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ADULT ADOPTEES AND CONSIDERATIONS OF PARENTHOOD:

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY EXAMINING ADOPTION EXPERIENCES AND EFFECTS

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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2016

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Adult Adoptees and
Considerations of Parenthood:
An Exploratory Study
Examining Adoption
Experiences and Effects

ABSTRACT

This exploratory, qualitative study sought to investigate how the experience of adoption affects an adoptee's decision to start a family (or not). One reason to conduct this study was to isolate a particular developmental stage – entering parenthood – to observe deliberations related to the experience of being adopted. This study adds to the limited but growing body of research dedicated to adult adoptees with the aim of assisting clinicians in the field of social work to enhance their knowledge about the experiences of adopted people, especially those who are considering starting a family.

The study was conducted by interviewing seventeen adult adoptees who were: adopted as an infant, either domestically or internationally; were at least eighteen; and were contemplating starting a family or were parents already. The study was designed to elicit information about the participants' adoption narratives in order to observe if connections exist between their adoption experiences and considerations of starting a family.

The major finding of this project is that, though the participants agreed their family planning decisions were affected by their adoptive experience, they were not ultimately hindered in their parenting choices by any lasting effects of adoption. Participants often recounted how either their idyllic childhoods provided inspiration for becoming a parent

or their experiences as adoptees promoted a desire to address adoption-related emotional injuries.

Key words: adoption, adult adoptee, transition to parenthood

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~

"…where I am and where I've been *is* the show."
from "Transistor Radio" by Cloud Cult

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Depending on the position one occupies within the adoption triad (adoptee, birth mother and family or adoptive family) the experience of adoption can be described in exceptionally different ways – joyous, triumphant, transactional, confusing or even traumatic. Historically, adoption served as a panacea to address complex social problems and consequently set the stage for a seemingly uncomplicated storyline, persisting as a popular conceptualization of adoption – birth parents who are unable to care for their children can relinquish their rights and deliver children into the open arms of deserving adoptive families, thereby solving any problems and leaving members of the adoption triad to thrive (Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003). However, most often within this narrative, the faintest voice of the adoption triad is that of the adoptee, owing logically to typical ages of adoption processes and emphasis placed on post-adoption monitoring and resources. If the adoptee's experience is a focus, interest lessens as adolescence fades.

For adoptees and non-adoptees alike, emerging adulthood prompts considerations of typical developmental stages (i.e. leaving home, participating in romantic relationships, or deciding to create a family). For a non-adopted person, a variety of emotions may accompany these events – excitement, curiosity, adventure, or trepidation. For the adoptee, however, when advancing towards significant life decisions, additional layers of complexity may exist and can be related to their experience of adoption, their conceptualization of self, their adoptive identity development, patterns of attachment styles, and whether or not they have searched for or been

reunited with their birth family (Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000).

One of the most significant decisions one can make over a lifetime is the decision to become a parent. Indeed, Erik Erikson's (1950) eight-stage theory of psychosocial development labels a seventh stage occurring in adulthood as "generativity versus stagnation," and defines the "primary concern" of generativity as "establishing and guiding the next generation" (p. 267, loc. 3938). Erikson (1950) posits successful generativity typically comes through the act of procreation, but it can also be satisfied with achievement in vocational or civic aspirations or through development of one's creative ambitions. For the purposes of this paper, a simplified conceptualization of generativity is used to examine the considerations of adoptees and non-adoptees as they reflect on their transition to parenthood.

However an individual is contemplating the decision to enter parenthood (e.g. as single or part of couple, either wishing to birth, foster or adopt a baby or child), the decision can include thoughtful considerations of how life will change emotionally, financially, and socially (Hube, 2007). This is true of both adopted and non-adopted prospective parents. But, for adoptees, the decision to become a parent may be further complicated by their experience as an adopted person. Thus, to begin to understand how adopted adults might navigate contemplating entering parenthood, this study asked the following questions: "Does the experience of being adopted affect adoptees' decisions to create a family, and if so, how?"

Research conducted about adult adoptees typically focuses on observing long-term effects of adoption on the subjects' mental health. One reason to conduct this study was to isolate a particular and typical developmental stage of adulthood – contemplation of parenthood – to observe deliberations related to the experience of being adopted. This study adds to the limited

but growing body of research dedicated to adult adoptees with the aim of assisting clinicians in the field of social work to enhance their knowledge about the experiences of adopted people, especially those who are considering starting a family.

The study was conducted by interviewing seventeen adult adoptees who were: adopted as an infant, either domestically or internationally; were at least eighteen; and were contemplating starting a family or were parents already. The study was designed to elicit information about the participants' adoption narratives in order to observe if connections exist between their adoption experiences and considerations of starting a family. Outreach to obtain study participants utilized snowball and purposive sampling and included posting advertisements of the study in adoptee-specific online forums, on Facebook and directly contacting bloggers and authors who were self-disclosed as adoptees.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The following literature review examines theoretical literature and empirical research relevant to the questions: *Does the experience of being adopted affect an adoptee's decision to create a family and if so, how?* This chapter is divided into five sections. To offer a contextual framework, the first section offers a brief historical and statistical overview of adoption. To theoretically frame the present study, a second section reviews the origins of and literature relevant to attachment theory and adoption. The third section will review patterns of findings about adult adoptees' long-term psychosocial wellbeing. A fourth section offers an examination of literature dedicated to adoptive identity formation. Finally, a fifth section explores data relevant to adult developmental stages and the decision to transition to parenthood.

Adoption: History and Statistics

While a wholly comprehensive overview of adoption is beyond the scope of this paper, the following brief synopsis is meant to offer a reader important historical details and statistics related to adoption, an act that is typically positively described as the best way to ensure the well-being and protection of infants and children whose biological parents are unable to care for them. As adoption always includes the integration of three separate entities (adoptee, biological parents and adoptive family) and sometimes includes the confluence of race, ethnicity, social issues, cultural values and historical events, controversies are inevitable. The following section attempts to maintain a balanced description of both the positive intentions and effects of adoption

and the realities of a practice that has historically included a tradition of adjustment and evolution.

Though earliest notions of adoption can be traced to the 1700s during the colonization of America, adoption began to take shape as a legal and social practice in the late 1800s, with organized "orphan trains" sent westward filled with children who would likely be adopted by farm families and expected to help with chores and farm work (Barth, 2013; Conn, 2013; Zamostny et al., 2003). By the middle of the 20th century, social service agencies began to standardize and regulate the practice of adoption, by creating screening protocols (albeit sometimes using problematic criteria (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation)) to identify prospective adoptive parents. During this period, the practice of sealing adoption records in order to ensure anonymity of birth mothers (who were often white, young and unmarried) and adoptive families became systematic and routine (Barth, 2013). Presently, in most states, adoptees placed within confidential or closed adoptions are unable to gain access to original birth certificates, which impedes their ability to obtain information about their genealogical backgrounds and medical records; adoptees are the only group of individuals in the US who do not have this information readily available to them (The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009).

Historically, data collection of domestic adoption statistics has been inconsistent and imprecise due to differing practices in reporting across public and private agencies and the prevalence of informal arrangements or kinship adoptions between family members, especially within communities of color (Stolley, 1993; Zamostny et al., 2003). However, The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2009) estimates that nearly 2% of the US population is adopted and nearly 60% of Americans are involved in an adoption triad. The 2000 US Census was the first to examine whether children within a home were biological or adopted – it revealed an

estimated 2.1 million adoptees, which is nearly 8% of all children of householders queried in 2000 (Barth, 2013; The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009).

Transracial adoptions. During the latter half of the 20th century, transracial adoptions (placement of a child with family of a different race or ethnicity) became a common solution to the problem of fewer available white infants sought by greater numbers of infertile white couples (Zamostny, 2003). The decreased number of desired infants has been attributed to a decline in child relinquishment by white communities, the rise in access to abortion, a de-stigmatization of single-motherhood, and the possibility of a lack of adoption counseling as an option for family planning considerations (Stolley, 1993, Zomostny, et al., 2003). Observing unpredicted losses to the Black community, in 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers denounced transracial adoptions as “cultural genocide” citing inevitable negative disruptions in a black child’s racial identity development (Zamostny et al., 2003). Ultimately, over the last thirty years, legislative acts including the Adoption Assistance and the Child Welfare Act (1980), Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997), Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (1994) and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions (1996), were created to aid in the efficiency and proficiency of permanently placing children of any race or ethnicity within diverse families in a timely manner (Lee, 2003; Zamostny et al., 2003). Currently, transracial adoptions account for 8-15% of adoptions, including those originating in foster care (Lee, 2003; Zamostny et al., 2003).

