, Erikson (1963) stated that all of the developments and tasks of this stage are accomplished within the context of social norms; acceptable, socially sanctioned intimacy, sexuality and family forms are all highly socially defined. This unfortunately is exemplified very clearly by Erikson's own heteronormative assertions about which sexual practices are examples of healthy intimacy, which is a reflection of the dominant social discourses of his era and one of his highly critiqued theoretical limitations.

Further, there are several unexamined assumptions that have been naturalized in exclusive theories of adoptee development. Primarily, the emphasis on the individual or family etiology of the proposed delay in mastery of age-appropriate tasks is problematic. In this instance, etiology is predicated on the primacy of genetic ties, which once again surfaces as an important theme, along with the idea that adoptees are somehow inferior

because of their unknown genetic history (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). This depiction of the adoptive family as inferior masks several of the ethical motives that continue to carry weight (Ambert, 2005; Wegar, 1992).

In addition, it is necessary to start by examining the emphasis on individual and family etiology of theorized delays during this stage. While the prolongation of the family romance fantasy may be realistic, and identity formation may also be prolonged for adoptees, it is misleading to portray these as unrelated to the way adoption is socially constructed. For instance, the preference for splitting as a defense mechanism, and the ensuing difficulty with ambivalence is portrayed as stemming solely from an individual psychodynamic process (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). This portrayal neglects the importance of the societal messages that abound concerning both adoptive and biological parents (Ambert, 2005). It is inherently problematic to label an adoptee as developmentally delayed due to an inability to tolerate ambivalent feelings about his or her adoptive or biological families when society constructs adoptive parents as inferior and biological parents as immoral and bad (Ambert, 2005; Gailey, 2006; Leon, 2002). This essentially creates a frame through which the actual characteristics – positive or negative – of both families are interpreted. Yet another double bind emerges whereby adoptees can display mature tolerance for ambivalence but refuse to accept societal definitions of parenthood, or they can remain immature by splitting their two families, but conform to societal definitions.

In a similar vein, exclusive theories also neglect to address the social construction of adoption when they consider the development of intimacy. Exclusive theories state that intimacy may be impacted by early trauma, which is a genuine concern for young



adoptees who have experienced trauma in early relationships (Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998; Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). However, their explanation includes adoptees in general, thereby validating the view that adoptive family bonds are inherently weaker than blood ties. There is no acknowledgement of how the social construction of adoption creates the impression that adoption is inherently traumatic and centered around the experience of loss (Leon, 2002). For this reason, while adoptees' ability to achieve intimacy may in fact be triggered by early attachment issues, these issues may stem from living in a society that has portrayed their primary familial attachments as inferior and insignificant (Leon, 2002).

The primacy of genetic ties also is reinforced by the analysis of adoptees and parenthood. Exclusive theories suggest that an adoptee's inability to pass on genetic information may be stressful, but they do not deconstruct how the ability to pass on genetic information is constructed as a parental duty (Ambert, 2005). Nor do they deconstruct the desire of adoptees to react to parenthood differently than their biological parents, which may in part be a reaction formation. The anxiety caused by imminent or new parenthood is normal. However, this anxiety may be more salient for adoptees, because of how the actions of biological parents are portrayed in our society. Since biological parents are constructed as immoral, immature and selfish, any impulse that an adoptee associates with their actions may trigger a reaction formation. Additionally, while it may genuinely be a significant event for an adoptee to meet a biological relative for the first time, part of the importance assigned to this event also stems from the importance assigned to blood ties in our society.

Finally, exclusive theories lack an analysis of how the ethic of reciprocity that pervades our society impacts adoptee identity development (Wegar, 1992). This oversight is especially evident in explanations of professional development. As Erikson (1963) suggests of this and previous stages, the professional aspirations of individuals are formed in the social context: in early childhood, society defines what constitutes acceptable initiative; in mid-childhood, society defines what constitutes productivity; and competence and in adolescence, the individual either conforms or subverts what society defines as acceptable roles. In this way, even defiance is a response to the dominant social discourse (Erikson, 1963).

Exclusive theories may briefly give credence to Erikson's emphasis by acknowledging that not all families place the same value on different professions; thus an artistic adoptee who is raised in an adoptive family that typically produces lawyers is likely to experience tension if his or her family does not value an artistic career (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). However, the social context is even more complicated than this: not only must adoptees navigate which professions family and society deem acceptable, they also must navigate this in the context of the ethic of reciprocity (Wegar, 1992). In other words, because adoptees are portrayed as indebted to their adoptive family, their decision to conform or defy familial expectations when tensions arise is impacted by the self-concept that they owe their families loyalty (Wegar, 1992). Furthermore, adoptees may also be deeply influenced by messages from societal stereotypes such as the dichotomy between "passive and lovable or active and evil" (Gailey, 2006, p.85). Although our society espouses the right to self-discovery, adoptees that engage in such explorations may have to do so at the expense of their duty to family,

and risk social disapproval (Gailey, 2006; Wegar, 1992). The social factors that are rendered invisible by exclusive theories in this stage of development have ramifications beyond this stage.

### *Stage Seven: Generativity versus Stagnation*

Erikson (1963) proposed that adults must develop a sense of generativity during the seventh stage of development or else experience a sense of stagnation. An individual can gain a sense of generativity by feeling needed and by feeling a sense of pride in what they have produced or nurtured (Erikson, 1963). This “productivity and creativity” (Erikson, 1963, p.267) is theorized to help individuals retain a sense of their identity and independence through the expression of their values.