International adoptions. Though the origins of international adoption of children by Americans can be traced to the end of World War II, it was during the aftermath of the Korean War when adoption agencies began to significantly facilitate the international placements of war orphans (The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). From 1955 to 2001, it is estimated that over 110,000 children were adopted from South Korea to the United States which is 10% of

the current Korean American population (Lee, 2003; The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). By the late 1960s and 1970s, as domestic transracial adoption became more controversial, international adoption became a viable avenue for adoptive parents and currently, the Evan B. Donaldson Institute (2009) estimates 30,000 to 40,000 children from over fifty countries are adopted internationally with American families receiving the largest number of adoptees worldwide. As with domestic transracial adoptions, international adoption has prompted concerns about ethnic identity development; added to these concerns are historical realities of baby selling, kidnapping and trafficking, leading some advocates to describe international adoption as "a new form of colonialism and cultural imperialism that treats children as economic commodities" (Lee, 2003, p.3). International and federal legislation has been enacted to address these concerns and to standardize the practice of international adoption (e.g. Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption of 1993, Intercountry Adoption Act and Child Citizenship Act of 2000) (Lee, 2003).

Attachment Theory and Adoption

Origins of attachment theory are rooted in the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth who examined the relationship between the development of emotional regulation in infants and children and the quality and consistency of care and attention delivered by the primary caregiver, typically the child's mother, especially in moments of distress (Bretherton, 1992; Davies, 2011). Though lasting contributions of both theorists are myriad, most relevant to the present study is the emphasized significance of an infant or child's ability to create a secure attachment with his or her caregiver since the lasting effects of attachment styles are likely to inform how the infant or child experiences relationships later in life (Fraley, 2010; Main, 2000). Bowlby asserted that an infant will develop an attachment behavioral system as she or he experiences a primary

attachment figure's responses to her or his needs, which includes, most importantly a sense of safety and security (Davies, 2011; Fraley, 2010). Based on the responses from the caregiver, the child adjusts his or her own expectations, behaviors, and responses which may be adaptive or maladaptive; Bowlby's observations noted that the child will either flourish or wilt if the experiences of safety or distress are repeated often enough, indicating the development or impairment of a functioning and stable internal working model (Bowlby, 1969; Fraley, 2010; Main, 2000). The length of time between an infant's birth and transition into an adoptive family has bearing on the successes or challenges of attachment between adoptive family and adoptee; empirical data generally identifies the first year as critical to ensure ideal attachment patterns between infant and parent, whether adopted or not (Davies, 2011; Fraley, 2010; Main, 2000).

Ainsworth expanded the work of Bowlby by distinguishing between the attachment styles developed by infants and children, classifying the patterns as secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-disorganized/disoriented related to the varying impacts of caregivers and the child's ability to regulate his or her affect and arousal (Davies, 2011). Both Ainsworth and Bowlby believed behavioral reactions to attachment figures and attachment styles form within the child's first year (Davies, 2011; Fraley, 2010; Main, 2000).

Related to the attachment development of a child's first year, van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of thirty-nine adoption and eleven foster child-related studies to assess whether adopted children are less often securely attached to their adoptive parents than children reared by their biological parents (most of the studies included control groups comprised of non-adopted peers). Ultimately, the researchers found adoptees and non-adopted peers have similar frequencies of secure attachment if the adoption occurs within twelve months of birth. van den Dries et al. (2009) also found

differences existing between children who had been in institutionalized care; these children exhibited lower levels of secure attachment.

Adult attachment styles. Building on the work of Ainsworth, George, Kaplan, and Main (1985) developed the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) in order to assess an individual's overall state of mind related to attachment; the interview is designed to assess a participant's memories of childhood and adolescence and current perspectives of primary attachment figures. Four main styles of adult attachment emerged from the research: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant. Prior to the development of this tool, many adoption-related studies had focused on the attachment patterns of late-adopted children; with the AAI, adult adoptees and their current attachment patterns can be measured.

Literature about adoptees and attachment tends to indicate adoptees demonstrate a higher prevalence of insecure attachment styles (both avoidant and ambivalent) than their non-adopted counterparts (Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2007). For example, in a study comparing 144 adults adopted as infants and 131 non-adoptees, Feeney et al. (2007), found higher rates of adult attachment insecurity among the adoptees than non-adoptees who described negative childhood experiences with their parents. Feeney et al., (2007), also found differences in levels of attachment related to whether the adoptee had searched for and been reunited with members of the birth family.

In a study investigating negative childhood experiences and adult love relationships, McCarthy and Maughan (2010) found among their sample of thirty-four women, a significant association between adult attachment styles and the quality of romantic relationships. Those subjects who recounted adverse childhood experiences and who had been able to ultimately develop an "integrated and coherent working model of attachment and self" demonstrated greater

secure/autonomous attachment patterns and cited satisfying romantic relationships (McCarthy & Maughan, 2010, p. 455). Subjects who demonstrated insecure attachment styles were associated with poorer functioning in romantic relationships (McCarthy & Maughan, 2010). Though adult adoptees did not comprise demographics of this sample, it might be inferred that if adoptees also had negative (or positive) childhood experiences, the eventual outcome could be unsettled patterns of attachment, which may influence romantic relationships and other developmental stages (e.g. the consideration of parenthood).

Openness in adoption communication. Farr, Grant-Marsney and Grotevant (2014) examined a sample of 137 emerging adult adoptees to determine whether positive perceptions of attachment relationships with adoptive family and openness in communication about adoption within the adoptive family influenced the adoptee's level of satisfaction of contact with biological families. Among the researchers' hypotheses was the expectation that the greater sensitivity demonstrated by adoptive families about an adoptee's experience, the greater the satisfaction with birth family contact, even if the frequency of contact was low or non-existent. A second focus of the study was to observe whether greater attachment security with the adoptive family would predict greater openness in communication about adoption (Farr et al., 2014). The study's findings outlined the importance of an adoptive family's endorsement and practice of open communication about an adoptee's experience and correlated that success (or not) to the level of satisfaction with contact with biological family. Interesting and relevant to the current study is a finding correlating open communication about adoption (between adoptee and adoptive family) to the facilitation of adoptive identity formation, suggesting the important role the adoptive parents possess in their child's adoptive identity development (Farr et al., 2014).

The present study seeks to understand whether the experience of being adopted affects one's decision to create a family, and because the study is exploratory in scope, a particular hypothesis is not sought. However, although attachment styles may change over a lifetime, adult attachment styles are vestiges of an infant or child's initial patterns of development and may shape decisions made in adulthood. If an adoptee conceptualizes his or her adoption experience as one of loss and rejection by biological parents and has experienced difficulties in the attachment to adoptive parents, it may be anticipated that he or she will also exhibit an insecure attachment style which may influence his or her plans to start a family (e.g. by possibly introducing an element of ambivalence related to interpersonal relationships or decision-making) (Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2007; Leon, 2002; Palacios & Brodzinsky 2010; Rholes, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan, & Allen, 1997).

Psychological Wellbeing of Adult Adoptees

Historically, studies about adoptees are fairly limited in number and scope and have often revealed pessimistic findings about their subjects' psychological wellbeing when compared to non-adopted people. Indeed, much of the early adoption-focused literature endorses a stereotypical profile of a maladjusted and unhappy adoptee who is overly represented in clinical settings (Brinich, 1980; Brodzinsky, 1993; Haugaard, 1998; Miller, Fan, Christensen, Grotevant, & van Dulmen, 2000; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998; Wierzbicki, 1993; Wilson, 2004). However, as adoption-focused research increases and becomes more methodologically sophisticated, greater nuance of the unique attributes of adoptees is revealed.

Adoptees and behavioral health treatment. Many empirical studies have revealed higher numbers of adoptees seeking treatment for various behavioral health issues. Related to the over-representation of adoptees seeking support in mental health clinics, Wierzbicki (1993),

conducted a meta-analysis of sixty-six research studies comparing the psychological adjustment of adoptees against that of their non-adoptive peers. Wierzbicki (1993) established the notion that adoptees were outnumbered in clinic populations and did indeed exhibit behaviors suggesting psychological maladjustment. Brodzinsky (1993) supported these findings, but offered an alternative explanation – adoptive parents might be more likely than biological parents to seek care for their children for several reasons, including believing any problem an adoptive child might exhibit is related to adoption. Adoptive parents might react more quickly and often to problems due to an internalization of stigma related to adoption, or adoptive parents might have greater knowledge of available social services, and rely on them when necessary.

When synthesizing adoption-related literature relevant to the long-term outcomes in adoption, Brodzinsky (1993) concluded: "although most adoptees are well within the normal range of functioning, as a group they are more vulnerable to various emotional, behavioral, and academic problems than their non-adopted peers living in intact homes with their biological parent." But he also notes that methodological difficulties (e.g. using only subjects from clinical populations) in the literature might account for conclusions that reveal patterns of pathology or maladjustment among adoptee populations (p. 153).

Adoptees' wellbeing compared to non-adopted peers. Borders et al. (2000) surveyed 100 adoptees and seventy of their friends "to investigate whether adult adoptees exhibit greater psychosocial dysfunction than non-adopted adults"(p. 415). Areas of focus and comparison for the researchers included satisfaction with life, perspectives of intimacy, ability to connect with significant others, emotional wellbeing, and risk-taking behaviors related to substance use or dependency (Borders et al., 2000). Ultimately, the researchers found only slight differences among the two peer groups (adopted versus non-adopted) in the general areas of social support,

self-esteem, and experiences of depression and concluded, “while adult adoptees have had unique life experiences, in many ways they are navigating their adult years no differently than their non-adopted peers” (p. 415). Moreover, the researchers noted the biggest differences were not among adopted and non-adopted persons but between adoptees who had contemplated or engaged in searching for their birth families versus those who had not (non-searchers). Interestingly, when divided and examined in this manner, searchers demonstrated lower self-esteem and higher frequencies of depression, which was an unexpected finding leading to more questions than answers (Borders et al., 2000). Other studies have also focused on the differences between adoptees who searched for biological relatives versus non-searchers, sometimes finding higher frequencies of pathology within this sub-sample (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Cubito & Obremski Brandon, 2000). This suggests if adoptees search are unhappy with the results or rejected by biological family, remaining a “non-searcher” may preserve a higher self-esteem and guard against experiencing depression related to searching.

Finally, Borders et al., (2000) found that patterns of adult attachment represented another area where adoptees (both searchers and non-searchers) differed – "with fewer adoptees classifying themselves as securely attached and more adoptees describing themselves as pre-occupied or fearful/avoidant" (p. 416). For the present study, differences in attachment experiences among the sample population might be anticipated, especially if searchers and non-searchers are compared.

Adoption communication and psychological adjustment. How a family communicates about adoption and whether there is contact with the biological family has an impact on an adoptee’s psychological adjustment. An empirical study of 190 families of domestically adopted infants, Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, & Gonzalez (2011) examined how contact with the birth

family and adoption communicative openness (i.e. how an adoptive family and adoptee communicate about the adoption experience) might predict externalizing behaviors in adolescents and young adults. Brodzinsky (1993) found the greater the communication about adoption and difference, the fewer identity problems adopted adolescents demonstrate, but he balanced this notion with the idea “that extreme styles at either end of the communication continuum – denial-of-differences at one end and insistence-on-differences at the other end” – are less likely to promote positive adjustment to adoption (p. 158).

Grotevant et al., (2011) also suggest it is the family-level satisfaction with the contact that is related to externalizing or antisocial behaviors, rather than simply the presence of contact or openness in communication about adoption. That is, if members of the family were content with the levels of contact between themselves and the birth family (even if there was no contact), adoptees expressed decreased amounts of anti-social behaviors as they progressed towards adulthood. Limitations noted in the study include a lack of diversity of population sample: all but eight of the adoptees were white and additional criteria required the adoption not be “transracial, international, or special needs […] and the adoptive parents had [to have] been married to each other since the adoption” (Grotevant et al., 2011, p. 531). For the purposes of the present study, whether or not an adoptee has had contact with his or her birth family may be relevant to their current psychosocial functioning, which may influence their interest in creating a family of their own.

Adoptive Identity Development

Beyond the psychological wellbeing of adoptees, another area of investigation for adoption-focused researchers has long been the exploration of adoptive identity development – namely, trying to determine what aspects of identity become the most salient for adoptees and

how adoptees might navigate those aspects differently from their non-adopted peers. This section reviews adoption-related research and literature while considering these ideas within the contextual frame of the present study – that is, does an adoptee's identity development shape a later decision to become a parent or not?

Defining adoptive identity. Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, and Esau (2000) define adoptive identity development as "how the individual constructs meaning about his/her adoption" and he describes identity this way: "identity connects personality, subjective awareness, relationships, and external context. Thus, the essence of identity is self-in-context" (p. 381). Identity development of adoptees differs from that of non-adopted people because of the complexity found within this notion of "self-in-context" as the "context" includes added dimensions that require integration and cohesion, which may prove easy or difficult for an adoptee depending on his or her circumstances (Kelly, Towner-Thyrum, Rigby, & Martin, 1998; Verrier, 1993).

The role of adoptive parents and family in an adoptee's identity development is significant as Kelly et al., (1998) found in a survey of 49 adopted and 49 non-adopted college students; the measures used in the study queried students' perceptions of their family environment, self-esteem, and beliefs related to personal achievement of developmental tasks. The researchers observed adoptees who rated themselves less harshly on a measure of self-approval tended to come from families who rated as "highly organized [and] expressive" (Kelly et al., 1998, p. 500). The researchers defined "expressive families" as those who fostered and encouraged open and direct communication.

An unanticipated finding revealed a correlation between non-adoptees' positive self approval and families who encouraged individuality, self-sufficiency and a sense of independent decision-making; the researchers did not find a similar correlation in the adopted sample,

suggesting the adoptees surveyed were less individuated from their families than their peers (Kelly et al., 1998). While findings from this study are not generalizable, they do support the notion that adoptive parents (and families) are influential in an adoptee's identity development, however positive or negative.

Reunification with biological parents may facilitate the process of an adoptee's evolving integration of a sense of self and his or her adoption narrative. Grotevant et al. (2000) explains: "because most aspects of adoption do not concern things that the person has chosen, the task of identity involves "coming to terms" with oneself in the context of the family and culture into which one has been adopted" (p. 382). If this "coming to terms with oneself" includes searching for biological parents or family, the complexities of the integration of adoptive and biological identities are increased (Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005). Related to connecting with biological family, Leon (2002) suggests:

> Contact with the birth family may also facilitate a clearer sense of physical and biological identity by observing similarities in appearance, talents, and certain traits. Not knowing any birth relatives may exacerbate losses to the self and interfere with the consolidation of physical and genetic aspects of identity, even when positive ties with adoptive parents exist and self-related connections with them are maintained via psychological identifications (e.g., in mannerisms, intonations, and so forth) (p. 656).

The present study is concerned with the development of one's adoptive identity to observe if correlations exist between the development of one's sense of self and a desire or willingness to create a family; it may be that study participants rely on reunification to discover unknown parts

of themselves, which may aid in the parenthood transition by resolving any possible dissonance preventing them from considering becoming a parent.

Racial and ethnic identity development. Race and ethnicity are typically described as salient attributes of anyone's identity, whether adopted or not. For children adopted transracially or internationally, racial or ethnic identity development may be occurring in tandem with an overall development of one's sense of self – how adoptive parents navigate difference within the family can influence an adoptee's identity formation. For example, over-emphasis or rejection of racial or ethnic difference is correlated to lower self-esteem and problems within the family, suggesting a balance of the two should be an aspiration (Grotevant et al., 2000).

As mentioned in the historical overview of adoption, one controversial concern about transracial and international adoption concentrates on adoptive parents and their ability (or inability) to help their children develop a positive racial or ethnic identity. In reference to mono-racial black families, Butler-Sweet (2011) suggests, "through racial socialization black parents actively insulate their children from negative racial messages while emphasizing positive racial messages including knowledge of black culture and achievements" (p. 195). Critics of transracial adoption maintain that white families are unprepared to navigate the necessary racial and ethnic development and socialization of a non-white child, which may lead to confusion about one's racial or ethnic identity and related behavioral problems as well as the transmission of unpreparedness to manage instances of discrimination and racism (Butler-Sweet, 2011; Hughes et al., 2006; Samuels, 2009).