Exclusive theories have relatively little to report on this stage of development, except to comment that the maintenance of identity and independence supported by generativity may be impacted by the ongoing evolution of adoptive identity (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Both Erikson (1963) and Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998) acknowledge that biological reproduction and family relationships are not the sole means of achieving generativity; however, the emphasis seems to fall here within exclusive theories. In particular, it is noted that the development of generativity coincides with a general shift in relationships, whereby adults start to look after their aging parents and act as mediators between younger and older generations, while intimate relationships may become “broader, more social and less sexual” (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998, p.152). This often places adoptees and non-adoptees alike in a position of responsibility within

the family and may create an emphasis identity in relation to the family life cycle (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

It is also notable, however, that while identity formation in earlier stages is performed in relation to what has passed since birth, identity in mid-life is maintained and performed in relation to what is to come, namely, physical decline and eventual mortality (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Exclusive theories posit that this creates a sense of urgency: “For people with an unresolved psychological issue – as is the case with many adoptees – this time urgency can tend to crystallize a focus on adoption in a way that never existed before” (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998, p.153). Exclusive theories portray one’s genetic material as a highly determining factor in one’s personality characteristics, suggesting that the urgency of mid-life may create a strong incentive to find one’s biological family (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

Exclusive theories also comment on the potential impact of secrecy in family and intimate relationships. Learning of one’s adoptive status at this late stage of development can be particularly devastating for adoptees, who may feel as though their earlier life was false (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Additionally, adoptees may or may not feel comfortable revealing their adoptive status within significant relationships, which can cause tension and distress (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998) This is another instance wherein exclusive theories provide a good base for understanding the individual and family factors involved in adoptee development, while neglecting the impact of social factors. Erikson noted that, “as to the institutions which safeguard and reinforce generativity, one can only say that all institutions codify the ethics of generative succession” (Erikson, 1963, p.267). As he succinctly explains, whether or not someone is

considered to have mastered this task depends on how society defines generativity. If society places a strong emphasis on the important responsibility and role of the individual within the context of the family life cycle, then differences in family life cycle may become more salient and pre-existing tensions may become more prominent. Rather than assume that family tensions or an urgent desire for biological information are the result of psychological issues, as Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998) do, it is possible to consider that family tensions or a desire for information may result from the increased focus on a limited conception of generativity as occurring solely within the context of the biological family unit.

This assertion is supported by the impact of secrecy on adoptees, which can exacerbate other factors (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Exclusive theories posit that secrecy within family and individual relationships may cause distress, but do not give a satisfactory explanation of why secrecy occurs, other than suggesting historical norms (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). Secrecy in adoption does not reflect a whim on the part of social workers, but rather has been advocated historically to protect adoptees and adoptive families from the double stigma of infertility and illegitimacy (Wegar, 2000). So, the remnants of secrecy reflect the social construction of adoption as an inferior way to form a family (Ambert, 2005; Wegar, 2000).

This is also reiterated in a less subtle manner when exclusive theories portray identity formation as highly contingent on biological factors. Apparently, earlier identity formation is sufficient for the time being, but once mortality comes into the picture, adoptees require access to information from their biological families to achieve more satisfactory identity formation. This may or may not be the case, but it does not take into

account that the social construction of the biological essentiality of identity may play a role in creating a sense of urgency for adoptees (Ambert, 2005; Wegar, 1992).

Finally, it is also important to consider what influence the increased emphasis on family responsibilities during mid-life might have on adoptees. This is particularly relevant given the ethic of responsibility that pervades the social construction of adoption (Wegar, 1992). For some adoptees, this increased stress on responsibility might be a natural fit; for others, it is possible that the increased salience of familial duty might intensify the pressure to suppress inclinations and initiatives that are not welcomed by adoptive family systems (Gailey, 2006; Leon, 2002; Wegar, 1992). This might be especially true in cases where an increased desire for biological information conflicts with family values in light of the increased responsibility within the family (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

#### *Stage Eight: Integrity versus Despair*

The emphasis on family structure and genetics also has implications for the eighth and final stage of development. Erikson (1963) proposed that during this final stage, older adults face the task of maintaining integrity in the face of mortality. If they are unable to master this task, older adults will instead experience a sense of despair at their impending death (Erikson, 1963). The experience of integrity as a culmination of all of the previous developmental stages includes accepting and finding order and meaning in the narrative of one's life (Berzoff, 2008; Erikson, 1963).

Mastery of skills throughout the previous seven stages allows for and promotes the mastery of this developmental task, but this is mediated by social norms. Erikson

(1963) highlighted the importance of the social context one last time in explaining the final stage of life, whereby the creation of a life review entails acceptance of the life course within the context of society and human history. In other words, it is easier to create a positive life narrative for one's self if the social roles one embodied are socially acceptable (Erikson, 1963). If integrity is achieved, the individual will experience a "post-narcissistic love of the human ego – not of the self – as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense, no matter how dearly paid for" (Erikson, 1963, p.268). In this sense, the individual who has lived his or her life in a way that is socially constructed as valuable will see their life as fitting within the larger scheme of things.

Exclusive theories of adoptee development highlight Erikson's assertion that this stage of development is a culmination of all of the previous stages of life:

During old age, the prominent conflicts of every other stage – trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation – occur one final time (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998, p.166).

Exclusive theories note that a life review consists of changing dissatisfactory elements where possible and accepting elements that cannot be changed, depending on the outcomes of previous stages (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). However, it is argued that this may be more poignant and distressing for adoptees, as so many facets of their lives – during infancy, childhood and even adolescence – were beyond their control (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). It is also posited that older adoptees have one last chance to consider their adoptive status, potentially questioning how their personalities and lives were shaped by adoption: "So one last time, the adoptee will metaphorically

climb the stairs, open the closet door, and take down the box to deal with his 'issue' – the fact of being adopted” (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998, p.170). Exclusive theories suggest that for adoptees despair may come from never having known who they really are (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

Finally, exclusive theories stress that community and family are two major sources of support for both older adoptees and non-adoptees. The existence of multiple generations of biological relatives is depicted as especially beneficial:

When older adults also can recognize personality traits and moral values that are passed on to grandchildren, they are especially gratified (...) Grandchildren provide this wonderful function for adoptees, too (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998, p.176).