Much of the literature about transracial or trans-ethnic adoption ultimately concludes these adoption configurations are preferable to a child languishing indefinitely in a non-

permanent placement but also emphasize the importance of adoptive parents placing intentional focus on their child's positive racial identity development (Butler-Sweet, 2011).

To develop further understanding of the outcomes of transracial or trans-ethnic adoption, Butler-Sweet (2011) sought to examine how parental race and implications of class affect the identity development of young black adults and did so by conducting semi-structured interviews with thirty-two black adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty who came from mono-racial, bi-racial, or transracial families. All participants were either college graduates or in college and all participants identified themselves as upper-middle class, with families earning more than $100,000 annually. By combining the three types of family configurations and controlling for class status, Butler-Sweet (2011) was able to aptly compare the experiences of the participants revealing anticipated findings for the transracial adoptees:

> Middle-class black informants raised by white parents did appear to suffer from a certain degree of identity confusion, and they also had some difficulty relating to black peers. They struggled with day to day issues like skin and haircare, many did not have positive black role models, and their perceptions of "authentic blackness" tended to be skewed towards stereotypes of urban poverty (p. 208).

Participants from the bi-racial families (parents were two different races) *also* expressed racial identity confusion and difficulties relating to black peers, suggesting "having two white parents alone is not the only variable that could cause identity confusion"(Butler-Sweet, 2011, p.208). Participants from mono-racial families recounted difficulties related to fitting in with black peers (e.g. not feeling "black enough") and expressed surprise as these experiences; the researcher related this finding to the significance of differences in class status and suggested middle-class

status and its benefits also has isolative consequences for these particular black participants (Butler-Sweet, 2011).

Outside of the family, navigation of racial and ethnic identities continues as adoptees might find themselves experiencing feelings of alienation or isolation in the communities from whence they come – socially or biologically. If possible, identifying and engaging with communities within the same race or ethnicity is one way to mitigate these differences (Grotevant et al., 2000).

Adoptive identity, grief and loss. Anticipated feelings of grief and loss are commonly attributed to and experienced by adoptees. In summarizing Brodzinky's et al. (1993) work, Wright (2009) states, "even with adoption soon after birth, adoptees eventually experienced an "epiphany of loss" not only of the birth parents they never knew, but also of their origins, genealogical continuity, and of a completed sense of self" (p. 77). This "epiphany of loss" has a range that is far-reaching, beginning, some hypothesize, at the instant of birth: "[…] the earliest bodily experiential roots of self-representation and identity originate in the intrauterine and perinatal period, and recent research has confirmed recognition reactions in the newborn to the body, smell, and sound of the birth mother. […]" (Wright, 2009, p. 77-78).

When comparing early memories of 30 adoptees with those of their non-adopted peers, Saiz and Main (2004) found higher incidences of themes of loss and grief among adoptees than non-adopted participants. Within the themes analyzed, adoptees tended to have greater numbers of recollections about instances of abandonment and feelings of a loss of control. In summarizing the work of Schecter and Bertocci (1990), Saiz & Main, (2004) comment on the observed dissonance felt by adoptees throughout their life as related to the practice of navigating disparate parts of their identities or their adoption narratives, explaining "dissonance occurs because the

adoptee perceives that the way he or she came to be in this adoptive family was neither typical nor natural. The dissonance may resonate and build throughout the adoptee's life' (p. 184). This felt dissonance might lead some adoptees to search for their biological parents, which may both alleviate or exacerbate feelings of a lack of control or loss and grief (Saiz and Main, 2004).

Contrastingly, Leon (2002) undertook a review of cross-cultural and historical accounts of adoption to explore the concept and experience of loss, questioning its inherent presence in an adoptee's life. Leon (2002) suggests the institution of adoption in the United States has been shaped by stigma beginning with an early emphasis on sanguineous "kinship," which is not so necessarily prized in other cultures. Further, Leon (2002) finds support from adoption researchers to minimize the presumed impact of the earliest experience of separation at birth – the point of relinquishment from his or her biological mother – instead focusing on the importance of attachment in the infant's social world, referencing Bowlby (1969): "attachment theory underscores that what may be most natural (i.e. biological) in the ecology of parenting is not the act of procreation, but the instinctive readiness to parent the needy infant mammal who in turn is attached to that nurturing parent" (p. 653). Ultimately Leon (2002) acknowledges loss on all parts of the adoption triad but encourages a reframing of the practice of adoption, focusing less on presumed grief and loss and acknowledging the importance of attachment theory in the construction of parent-adoptee relationships.

An adoptee's emerging sense of self is shaped by many factors – adoptive family, one's race and ethnicity, connections with biological family, external influences – and an adoptee possesses the task of integrating this all into a cohesive sense of self as he or she progresses through developmental stages. For the present study, one's adoptive identity and adoption narrative may influence considerations of parenthood; adoptees who have a positive and fully

integrated sense of self may be more likely to consider the transition to parenthood. If an adoptee sees himself or herself as conflicted or unsettled, especially as related to their adoptive identity, it may be predicted that starting a family is not a present priority.

Becoming a Parent

According to Erikson's (1950, 1997) articulation of the stages of psychosocial development, whether one is adopted or not, considerations of reproduction are congruent with a common trajectory of adult progression; such a conceptualization of generativity "encompasses procreativity, productivity, and creativity, and thus the generation of new beings […]" (1997, loc. 949). Whether adopted or not, typical arcs of the adulthood experience involve navigating what Slater (2003) terms the "crisis of parenthood:"

> Everyone faces the crisis of parenthood. Most make a deliberate decision to become parents, but some become parents without conscious decision, others decide not to become parents, and still others want to become parents but cannot. The decision and its outcome provoke a crisis that calls for a reexamination of life roles (p. 57).

Jaffe and Diamond (2011) concur with the sentiment above – "the fact that individuals think about being a parent, whether they have children or not, whether they want children or not, speaks to the importance of the role of parental identity in adult development" (p. 36).

The present study seeks to elucidate the particular deliberations adult adoptees might experience in their considerations of starting a family and findings might reveal a pattern of "well-adjusted" adoptees embarking on the transition to parenthood with greater ease than adoptees who may feel less generally settled. To date, there is a paucity of research dedicated to this particular topic and literature related to the deliberations of non-adoptees beginning families

is also slim. Since adoptees are found to be developmentally aligned with their non-adopted peers, reviewed literature focused on the parenthood question will include the general (non-adopted) population.

Parenthood and adult attachment styles. Rholes et al. (1997), examined adult attachment styles, the desire to have children, and working models of parenthood by surveying single college students about their ideas of themselves as future parents. Rholes et al. (1997), hypothesized and found that students who demonstrated avoidant or ambivalent attachment styles would be “less certain about their capacity to relate well to children and […] less certain about whether they wish to become parents” (p. 362). Furthermore, avoidant students tended to display harsher views of themselves, any prospective children, and parenting, forecasting difficulties in developing secure parent-child relationships.

Rholes et al. (1997) further illuminated the reality that “parent-child relationships are partially determined by the parent’s own history of relationships with attachment figures and the working models that grow out of such relationships (p. 378). Interestingly, Rholes et al. (1997) found that ambivalent students, like their avoidant counterparts, held negative views of themselves, but did not believe their children would express negative or insecure behaviors (as did the avoidant subjects), indicating a belief that their own ambivalent behaviors could be self-contained.

In becoming a parent, adoptees who recollect a challenging or difficult upbringing within their adoptive families might be anticipating a reparative experience. Jaffe et al., (2011) offer this possible framework for prospective parenthood:

> […] becoming a parent provides a person with an opportunity to repair or work through conflictual experiences from one’s own childhood. Parenthood,

> consciously or not, provides fertile ground for reexamination of one's past. […] As a child hits particular developmental markers, it is normal for parents to reexperience, rethink, and refeel their own lives, providing an opportunity to process childhood events, but with an adult perspective (p. 32).

The converse of this idea is also true; adoptees who reminisce about idyllic childhoods may wish to recreate a similar experience for their own children, suggesting the developmental history of a prospective parent might be trans-generational (Cain & Combs-Orme, n.d.).