The wonder of grandchildren (and children) is depicted as a soothing balm for older adoptees who may feel distanced from their adoptive and biological parents. In essence, exclusive theories suggest that the biological tie with descendants is especially important for the integrity of adoptees, since they do not have a biological tie with their ancestors (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). However, adoptees may wish that they had genetic information to pass on. This can also affect adoptees' ability to deal with mortality, since they may have no sense of the life spans of their biological parents (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). This final instance of “genealogical bewilderment” can create a sense of despair that may only be partially remedied by community and family support (Hoopes, 1990, p.152).

It is not surprising, given that the eighth stage of development is a culmination of all of the previous stages that exclusive theories of adoptee development manage to include all of their previous oversights in the description of this final stage. Although



these theories may have descriptive merit, in that adoptees may experience the emotions described, there is scarce no consideration given to how socially constructed assumptions concerning adoption and family affect older adoptees. Within the description of this stage, there are numerous examples of taken-for-granted assumptions underlying the construction of adoption, such as the primacy assigned to genetic ties and the depiction of adoptees as disempowered and thwarted by their adoptive status.

The life review of older adoptees is depicted as being more difficult due to the plethora of factors outside their control (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998). This is a surprising assertion, since *most* children have little control over their childhood. It is not possible to control the family that one is born into any more than it is possible to control the family into which one is adopted. Moreover, in making this assertion, exclusive theories imply that there is something about being adopted that one would want to control so as to change it for the better. As the quotation from Brodzinsky Schechter et al., (1998) not so subtly suggests, being adopted is portrayed as a facet of identity that is stored, hidden, forgotten or generally obscured. Furthermore, it is one's adoptive status, not a dissatisfactory life, which is labeled as a cause for despair.

None of these references acknowledge that shame or distress stemming from adoption is caused – at least in part – by the stigma that society has come to attach to adoption as an inferior means of family formation. There is also no connection made between the societal denigration of adoptive family attachment and the lack of connection felt between adoptees and both sets of parents as outlined in the ensuing argument. Far from examining the assumptions underlying the primacy of blood ties or the importance

of genetic knowledge, exclusive theories in this case actually reproduce the very social definitions and discourses that may contribute to adoptee distress in the first place.

For instance, consider the vital function assigned to children and grandchildren – which goes so far as to contradict the earlier assertion of Brodzinsky, Schechter et al. (1998) that generativity does not depend on biological reproduction. Not only is the primacy of the biological tie to identity formation reproduced, but adoptees are depicted as an “other” in comparison to “older adults”, as if older adoptees form a different category of humans altogether (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998, p.176). This insensitive commentary further denigrates the adoptive family by suggesting that adoptees would feel disconnected from their ancestors because adoptive family bonds are not enough to make up for a lack of biological connection. Adoptees are portrayed as dependent on their children and grandchildren when developing a sense of integrity and overcoming despair at their mortality.

Additionally, exclusive theories of adoptee development reproduce a dominant stereotype one last time by depicting adoptees as disempowered by the lack of information on their biological parent’s mortality. This reiterates the notion that adoptees are inferior because of their unknown genetic material (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998; Miall, 1996). Although illness is often genetically based, to assume that an acceptance of mortality is predicated on genetic knowledge rather than an understanding of one’s own role in the world is presumptive and erroneous.

One last factor neglected by exclusive theories is the impact of stigma on a life review. Erikson (1963) stresses that an important part of a life review is situating one’s life within the context of one’s society, which enables the individual to feel integrity

instead of despair. Far from explaining this aspect of Erikson's theory, exclusive theories overlook how the idea of adoption as it is currently constructed in the dominant discourse might increase the difficulty for adoptees of integrating this stigmatized aspect of their identity into a positive life review. Rather, exclusive theories only suggest that despair can result from individual and family processes instead of from the intersections between the individual and society (Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1998).

An inclusive theory would analyze how integrity or despair are mediated in the context of the social construction of adoption. For instance, are adoptees able to successfully form a positive life review if they are satisfied with how they coped with stigma against adoption? Many questions arise when considering a more complete inclusive theory, but it remains important to keep asking questions about how the unchallenged assumptions present in the dominant discourse shape adoptee development. In the following section, a case example will be presented to illustrate how the practical application of inclusive and exclusive theories of adoptee development can produce very different clinical pictures.

*A Case Example: Claire Bennet from Inclusive and Exclusive perspectives.*

Claire Bennet, the adolescent adoptee of *Heroes* (Kring, 2006) described and analyzed in the previous chapter, is an ideal case study with which to compare to exclusive and inclusive Eriksonian theories of adoptee development. One of the factors that makes Claire's narrative ideal is that it exemplifies how mastery of developmental skills is an ongoing process, which supports the idea that mastery of developmental tasks is fluid rather than static. This further demonstrates how contemporary critiques of

Erikson that question the rigid and linear nature of his developmental stages can be incorporated into a new understanding and application of his theory (Berzoff, 2008).

To reiterate, exclusive and inclusive theories of adoptee development are characterized by either the presence or lack of consideration concerning what assumptions are attached to “adoption” in the theories’ conceptual base. In particular, the applicability of theories is limited by whether the theory accepts certain assumptions typically linked with the understanding of adoption. Specific examples discussed in the previous chapter include the primacy assigned to blood ties and genetic information; the construction of adoptive parenthood as inferior; the construction of adoptees as inferior due to their unknown genetic material; the construction of biological parents as irresponsible, immature and selfish; and the consideration of the ethics of reciprocity and self-discovery (Ambert, 2005; Grotevant et al., 2000; Leon, 2002; Miall, 1996; Wegar, 1992, 1995, 2000). As a case in point, these constructs significantly change the clinical understanding of Claire’s case.

A case formulation of Claire’s case using the current exclusive theories of adoptee development will include a comprehensive understanding of her biological and psychological characteristics and a thorough family history. However, such a case history would not include an assessment of the societal context in which Claire lives. In this vein, Claire’s functioning and development would be seen as an attempt at “normal” development in abnormal circumstances (Brodzinsky, Schecter et al., 1998; Freud, 1999).

At the start of Claire’s narrative, a clear family romance fantasy emerges in which Claire defends against anxiety by splitting between her “bad” adoptive family and her “good” fantasied biological family. Through Mr. Bennet’s commentary on the adult

nature of the decision to meet one's biological parents, Claire is portrayed as immature (Kring, 2006). However, as Claire's narrative progresses, she eventually strongly identifies with her adoptive parents and is depicted as maturing and resolving the family romance fantasy (Kring, 2006). From an exclusive perspective, this would suggest that Claire has become a mature, well-adjusted adoptee who has preserved the integrity and cohesion of her adoptive family while simultaneously progressing towards the development of a socially acceptable career as a hero (Wegar, 1992).

The positive light in which exclusive theories explain the resolution of the family romance fantasy reiterates the sociological expectation that individuals will develop consistent and stable beliefs. Thus, Claire is considered mature because she makes a decision about what she values and because she meets the needs of her family (Gailey, 2006; Wegar, 1992). Additionally, from the perspective of viewers (which essentially includes our hypothetical clinician) Claire is depicted as well adjusted because she develops the ability to master her body. While Claire is initially frightened and upset by her newfound abilities, she eventually masters them. Her ability to control her alien body – and the metaphorical time bomb of her unknown genetic material – is comforting to the viewer (Wegar, 1995). In this understanding of Claire, she is regarded as well adjusted and as progressing normally through the adolescent tasks of identity formation towards maturity. In this case, an exclusive perspective is not overtly pathologizing, but it has made certain factors invisible (Grotevant et al., 2000; Wegar, 1995). If one considers Claire from an inclusive perspective, the clinical picture is different in important ways.

A case study of Claire written from an inclusive perspective would include an assessment of biological and psychological characteristics, a comprehensive family

history as well as an understanding of how societal assumptions intersect with these factors, therefore, affecting an adoptee's developmental experiences. This manner of integrating the biological, psychological and social reflects the reality that adoptive identity is formed in the context of the larger social world and that identity development is significantly impacted by the definitions of others (Erikson, 1963; Grotevant et al., 2000).

Through this lens, a clinician might understand Claire as filtering her unique personal experiences and conflicts through the lens of external social messages and the stigma attached to her identity as an adoptee, while trying to find her way to maturity. On both levels, Claire will have to make sense of the meaning of her genetic inheritance and abilities, developing ego strengths and defenses in the context of both adolescent and adoptive identity formation, so as to find a place for herself in society without compromising her individuality, while simultaneously negotiating social and intimate relationships through successfully individuating and separating from her adoptive family (Kring, 2006). An inclusive perspective will certainly reveal increased complexity within Claire's development.

From an inclusive perspective, Claire still emerges as a well-adjusted adolescent adoptee; her narrative portrays an adolescent who is successfully mastering developmental tasks in a socially sanctioned manner. By the end of season one, Claire has made solid progress towards identifying with the role of "hero" (Erikson, 1963; Kring, 2006, Episode 23). This occurs despite multiple instances of social disapprobation stemming from her identity as "other"; she is pitied by influential peers for being an adoptee and ostracized both for defying social norms and being a "freak" (Kring, 2006,

Episode 5). If these instances of social disapprobation are carefully considered and deconstructed, they reveal a dominant discourse with several assumptions pertinent to understanding Claire's development.

For instance, Claire's narrative depicts her as revisiting the developmental task of mastery over her body. This is pertinent because a balance of positive and negative outcomes in this developmental task leads to a sense of autonomy instead of a sense of shame and doubt (Erikson, 1963). Both the theme of autonomy and shame at one's body emerge clearly in *Heroes* (Kring, 2006). Claire eventually comes to understand the strengths and limitations presented by her newfound abilities, but this is highly mediated by social discourses. For instance, when Mr. Bennet comments that meeting her biological parents will allow Claire to know who she really is, he is referencing a dominant albeit socially constructed understanding that blood ties are imperative to identity formation (Ambert, 2005; Kring, 2006; Wegar, 1995, 2000). Since Claire's desire to meet her biological parents is driven by a desire to understand her body and abilities, this also implies that a sense of autonomy and pride in one's identity is dependent on a biological connection.

This is a powerful metaphor: the body – the literal physical self – becomes symbolic of the imperative to find identity. Without control over her body, Claire feels disempowered and confused about her identity. Once Claire resolves questions about her genetic identity, she is portrayed as having a strong sense of autonomy. Upon this foundation, Claire is then able to work to develop a sense of initiative in relation to her newly created, genetically clear identity. For instance, in "Episode 17", Claire rescues Mr. Bennet from a fire and saves his life (Kring, 2006). This example demonstrates how

Claire's proverbial re-mastery of multiple developmental tasks is portrayed as dependent on "self-discovery" (Wegar, 1992).

Furthermore, Claire's successful rescue attempt also exemplifies how the mastery of initiative sets the basis for children's ability to take on socially meaningful roles (Erikson, 1963). It also must be understood within the context of the ethic of reciprocity within our society (Wegar, 1992). Claire's heroics and eventual identification with Mr. Bennet represent both literal and metaphorical reciprocity: Claire literally protects her father in return for his protection, but metaphorically her rescue of and identification with him represent loyalty and indebtedness to her adoptive family. This loyalty and indebtedness is also exemplified by Claire's desire to protect her adoptive family from knowledge of her genetic inheritance. Since she views knowledge of her abilities as potentially destructive, Claire reciprocates their care by trying to prevent the disintegration of the family system (Kring, 2006).