Parenthood and biological connections. Often, one motivation of adoptees' who search for their biological families is to finally experience a physical connection with another. Although open adoptions are becoming more common in the US and beyond, historically, due to closed adoptions, adoptees lacked knowledge of or access to relatives who are physically similar to them. March (2002) addresses this absence and need for connection comprehensively:

> Lack of biological background information means not being able to place self in the social context expected by others. It also means not being able to envision self as a single entity with distinguishable physical traits. Searching adoptees express a sense of incompleteness from not knowing the source of their physical characteristics. This sense of incompleteness creates personal doubt about their bodily perceptions. Part of adoptees' desire for contact derives from the need to remove these doubts by meeting biological relatives who match them physically. In this way, their search represents an attempt to access the biological template used by others in developing a sense of physical self (p.360).

Not all adoptees will or want to be reunited with their biological families – the desire to search is not essential to all and some who desire to search may be disappointed with their findings or lack of results (e.g. learning of the deaths of biological family members).

Those adoptees who have not been reunited with their biological parents may be partially motivated to have a child in order to experience a connection with another that has not existed previously. An example from the study conducted by Pacheco and Eme (1993) illustrates this, "[…] one woman stated that after she had given birth to her child, she closely inspected every detail of her infant's face and she could clearly see her own features. She had never before experienced the feelings that this evoked […] p. 56). As important as finding biological family is to the integration of an adoptee's sense of self, reproduction might offer a similar feeling of closure, as the adoptee looks towards his or her child and experiences physical connection for the first time (March 2002).

There are myriad reasons motivating individuals to start a family; for adoptees, there may be additional layers of consideration driving the parenthood decision. Some adoptees might wish to transmit idyllic childhoods while some might desire an experience that addresses areas of sadness, loss, or regret. For some adoptees, their experience of being adopted might not have any bearing on their decision to start a family; this study anticipates findings illustrating an array of ideas and experiences that influence an adoptee's parenthood decision.

Summary

The present study seeks to explore the question "does the experience of being adopted affect an adoptee's decision to create a family and if so, how" by exploring the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of adult adoptees who are considering starting a family or who are already parents. While there is a wealth of literature focused on adoptees and their patterns of

attachment and wellbeing immediately post-adoption, there is a limited amount of literature focused on this particular subject – adult adoptees navigating particular developmental stages. Because the project is exploratory in scope, the literature reviewed in anticipation of the research is eclectic in nature. However, it may be expected that the pattern of attachment an adoptee developed as a child may impact his or her adult attachment style, which may influence his or her general wellbeing and sense of identity, and may then inform a decision to procreate or not. What follows is a description of the methodology employed for this project, which includes an outline of the sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This qualitative study explored the questions, “does the experience of being adopted affect an adoptee’s decision to start a family and if so, how?” The intentions of the study included examining a particular and typical developmental stage – the consideration of parenthood – to gauge whether deliberations and decisions are related to the experience of being adopted and to enhance the body of literature available to clinicians who may find themselves working with adult adoptees. In order to best discover the feelings, experiences, and perspectives of the participants, an exploratory, qualitative study utilizing intensive interviewing was designed. Such a study allowed the researcher to apply an inductive approach to address the question, thereby exploring the diverse and rich voices of participants by examining their own words (Engle et al., 2012).

Sample

Participants in the study were adult adoptees who met the following criteria: he or she was adopted as an infant (between the ages of 0-1), either domestically or internationally; he or she was at least eighteen; and he or she was contemplating starting a family or was a parent already. Initially, the required criteria limited the sample to people who were not yet parents; however further consideration of this idea revealed that lifting this limitation would allow the researcher to compare the differences and similarities (if any) between childless participants and those who were parents already.

In responding to the recruitment solicitation, prospective participants initially screened themselves on the four criteria stated above. During our initial email correspondence or phone conversations, the researcher again confirmed the criteria. Some prospective participants, when contacted for inclusion, revealed they did not meet the criteria; these people were thanked and encouraged to pass information about the study to others. In the present investigation, seventeen participants were interviewed and no efforts to verify the participants' responses to the screening criteria were made.

Recruitment

Prior to publicizing the recruitment solicitations for this project, approval for the study was granted by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review (HSR) Committee (Appendix A). To identify subjects for this study, purposive sampling (a non-probability and non-random sampling method) was utilized and snowball sampling occurred as participants shared the study information with their friends or family members.

Solicitation for participation in the study occurred by advertising in adult adoptee-specific online forums (Appendix B), through the social media platform, Facebook (Appendix C) and by directly writing the authors of adoptee-related blogs or books (Appendix D). The recruitment letters included a brief summary of the study, the eligibility criteria, the nature of participation, and contact information for the researcher. Once the researcher made contact with the prospective participant, eligibility criteria were confirmed and an appointment for the phone or Skype interview was determined on the condition that the signed consent form was returned to the researcher (Appendix E). All consent forms were either printed, signed and scanned, and then emailed to the researcher, or printed, signed and photographed and then emailed to the researcher, who stored them in a password protected electronic file. During the first few minutes

of each interview, the researcher briefly reviewed the nature of the study and his or her participation and emphasized confidentiality and the ability to end the interview at any time.

Ethics and Safeguards

Protection of confidentiality

Because of the nature of conducting intensive interviews, participation in the study was not anonymous. To protect the confidentiality of study participants, I did not label interview notes or audio recordings with their real names, but with pseudonyms instead. Additionally, the informed consent forms and interview notes were saved in a password protected computerized file during the thesis process and will be saved for three years thereafter, in accordance with federal regulations. After such time, I will either destroy the above-mentioned material or maintain it in its secure location.

Risks and benefits of participation

Risks for participants are few, but included the possibility that the interview might stimulate reflections that caused concern or anxiety for the participant. Confidentially was emphasized and each participant was informed that he/she could decline to answer any question and could end the interview for any reason. Additionally, in the case of a participant needing support after the interview, the researcher was prepared to offer a referral list of national hotline numbers for participants (Appendix G). In order to assess a need for resources, at the end of the interview, the researcher asked each participant how they felt about the interview and extent of content shared and whether any support might be needed; each participant confirmed he or she was not emotionally dysregulated and enjoyed talking about the focus of the study.

While compensation for participation was not given, benefits for the participants included the opportunity to share their adoption narrative and explore its possible impacts on their

contemplation of parenthood. Another benefit is the opportunity to contribute to growing research about adult adoptees that will aid clinicians to learn more about this population. Related to the field of social work, the hope in conducting such a study is to further illuminate for adoptees and clinicians the types of deliberations adoptees face when deciding to become a parent. Additional benefits for the field of clinical social work include a new and deliberate focus on adult adoptees at a particular life stage – entering parenthood – in order to observe if connections between one's adoption experience has bearing on the presence or lack of desire to have children.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred through the use of semi-structured phone interviews that ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour. Participants were asked for specific demographic information (name, age, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) and then asked to share the details of their adoption narrative. From there, following the interview guide, (Appendix F) interviews typically progressed to participants' perspectives of their relationships with their adoptive (and/or birth) parents, followed by their understanding of their adoptive identity and concluded with their ideas about creating a family (or not). At the end of the interview, the researcher did a quick assessment for needs related to emotional support, thanked the participant and outlined the next steps for the project; each participant was told he or she would receive a copy of the thesis during summer 2016.

In order to remain as close to the participant's voice as possible, recording of the telephone calls was captured using a mobile phone application called TapeACall. The calls where then immediately downloaded to the researcher's computer, named with a pseudonym and stored in a password protected electronic file for complete, verbatim transcription by the

researcher. For the Skype conversation (n=1), an audio recording device was used and the above process was followed.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected and the interviews were transcribed, the qualitative content analysis began with preparing, processing and organizing the raw content of the interviews, in order to facilitate an inductive coding approach. Thomas (2006) offers, "the primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (p. 238). The researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times in order to identify emerging thematic patterns and categories, eventually paring the numerous segments of text down to the most important or essential categories. Using this approach leads to a presentation of findings focused on descriptions of the most important themes and patterns (Thomas, 2006). These themes and patterns will be discussed in the followings findings portion of this thesis.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study is to investigate whether the experience of being adopted influences an adoptee's decision to start a family (or not). This chapter presents the major findings from this study based on seventeen semi-structured interviews with adult adoptees who were willing to discuss whether or not their experience of being adopted affected their decision to enter parenthood.