Notably, this reciprocity is contrasted with Claire's drive for self-discovery. While exclusive theories of adoptee development might take the tension between these two imperatives as a sign of immaturity or splitting due to the incomplete resolution of the family romance fantasy, an inclusive theory recognizes that ambivalence results from the internalization of two opposing social mores (Wegar, 1992). Claire's subjective perspective, as portrayed through her narrative, also supports the relevance of the tension caused by the internalization of social assumptions. Claire's narrative recognizes the loss of biological information and kinships but eventually holds her adoptive family up as her "real" family – a deviation from the normal portrayal of adoptive families (Kring, 2006).



This affirmation of her adoptive family as her primary family can also be understood within the tendency to portray adoptive families as either destroyed or triumphing in the face of adversity (Gailey, 2006). An inclusive theory must also recognize that the dichotomy between triumphant or shattered adoptive families may cause anxiety for adoptees who, like Claire, view themselves as responsible for preserving the integrity of their family (Wegar, 1992). However, as demonstrated above, an inclusive understanding of adoptee development will provide a more complex and nuanced picture for clinicians. Without an understanding of the social context of individual and family factors, clinicians may overlook the tension that arises from trying to master developmental tasks in the face of so many societal double binds, mixed messages and competing ethics.

There is one final reason that a case study of Claire from an inclusive perspective is valuable: it demonstrates that an inclusive Eriksonian theory of adoptee development is able to respond to the numerous contemporary critiques of Erikson's original theories (Berzoff, 2008). An inclusive understanding of Claire's narrative demonstrates that it is possible to understand development as fluid and non-linear; to view women as empowered subjects rather than merely objects; to acknowledge the multiplicity of identity; and to acknowledge the interdependent nature of mature identity (Berzoff, 2008).

Claire epitomizes many of these responses. She is a strong female character whose identity development does not revolve only around her reproductive capacity, even though there are still elements of her narrative that reproduce the dominant discourse about femininity (Kring, 2006). However, while she is an object to be protected, pursued

and sexualized, she transcends this objectification by frequently defying these stereotypes (Yuen & Ray, 2009). Claire's identity is developed in such a way as to suggest that one can be simultaneously objectified and an empowered subject, thus demonstrating the multiplicity of identity and subjectivity within each individual. She draws on different characteristics and tropes depending on her context and this resourcefulness is portrayed as a strength (Kring, 2006). Moreover, Claire is depicted as re-engaging in mastery of developmental tasks in the context of new life cycle stages and emerging conflicts (Kring, 2006).

Lastly, one of the themes emphasized throughout *Heroes* is the interconnected nature of humanity (Kring, 2006; Yuen & Ray, 2009). The message that the ultimate goal of the individual is to find a community within which to pursue common goals, understanding and productivity is inherent in the narration and the plot development (Kring, 2006; Lindelhof, 2007). Claire's eventual identification with the values of her adoptive family and her bond with Peter Petrelli is what enabled her to find her "destiny", which is to assume the socially sanctioned role of "hero" (Kring, 2006, Episode 23). This is not portrayed as enmeshment or dependence; rather, this can be interpreted as productive and socially sanctioned interdependence, which in turn can be interpreted within the liberal sociopolitical context of the year in which season one was written and produced (Gailey, 2006).

The impact of the sociopolitical context on the development of Claire's narrative also illustrates the mutual applicability of Erikson's theory of psychosocial ego development with the concept of hegemony (Erikson, 1963; Gamson et al, 1992). This suggests that an inclusive Eriksonian theory of adoptee development is compatible with

post-structuralist theoretical analysis, despite the structuralist context in which Erikson originally wrote. Erikson recognized that each culture places more or less emphasis on certain stages, and this impacts what “normal” or ideal development looks like (Erikson, 1963). In Claire’s case, her particular development and the interdependence of heroes is portrayed as positive because of the liberal, yet slightly neo-liberal, and therefore somewhat individualistic sociopolitical context in which *Heroes* is written (Gailey, 2006; Kring, 2006). Ultimately, Erikson’s theory of psychosocial ego development allows for an analysis of “structures of everyday thinking” that create, maintain, and evolve the dominant discourse (Gamson et al., 1992). This analysis provides a space in which to understand how the definition of what is normal, acceptable and successful is embedded in our everyday practices, which ultimately reflects the way that dominant discourse privileges certain world views (Freud, 1999; Gamson et al, 1992).

*The Implications of Inclusive Eriksonian Theories of Adoptee Development for Social Work*

When the social construction of “normal” is naturalized through social work practices, it impacts the individuals, families and community systems that social work serves (Freud, 1999). In recent years there has been a widespread call for increased adoption awareness amongst mental health professionals as many within the adoption community feel that there are a lack of appropriate adoption-related specialists, therapists and supports (Schuck, 2009). Similarly, many mental health workers report feeling underprepared to work with adoption issues (Henderson, 2000).

However true this may be, it is also important to examine the pre-existing models that are used to increase awareness of adoption issues, such as exclusive Eriksonian theories of adoptee development. If the theories predominantly used exclude an understanding of how adoption has been socially constructed over time, then any services offered have the potential to be as detrimental as they are beneficial. Therapist statements that reflect either benevolent or negative stereotypes can both be unhelpful for clients (Henderson, 2000). By problematizing ‘adoption’ as a socially constructed concept however, social workers are then better equipped to challenge norms and assumptions. This critical perspective will then allow social to better understand the social context in which clients – individual, family or communities – operate. Ultimately, understanding the social context is necessary for understanding adoptee narratives, as adoptive identity cannot be understood outside of the context of social understanding of kinship and family (Grotevant et al., 2000; Wegar, 1992).