The first section of this chapter presents characteristics of the sample: adoptees' demographic information, details about the participants' adoptions and adoptive families, their search and reunion experiences (if any) and details about the participants' current families.

The second section of this chapter presents the emerging themes of the study's findings related to the overall question *does the experience of being adopted affect one's decision to start a famil*y and will be organized into these six sections: participants' adoption narratives, their adoptive identities, their processes of deliberation to enter parenthood, their hopes and fears about becoming parents, and a review of the experiences of current adoptee parents. All participants were assigned pseudonyms that are used throughout this paper in order to protect confidentiality.

The Sample and its Characteristics.

Of the seventeen adoptees interviewed, fifteen were women (88.2%) and two were men (11.8%). Ages of participants ranged from 25-55, with a mean age of 39. Eleven participants identified as White (64.7%), four participants were Asian (either Korean or Japanese American) (23.5%), and two participants identified as Black or multi-racial (11.8%). All but two

participants were partnered and all but one identified as heterosexual. The majority of the adoptees had college degrees, and several held master's degrees. Twelve (70.6%) participants had children ranging in age from infant to adult; five (29.4%) participants did not have children.

The majority of the participants' adoptive parents were interested in adoption due to challenges with fertility, but some adoptive parents initially opted for adoption, believing it was a calling. All but two participants' adoptions were confidential (i.e. at the time of his or her adoption, a different family adopted the infant and the record of the biological family was sealed). All but three adoptions originated in the United States. Eleven adoptees identified as the same race as their adoptive parents, three were not the same race as their adoptive parents, and three adoptees entered multi-racial adoptive families.

All adoptees were adopted as infants, though two were adopted at different points during their first year (one at 3 months and one at 12 months). Likewise, all adoptees were brought home to their adoptive families as infants, but for fourteen adoptees the transition was immediate and three adoptees' ages ranged from 2 to 12 months old before they transitioned to their adoptive home. Nearly all adoptees knew they were adopted throughout all of their lives, although one was not told until adulthood.

Within their adoptive families, eleven adoptees entered homes where there were or would be biological children born to their adoptive parents; four of those adoptees' parents also adopted other children. Four participants were adopted into families with only adopted children (no biological children born to adoptive parents) and two participants did not have any siblings. Eleven adoptees characterized their relationships with their adoptive parents as positive, while six participants stated their relationships with their adoptive parents were strained.

Three of seventeen adoptees had not searched for their biological parents; twelve had been reunited with at least one member of their biological family and five (including the three who had not begun a search) had not. Of the twelve reunited participants, seven characterized their current relationship with biological family members as positive and five stated their relationships with reunited family was strained.

Emerging Themes

In order to approach an understanding of how being adopted may affect one's decision to start a family, gaining familiarity with the participants' adoption narratives was vital. The first section frames the adoptees' early experiences by examining their transition to adoptive families, how curiosities about their adoption were managed, conceptualizations of relinquishment, and an overview of early relationships with their adoptive parents. By collecting information about these particular areas of the participants' lives, the researcher aimed to frame aspects of the adoption experience that may impact the adoptee's later decision to become a parent.

The second section explores adoptive identity development, where main emerging themes are reviewed and include – a sense of self and how one's adoptive identity development often happens in tandem with one's racial or ethnic identity development.

Findings about the considerations about parenthood - reflections and projections – are explored in the third section which includes reflections of the adoptees' sense of always knowing (or not) that they would become parents and an examination of their ideas about how to create their families, related to adopting or having biological children. This section also explores the participants' ideas about the experience of pregnancy and their predictions or experiences of the role of their adoptive mother in parenthood transition.

The fourth and fifth sections reveal findings related to the participants' hopes and fears about becoming parents and include the following two subsections related to hopes: experiencing a biological connection with their child and promoting their child's emotional wellness. Exploring adoptees' fears led to these themes: possibilities of genetic uncertainties, transmission of former emotional injuries, feeling unprepared to parent and a fear of a loss of self.

Finally, this chapter concludes with a fifth section that highlights the experiences of adoptees who have children, providing parents an opportunity to share reflective updates that may expand their original thinking about the transition to parenthood.

Overview of Adoption Narratives

From birth to home. To gain a sense of circumstances of the adoptee's birth and adoption, all participants were asked to share an overview of their adoptions and make-up of the adoptive family. Fifteen of seventeen participants shared similar stories about their adoptive parents' challenges with fertility, which led them to pursue adoption, like Jolene's parents, "[…] my parents were unable to conceive together for whatever reason and so they chose adoption" or Brian's mother, "she did always want to be a mother because she couldn't have children, just physically couldn't have children. She always wanted to be a mother."

But for a few of the adoptees, their adoptive parents were not responding to issues of infertility. For example, in the case of Annie, her adoptive parents felt spiritually drawn to pursue adoption: "My adoptive parents didn't even try to get pregnant when they got married; they always felt called to adopt, and so they adopted my older brother first from Korea." Almost all adoptees shared similar descriptors of their adoptive parents' perspectives on welcoming the infants home using words like "chosen," "special" and "wanted very much."

Related to the existing or eventual structure of their adoptive families, the majority of the participants entered families with siblings, either adoptive or biological, and some adoptees joined families with a combination of adopted and biological children, like Rhonda:

> I was adopted into a blended family. Kind of yours, mine and ours. My parents were both previously married so they had children from those former relationships. When they married, they weren't able to have children. So, they adopted me first and then my younger sister who is also adopted from Korea.

Sometimes, in the cases of families with biological and adopted children, the order of each was intentional, as in Annie's family: "my parents, they really wanted their adopted kids to be first. They wanted it to…They really felt like it was so important to them." This intentionality around first birthing or adopting children features in many of the adoptees' later considerations of parenthood.

Curiosities about adoption. Nearly all of the adoptees knew they were adopted for as long as they could remember. Most of the adoptive parents were as transparent and forthcoming as possible with as much information about the adoption and biological family as they had. As Rhonda reflected, "I was always the curious one. I always wanted to see my paperwork and know more information. My parents were very receptive. My mom never hid that from me and we would talk about it." However, many of the adoptees also grappled with their curiosity and how to approach the subject of their adoption with their parents. As the adoptees grew older, the navigation of these conversations changed and sometimes began to feel uncomfortable or difficult; this is illustrated with Renee's experience:

> I felt weird and I still do. It's a weird conversation to have. But, they gave me the sheet of information and yeah, they were always there. I just chose not to talk about it. I think, [...] I just think I felt guilty. Like if I asked about it, then they would feel bad.

And some participants were not immensely curious about their adoptions or biological families beyond desiring to know medical information or physical attributes of their biological relatives, relating their lack of inquisitiveness to good relationships with their adoptive families. Celeste explains it this way:

> I think the most that would happen for me was wishing I had a photo album or some medical records of this person. Because I was really grateful and happy with the life that I had and I didn't need anything to be different but there was still that curiosity – that's about the extent of it. The curiosity…I didn't want to get engaged in any one's life but I would have loved to have a photo album handed to me so that I would know what my parents looked like.

The majority of the adoptees interviewed remembered how when they were young, their adoptive parents were willing and able to share details of how the adoptee joined the family, specifics about the adoption itself, and information about biological parents or family, if it existed. However, many adoptees also described an eventual shift in this sense of openness as the adoptee aged – sometimes exploration of the adoptee's curiosity became "awkward" or "difficult" or "potentially painful" for the adoptive parents especially if the adoptee was contemplating searching for biological family.

Relinquishment. As important as an adoptee's entry is into an adoptive family, the details of relinquishment from his or her biological family can also carry much meaning. When an adoption is closed or confidential, details of relinquishment may be a part of the limited

information adoptive parents receive to disclose as the adoptee grows older. Knowing the details of relinquishment may contribute to an adoptee's sense of identity or emotional wellbeing, for better or worse. In Brian's case, for example, learning the details of his relinquishment added to long-lived feelings of rejection and abandonment, which later impacted his relationships and thoughts about parenthood:

> The situation around my adoption that I do know, that I have found out over time is that, my birth mother had an affair and I was the product of that affair and she didn't know that until I was born and she already had children. So, it was like basically, you need to give this child up for adoption or lose your family kind of situation.[...] I was given away at my most vulnerable stage of life […]. And it's something I still deal with on a daily basis.