Moreover, by recognizing that even theories are socially constructed to meet the needs of the context and “to do particular kinds of work”, social work has the opportunity to operate in a self-reflexive way (Weinberg, 2009, p.295). In other words, even though the social work field and practitioners are inherently socially situated, their subjectivity does not need to distort their understanding if they are engaged in more self-reflexive way (Weinberg, 2009). By critically examining the pre-existing theories of adoptee development and reconsidering taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in these theories, social work will develop a greater ability to support and understand those it serves (Freud, 1999).

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Theories that focus solely on individual and family factors in adoptee development reflect the sociopolitical context in which they were developed. Overtime, “adoption” as a social entity has morphed in its meaning and its function in society. As it is represented in contemporary theories, “adoption” connotes an inherently inferior, albeit socially necessary, means of forming a family (Ambert, 2005; Miall, 1996; Wegar, 2000). This predominant attitude towards adoption in the general discourse reflects an ongoing societal ambivalence towards the act of adoption. Inevitably, this attitude proscribes what is considered acceptable behaviour for adoptees, given their assumed genetic inferiority and indebtedness to their adoptive parents (Ambert, 2005; Gailey, 2006; Wegar, 1992). Since societal theories and general attitudes inform each other, unchallenged assumptions and biases are further encoded through media depictions, which are often assumed to be a neutral source of information and knowledge, merely representing what is ‘normal’ within our society (Ambert, 2005; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes & Sasson, 1992; Wegar, 2000).

The intersection of the individual, family, and society has many implications, some of which directly implicate social workers and social work as a profession. Not the least of these implications is the need for social workers to recognize not only the social values embedded in theories surrounding adopting, but also the degree to which those values shape social work practices. In short, if social workers hope to engage in culturally

competent and adoption competent practice, they must take on a more critical stance, which includes becoming more self-reflexive in questioning their own assumptions. Since an uncritical involvement in the field can only perpetuate the same attitudes, accepting the seemingly neutral theories about adoptee development can only add to the stigma attached to adoption.

*The Intersection of Sociopolitical Macro Context and Social Work: The Case of Adoption*

Just as social workers strive to understand the meso or micro systems that surround their clients, the social work profession and the social welfare system also inhabit a larger macro context. Understanding this larger context is critical to understanding the interaction between the social work profession and adoption. As Freud (1999) explains, the Neo-liberal and Capitalist sociopolitical atmosphere emphasizes free market practices and the responsibility of the individual towards oneself. These emphases have a couple of consequences. In terms of hegemonic discourse, the emphasis on individual responsibility is manifested through the ethic of self-discovery (Wegar, 1992). This emphasis on the individual creates an appealing social narrative that depicts finding oneself as a richly rewarding and socially acceptable quest (Wegar, 1992). It also creates an environment where the responsibilities of the individual become paramount, rendering state or public intervention into the private sphere anathema to cultural morals (Gailey, 2006; Schuck, 2009). This further interacts with capitalist ideals to create a social environment wherein the onus of financial and economic responsibility falls on the individual or family unit (Schuck, 2009).

This is particularly evident in the privatization of the family. In general, neo-liberal policies place the locus of control on individuals or the family so that the onus of care work falls on the family instead of the state (Schuck, 2009). In the case of adoption, this is exemplified by the view of adoption as “private transaction” (Henderson, 2002, p.131). This is also exemplified by an exclusive view of adoption that regards any pathology in the adoptee as the result of individualistic factors, obscuring the impact of social stigmatization (Wegar, 1995). In turn, this obscures the ways in which public systems and state processes bear any responsibility towards the outcome of adoptions.

The intersection between neo-liberal and capitalist influences also helps explain the amount of social control exerted over the adoptive family. Since the family (as a system potentially requiring rehabilitation and social reform) is still understood within the rubric of the social welfare system in general, the adoptive family is even more highly mediated by social control than any other form of family (March & Miall, 2000). Furthermore, while this public intervention in the private family sphere may seem counterintuitive, it actually reflects the economic interests of those in power (Schuck, 2009). For instance, the social contract inherent within democratic societies allows for the protection of children, but state wards also represent an economic burden on the state. By allowing infertile couples to adopt children (a private, individual entity) who would otherwise become a responsibility of the state (a public entity), the ruling powers transfer responsibility to an appropriate private entity – adoptive families (Schuck, 2009).

This transfer of responsibility helps partially explain the ongoing ambivalent community attitudes towards adoption. Adoption is constructed as socially necessary because it places the responsibility for children in an appropriately private unit, yet the

adoptive family simultaneously is constructed as inferior. This assumption of inferiority stems primarily from the construction of the blood tie as essential to the formation of kinship bonds due to vestigial historical western beliefs (Ambert, 2005). Additionally, “the adoptive family has been socially constructed as deviant, stigmatized and ‘burdened’” and therefore inferior, in part because it *does* necessitate state intervention in a society that values individual responsibility and self-sufficiency (Wegar, 2000, p.363).

This creates a vicious cycle whereby the emphasis on individualism and accountability for individual well being necessitates (and rightly so) the placement of children within families, but then defines these families as deviant for requiring state intervention. March and Miall (2000) note that “From this perspective, our involvement with adoptive families has tended to inadvertently stigmatize them as a problematic family form in need of specialized intervention” (p.359). This double bind reflects the incredible tension present in the false dichotomy that is created between “private troubles and public issues” (Wegar, 2000, p.364).

Social work, which often embodies the interaction between the private and the public sphere is implicated in this dilemma, since the social work profession is highly involved in defining social reality and societal definitions of normality and deviance (Freud, 1999). Social work creates, reiterates or perpetuates social definitions through the mechanisms of theory and practice. From the theoretical standpoint,

Once a theory of normality is established (...) description becomes prescription, which is then transformed into a desirable standard of normal behaviour to be upheld and maintained by the educational system, the religious system, the legal system, and of course, the psychotherapeutic system, and to which every section of the population has to measure up or be found deficient (Freud, 1999, p.336).