Related to relationships, Jolene also commented on how being relinquished affected her abilities to cope with rejection in other areas of her life, namely relationships:

> Because I'm not good with rejection - or I wasn't. Getting in touch with my adoption baggage has allowed me to realize things…Oh, I do certain things and fear certain things because I was rejected…in some ways rejected before I had a chance to do anything and so I'm always trying to be the best. So, that has made relationships hard.

The conceptualization of relinquishment as a form of rejection or abandonment was not unique to Brian and Jolene; many other adoptees also articulated complicated feelings about this stage of their adoption process. Most shared generally positive reports of their adoptive backgrounds but also sometimes related troubles with interpersonal relationships (e.g. trusting and committing to others) to this initial experience.

Childhood relationships with adoptive families. When asked to characterize their relationships with their adoptive families, most participants reported feeling loved and accepted and often related those experiences to their parents' intentionality around creating cohesive and bonded families. For example, Annie stated, "my parents were very adamant about us understanding that we like, we were completely a family, that you know, there was no difference between adoption and biological." And for Brian:

> My experience, looking back on it, in all total, it was good. I was adopted into a loving family that did whatever they had do to do to make sure I had a good life and a great education and every advantage that they were able to give me in life.

When asked about her relationship with her adoptive parents, Celeste shared this perspective:

> I feel enormous pride and gratitude for them. I definitely feel incredibly blessed to have been chosen by them. They have really strong values and ethics and a really wonderful sense of family values and work ethic. My father was very clear about what it meant to raise a family, so he did – they did things by the book. Mom stayed at home and always put a meal on the table every night and my dad went to work and raised us in the country. I was able to grow up in the woods, which is a huge part of who I am. And, yeah they really worked hard for their family and I really value that and feel really blessed that I got to be raised in that. They were very intentional about doing that well.

Often, adoptees would compare and contrast their early perspectives of their adoptive families against those of their biological or adoptive siblings. Sienna explains how she differed from her brother in this way:

> I never felt like the parents I grew up with weren't my parents. My younger brother, I remember when he was twelve had this total identity crisis, and was like "why don't we

> know who our real parents are?" But, I never felt anything like that. I would say my attachment to my parents was just like any other kid who was biologically related to their parents.

In describing their upbringings, more than half of the respondents explicitly referenced idyllic childhoods, as Rhonda recounted:

> I really do feel like I had a really happy childhood. When I go back to childhood…I do…I long to go back there…My parents had us involved in so many things. I see more light things than dark [...]. My childhood is filled with so many good memories.

And, nearly always, adoptees referenced memories of feeling different, as Marjorie who was adopted into a family with one biological (to adoptive parents) sibling and one adopted sibling, shared:

> I applaud my parents for raising me […] and I know like, I would say, if you talked to my friends and family, they would say that I'm very well emotionally adjusted, but there are still things, you know, that um bothered me so […]. Yes, I felt loved. I definitely felt loved. Did I feel different? Certainly? Very different from my siblings? One hundred percent.

Reportedly, for most adoptees, how their adoptive parents acknowledged and addressed the differences their adoptive children faced might not have alleviated all potentially negative impacts, but most adoptees stressed generally positive relationships with their adoptive parents. But, for a few adoptees, differences were highlighted in nefarious ways, leaving behind painful imprints, like in Valentina's case, "My grandfather would even sometimes make jokes about my hair being nappy, you know." Valentina also shared how she coped with feelings of difference:

> There were times when I remember telling my mom that I didn't love her that she wasn't my real mom, that I hate you. I went through that when I was a child a lot. I don't know…I just feel like why should I be grateful? Why should I be grateful for adoption?

Finally, one adoptee who experienced a childhood filled with secrecy and illusion, recounts his historical feelings of difference this way:

> There were always these weird innuendos in family conversation. People in the room would go quiet when I would come in. There were a lot of hints. Especially after I found out that I was adopted and looking back at the way I was treated and the way people talked about me when I was growing up. Things became a lot clearer. [...] As time passed, I really felt more of an indentured…like I was there to do the work. My father had a very weak heart. I kind of felt like I was there to toe the line for family (John).

Participants were asked about their relationships with adoptive families in order to gain an understanding of how (or if) these early relationships, whether positive or negative, had any bearing on how they later envisioned (or envision) entering parenthood.

This first section of emerging findings offers an overview of the participants' adoption narratives. By exploring an adoptee's early adoption experiences and childhood relationships with adoptive family, the researcher attempts to highlight the foundation of an adoptee's emotional wellbeing, which may later influence the adoptee's consideration of parenthood.

Adoptive Identity

The next section reports findings related to an exploration of the construction of an adoptee's identity. Identity development for anyone is a complex and life-long process, but for adoptees, complexities of becoming oneself emerge as an adoptee grapples with racial identity or a desire to search for biological family, for example. Information collected from participants

about their conceptualization of their adoptive identities was gathered to illustrate how one's understanding of her or his identity might shape ideas or desires about becoming a parent or not.

A sense of self. When participants were asked to reflect on their adoptive identity, responses generally fit into one of three different types: their adoptive identity was a source of pride, evoked feelings of shame, or the adoptee expressed neutral feelings about the distinction of being adopted. Sometimes, adoptees related their ideas to a sense of belonging and the adoptive parents' abilities to hold and explore both concepts – belonging and difference – for their adoptee. For example, Rhonda refers to the efforts of her adoptive mother to encourage her identity development:

> I think our mom has significantly impacted our sense of self and that whole nurture thing and our own attachment stuff. And so I think that definitely has big influence I believe - the nature of and the context of where you're raised in addition to the genetic and biological elements of that.

Conversely, there were adoptees who did not feel entirely in control of their personality or identity development, as Sophie shares her experience:

> My mom, she was a good mom and tried her best but she was you know, she over-tried because, they knew that she was an adoptive mother…Overcompensating with being protective. I had a real shy personality and I was kind of, I felt kind of humiliated all the time because she bragged about me with her friends and around people and I didn't feel like I could really have my own personality or find it growing up because I was embarrassed because she kind of did my talking for me. "oh, she's so good in school." I had to be her perfect little daughter.

Sasha reflected on the challenges of missing background information:

> It's always a question that you don't really know where you came from. It's almost part of your identity is mystery. And people would always ask me "what are you - are you Italian, Greek, are you…?" I would always say, "I don't know. I don't know what I am."

When asked to share details of their adoptive identity, there was much variety in responses, possibly owing to the enormity of the subject; ultimately, most adoptees reflected that their adoptive identity was a large part of their overall identity and often used it as a descriptor when given the opportunity.

Identity as related to race or ethnicity. Often, participants connected their experience of being racially similar or different from their adoptive parents to their understanding and development of their adoptive identity. More than half of the adoptees who were placed with adoptive parents of the same race referenced either physical similarities to their adoptive families or their ability to blend in or "pass" as a biological child – both allowing a sense of control over disclosure. For example, Celeste, who grew up with racially similar parents, reflects on both the salience of her adoptive identity and her ability to acknowledge her adoption or not:

> Again, there was no shame around it – it was this really precious part of my identity…so it was something that I was always really comfortable sharing and also back in the day, it wasn't necessarily a question that came up either, because it was more…It was always something that I had the freedom or the privilege to divulge because back then…they did a good job of matching people who looked like you. If that was important to you, if you have brown hair and brown eyes, we're going to give you children who have brown hair and brown eyes.

Similarly, Sienna, who is white and grew up with a white adoptive family, described her adoptive identity this way:

> I would say it's kind of something, I don't know how to explain it…I wouldn't consider it a major identifier in my life just because, it's just like another demographic to me. Other people who are adopted and are from other countries for example, I realize it's a much a stronger identifier to them than it is to me.

Penelope recalled how she disavowed her adoptive experience in her youth by relying on racial similarity:

> I had grown up - again, a kid in the 60s and 70s, kinda stigmatized. I hated the fact that I was adopted - that I wasn't like…normal born, like everybody else. I just hated it. I hated it so much that I didn't even want to discuss it. I lied through my teeth and never told friends or anybody, and they didn't have to know, you couldn't lie to your family, but outside the family, if somebody didn't have to know, they never got told.