As such, hegemony is created over time and normative standards take on a sanctioning power that infiltrates all levels of social functioning (Gamson et al., 1992). In his theories, Erikson (1963) agrees that individuals who adhere to this definition of normal are rewarded through success and social approval.

In social work, this theory of normalcy then acts as the basis for practice: “Psychotherapy and psychological theories on which the institution is based have been given the sociopolitical function of judging and maintaining standard of acceptable normal behaviour” (Freud, 1999, p.335). Likewise, “Psychotherapy’s and social work’s theory and practice techniques and research methodology all have value connotations” (Freud, 1999, p.334) and the mechanisms through which social work practice establishes a gate-keeping and monitoring gaze are intertwined and reflect the neo-liberal and capitalist characteristics of our society.

Initially, social work defines the consequences for deviance from the norm; this may include counseling but can also include more intrusive and/or disempowering interventions (Freud, 1999). This is accomplished through the assessment of clients and client systems, for the discourses and power relations present in labeling and categorization of various deviances regulates who receives social approval (Freud, 1999). These practices also serve to control the behaviour of those not motivated by the rewards of the hegemony.

The social work profession claims to espouse humanistic values, in contrast to the individualistic values prevalent in our society. Despite this commitment to social justice, however, there are still ways in which the social work profession remains vulnerable to the same unquestioned assumptions that impact the rest of society (Freud, 1999). If the

social work profession is not self-reflexive, it risks engaging in a “sociology of error” (Weinberg, 2009, p.285), thereby insisting that one’s ideas are epistemologically valid, while ducking the reality of one’s own social context. This “error” constitutes an inadvertent but nonetheless powerful reiteration of the interests of those already in power, because “reason and knowledge are not detached and disinterested, but historically conditioned and materially embodied forms of practical engagement with the world” (Weinberg, 2009, p.290). Conceptualizing theory and research as separated from the social construction of reality obscures the fact that intellectual authority is often complicit with economic and political power (Weinberg, 2009).

As may be evident from the arguments above, the social work profession wields a great deal of power. When the social work profession does not engage in self-reflexive theorizing, research and practice, clients are inevitably affected, since “all theoretical constructions that define our reality have sociopolitical implications” (Freud, 1999, p.334). This is equally true in the case of adoption. As suggested, adoption is a highly socially controlled form of family and the social work profession has been inextricably intertwined with adoption’s contemporary form (Leon, 2002; March & Miall, 2000).

However, the theories utilized by the social work profession to understand adoption and the adoptive family reflect the ambivalent and stigmatizing attitudes of the current social construction of adoption (Grotevant et al., 2000; Wegar, 1995, 2000). These theories uncritically reproduce practices affecting adoptees in ways that in turn recreate the same dominant stereotypes (Wegar, 2000). This is exemplified by the practice of “matching”:

Adoption workers try to recreate the biological family and thereby further emphasize the importance of the genetic connection for family bonding.... The policy of matching is intended to ensure that adoptive kinship resembles biological kinship as much as possible, yet at the same time emphasizes that adoptive families can *never* be quite as 'real' as families connected by a biological bond (Wegar, 2000, p.367. Emphasis in original).

This practice is based on a stigmatizing theory and it further stigmatizes adoptive families by implicitly invalidating the adoptive family. In essence, theory and practice have the power to create a feedback loop that reiterates social definitions beneficial to those in power, unless otherwise subverted. This subversion is unlikely to occur spontaneously as research suggests that adoption workers are even *more* likely than individuals in the general population to regard adoption as an inferior means of forming a family (Wegar, 2000). Nor do social workers take this general stigma, or their own stigmatizing beliefs into account, when working with adoptees (Wegar, 2000).

The lack of self-reflexivity demonstrated by this perpetuation of stigma suggests that the social worker and other mental health professions have bought into the shame and stigma surrounding adoption (Henderson, 2002). This likely reflects the historical legacy of adoption, for it was the social work profession that originally advocated secrecy as a way to shield adoptees and adoptive families from stigma, but this has been maintained by several unquestioned cultural, moral and economic factors (Henderson, 2002).

Primarily, the very secrecy surrounding adoption instilled and perpetuated by the social work profession makes research concerning adoption difficult to conduct (Henderson, 2000; Zamostny, Wiley, O'Brien, Lee & Baden, 2003). Since research is so highly valued as a means of knowledge creation and can serve as a mechanism to

challenge the status quo, the difficulty in performing research functions to limit subversion of the current social construction of adoption (Wegar, 1992). Especially since research is also a valuable way to challenge the status quo, the lack of studies on this aspect of adoption has left theoretical gaps in our understanding.

Secondarily, the hegemonic discourse itself discourages challenges to the status quo, as self-reflexivity is rendered uncomfortable because it challenges familiar notions (Gamson et al., 1992; Henderson, 2002). For instance, despite ambivalent attitudes, many mental health professionals conceptualize adoption through a “feel-good” model, wherein adoption is considered a “win-win-win” situation. It is a difficult proposition to challenge this benevolent notion (Henderson, 2002, p.133). Furthermore, since mental health professionals are so highly involved with the social mediation of this form of family, it is also possible that any shortcomings that emerge will be associated with mental health professionals (Henderson, 2002). This makes it a potentially thorny endeavor for mental health professionals to engage in a critical examination of their profession.

Additionally, economic reasons render a more critical examination of adoption uncomfortable. In the context of our capitalist society, adoption has become highly commercialized; this commoditization of children is a reality that few adoption professionals readily admit (Henderson, 2002). Increased scrutiny of this commercialization also threatens to undermine the credibility of the adoption field as benevolent and beneficial (Henderson, 2002). The threat of the removal of social and intellectual authority from the social work profession acts as a barrier that effectively protects the status quo and renders capitalism an invisible, natural component of the social fabric and the formation of adoptive families.

Lastly, the lack of self-reflexivity on the part of the social work profession also reflects the limited availability of training and educational opportunities (Henderson, 2000; Zamostny et al., 2003). This shortfall means that there are fewer opportunities to create a subversive discourse, which also creates a barrier to change. It also represents a barrier to the continued evolution of social work practice and theory because

Empirically informed reflexive dialog hones our research skills by facilitating a more explicit regard for the specific nature of our collective work in all its myriad forms and the distinctive resources and constraints that attend the specific conditions under which it is accomplished” (Weinberg, 2009, p.294)

It is for these reasons that a more nuanced theoretical understanding of adoptee development is so valuable.

*End Goals and an Inclusive Eriksonian Theory of Adoptee Development:*

In an ideal world, social work as a profession will create a base for socially situated knowledge that would allow for culturally competent and adoption competent practices with adoptees and other members of the adoption constellation. In describing the traits embodied by an adoption competent therapist, the Minnesota Adoption Support and Preservation Program (1997) supports this assertion, identifying the following characteristics as integral:

Viewing adoption from culturally competent family perspective and understanding the power and complexities of adoptive and birth family dynamics... [And]... recognizing and respecting the unique characteristics and skills that make adoptive families successful and that assist families in developing and practicing those skills (§ 7).

Several others echo this focus on both the social context of the family and the importance of family function over means of formation (Ambert, 2005; Freud, 1999). Until this

emphasis of function over form exists, practice with the adoptees in the field will remain a decontextualized form of service that will continue to stigmatize the individuals and families affected by adoption.

This “stigmatization constitutes a heavy mental burden” for adoptees (Ambert, 2005, p.11). The emphasis on family formation and not function leads to the continued prevalence and perpetuation of stereotypes: adoptees cannot love their parents as much as biological children; or adoptive parents cannot love their adopted children as much as biological children, etc. (Ambert, 2005; Wegar, 1995). Hence, stigma can have very real consequences for adoptive family members, negatively affecting the individual’s adjustment to adoption. These stereotypes can cause significant distress for both adoptees and adoptive parents (Leon, 2002; Wegar, 2000; Zamostny et al., 2003).

In contrast, some contemporary adoption advocates recognize and advocate for the importance of understanding the social context in which adoption occurs: “Adoption experts argue that it is important for practitioners to understand the complexities of adoption practice as well as its psychological impact to better serve adoption triad members” (Zamostny et al., 2003, p.647). It is in this context that inclusive theories of adoptee development – such as the one outlined in this writing – become valuable.

Despite critiques of historical uses of Erikson’s (1963) theory of psychosocial ego development, several factors make his theory an ideal base for this use. Although Erikson’s theory has been criticized as too linear, the range of combinations of strengths and weaknesses that constitute successful development allows for a more inclusive and less stigmatizing approach. In other words, healthy development is not merely defined in one way, but is regarded as the most adaptive response to the given situation. In this

sense, a non-normative situation is not assumed to create pathological development (Berzoff, 2008).

This emphasis on adaptation, even in the face of stigma, means that an Eriksonian perspective of adoptee development enables social workers and other professionals to understand their adopted clients in a non-pathologizing manner, even before the stigma and ambivalent attitudes inherent in the contemporary social construction are altered (Berzoff, 2008). It is possible that by giving the social work profession a theory and mechanism to change its understanding of adoption, new and subversive dialogue will emerge that can help change the dominant discourse will emerge (Freud, 1999).

In conclusion, it has been said that paradigms of understanding are created and maintained by social interests and taken-for-granted assumptions. However, the social sciences are complicit in this maintenance if they do not question these paradigms. It is only “by reflexively interrogating the interests served by social scientific work we may succeed in making it a subtler and more valuable craft” (Weinberg, 2009, p.293). Since social work theory, research and practice are so intertwined, by extension self-reflexivity within social work practice will also allow for subtler, more valuable practice.

As Douglas Henderson (2000) writes of his personal experience of adoption and the mental health community,

In the process of my work with search and support groups since 1983, I have encountered many other triad members who, consistent with my own experience, reported receiving little to no help with their adoption related issues in therapy (Henderson, 2000, p.271).

As mentioned above, this is partially explained by a lack of training available to graduate and post-graduate students in mental health related fields. It has been suggested that this

lack of training reflects the “private and personal nature of adoption” (Henderson, 2000, p.271), which is in keeping with the unquestioned individualization of theories concerning adoption. In reality, however, understanding adoption in a culturally competent way necessitates the recognition that social forces also impact adoption. Arguably, the lack of training and culturally competent theories also are a sequelae of a society in which responsibility for human welfare is relegated to personal responsibility (Schuck, 2009). As Henderson (2000) elaborates,

The more contemporary and realistic view of adoption, however, is that every adoption represents both gains and losses, and that adoption is a multigenerational and ongoing process that only begins with the final adoption, and that permanently affects the lives of all those involved (p.263).

As the Dave Thomas Foundation of Canada found, three in five Canadians know someone who is adopted, one in nine Canadians have had personal experience with adoption and one in seven Canadians know someone who has placed a child for adoption (Ipsos-Reid, 2004). Likewise, in the United States, research suggests that 65% of Americans have some experience with adoption, whether through close friends or through his or her own family (Harris Interactive, 2002). This suggests that many more lives are permanently impacted by adoption than is generally acknowledged, and this truly is a topic that warrants further exploration. For this reason, it is time that the social work profession affirmed a theory of adoptee development that more closely reflects both the widespread impact and influence of the social construction of adoption and the professed values of the social work profession.



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