For transracial adoptees, the development of their adoptive and racial and/or ethnic identities was closely intertwined and multifaceted. Despite reports of most adoptive parents attempting to mitigate feelings of difference, the majority of transracial adoptees made reference to their overlooked racial or ethnic identities, as Marjorie describes:

> Just going back and searching made me re-examine how I was brought up and I mean, I have a very supportive family and but I was would say some of my differences were maybe ignored. I think my parents, you know, they, I think skipped over the fact that I was Korean a lot of times. They were like, "no, no, you're one of us - you're all the same and there are no differences." Sorta letting a lot of ethnic identity go unnoticed kinda like made me…I think it confused me a little, made me resent them a little.

Rich responses were elicited from the adoptees when asked about their adoptive identity and it was clear that for both transracial and same-race-placed adoptees, race and ethnicity was an

important and complicated factor in their lives and in their deliberations about becoming parents. Later, transracial adoptees reflected more often on the possibility of adopting outside of their race or ethnicity, as well.

Considerations of Parenthood – Reflections and Projections

Almost all participants readily agreed that their experience of being adopted impacted their considerations of becoming a parent, whether they were a parent already or planning for the future. Exploring the nuances of the impact is the focus of this section and include the following emerging subthemes: always having an internal feeling or desire to have children and be a future parent (or not), deliberations about creating a family through adoption or biological means, a desire to experience pregnancy and childbirth, and reflections or projections of the role of the adoptive mother during the transition to parenthood.

A sense of always knowing. Or not. When asked to reflect back (or consider current feelings), eleven adoptees expressed a longstanding interest in having children, often dating back to their childhoods. As Charlene remembers, “Well, I always wanted to be mother. When I was a little girl, people would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said I wanted to be a mom. I always wanted children.” Referencing societal influence, Penelope put it this way, “Yeah, as a little kid, I definitely did, part of that is the way society grooms little girls especially then. With the baby dolls and everything. I really wanted to be a mom.”

Three participants recalled believing they did not want to eventually start a family:

> I never had an intention to have children, which I think often shocks people because I am such a mother. I didn’t ever really picture myself raising a family and part of that…I don’t think I’ve ever really delved into that shadow psyche of myself as to what was that

resistance. Because I have so clearly embraced being a mother and I really love it (Celeste, mother to three).

I was always the person who was like I'm never going to get married and I'm never having kids. I'm pretty independent[...]. I remember at like fifteen saying I'm never going to have kids and if I do I'm just going to adopt. And that was coming from reading about how many kids are in the foster care system and then getting turned out at age eighteen [...] (Lucy, mother to one).

So, as far as having children, it's funny, I was thinking back, always when I was a kid, I used to always say that I was never going to have children. I'd tell my mom all the time, "I'm never having kids, I'm never having kids." I never knew why, it's something that I always felt. And looking back now, I wonder if it has something to do with being adopted. At the time, I didn't know it was that reason (Sasha, mother to two).

Brian (father to one) related his ambivalence to earlier described feelings of abandonment and rejection:

I had a lot of issues with it [thoughts of becoming a parent]. What I found is that while I was okay with being adopted in my teenage years, and I felt like I dealt with this and it's never going to be a problem for me, it's not going to be an issue. As I moved into adulthood and into my early twenties and later twenties, I found that there were aspects of being adopted that I hadn't dealt with and things that were on mind and questions that I had that were affecting my life, my relationships, with my fiancé or girlfriend at that time. [...] I felt like in my mind, I wanted a family but I wasn't sure. And somewhere in the back of my mind, I think that played a role, as I started to see a psychologist and open up and talk about what my hang-ups were with this commitment and I started to realize

> that this does come from me being adopted and the unsettled part of me as a child, as a baby or infant when I was put up for adoption.

Three participants recalled having been (or are currently) unsure. Marjorie is comprehensive in her response, sharing a number of reasons for her ambivalence:

> It [meeting biological sisters and mother] made me feel a little bit better about being so um just like on the fence about family. I think for so long, I kinda struggled with like, oh, do I start a family or do I not? I'm 33, I just turned 33 in November and I really don't know what to do. The unfortunate part is that it takes some actual planning and I'm so fucking confused right now. So, knowing…seeing that with my biological sisters, you know some decided not to and some decided to, I think it made me feel better about like questioning it a little. Because, my adopted sister is seven years older than me, she got married and had kids very early on. My parents are very pro-family. They would have adopted twenty kids if they could have. So, it was nice to see that other people felt differently, I guess. It was comforting. [...]

Like Marjorie, Penelope was impacted by meeting her biological sister who had children and served as a model of what could be:

> Once I found my sister, she had already had kids - she has three girls. Seeing her as a parent, she was kind of a like a role model for me. I was like little kids don't have to be like snotty and bratty and throwing up and sticky all of the time. Yes, those things happen, but they are also adorable and they are cute and they draw you little pictures and put hearts on it and they want to sing songs and do little dances and throw balls in the yard and stuff like that. I thought I would be alright.

Adoption or biological birth first. When considering the parenthood question, several adoptees mentioned grappling with the decision to create their family with biological or adopted children. Annie, who is the mother of a biological infant, remembers feeling certain she did not want to adopt, but after becoming a mother, felt she could consider adoption for a second child:

> So, we had talked about having kids and I don't know, I thought yeah, someday…I guess when I was growing up, people would ask me, "you're adopted so you probably want to adopt, right?" I don't know. But I was always like, "no, I'll never adopt. I do not want to adopt." I think it was because everyone just assumed that I would adopt […]. When it came down to it, I wasn't opposed to it - I didn't want to become a stereotype, so to speak (laughs). […] We're a lot more open to it, now. Even I am. Even after having Xena. I would love for her to have an adopted sibling. I don't want her to be the last one. I don't know. I could absolutely love a child an adopted child, as my own. I did have worries about that.

Two adoptees pondered whether or not a decision to adopt in the future might offer an improved adoptive experience for the child (because of their own adoption experience) and whether adopting a child might offer some amount of healing for their own experience:

> For a while there, it was, I was thinking maybe hey, I do want to adopt a child. It's still something I think about because there could be an advantage from the perspective from how you would want to handle an adopted child because you were adopted? There could be some advantages there for the child. As well as some catharsis for me. Kind of healing some wounds from the past - hey, you know I chose to do it right. Or I chose to do it differently. I don't know (Brian).

> I always think about adopting a child. The other part of my story is to fix adoption. If adoption is a trauma, in part because of the way our adoption system works in America today, if adopting wasn't a forced, closed legal issue like it is, and we were more open about adoptions in general and we praised people who engaged in adoption like birth mothers and adoptive parents and it was family love fest… I wonder if my life, if I would have experienced as much pain and trauma around adoption. So, if I can create that situation for another child that also finishes my story in some ways (Jolene).

Two adoptees who remain undecided about how they will create their families mentioned their ideas about adoption changed as they navigated searching for their biological families:

> At one point, I was very, even when I was coming back from Korea, just pretty frustrated with adoption and the system and you know. I was very transparent with my parents and did not agree with international adoption and voiced that (Rhonda).
>
> Going through my birth search, I realized that […] until a couple of months ago, I've had a very negative view of adoption, so much that, I probably would not have adopted my own child. Like I found myself saying, "man I would never want to put a kid through that. [...] But, I think in the past two months, I've kind of been thinking a little differently. Maybe I could adopt.[...] I guess I always come back to if I really really want a kid, and I'm unable physically to have one, by the time I'm emotionally ready, at that point, I'll adopt. I always feel guilty that it would be my back-up option. Part of me thinks, you're adopted, pay it forward, you should adopt. But, I really don't want to. I feel like if you are going to have a kid, you might as well have someone that is related to you…The thing that I always craved when I was younger (Marjorie).

Experience of pregnancy. Some adoptees referenced the desire to experience pregnancy but are also considering adoption, either as a solution to potential problems with fertility or to provide a home for a child who needs it. Jolene remarked, "To sum up, yes, I want to have a biological child and I want to also adopt a child somehow and help them in the same way I've helped myself, I guess."

Rhonda shared her desire to experience pregnancy as a way of deepening her sense of empathy towards her birthmother:

> Yes, I do dream of that. I think as an adoptee, I really want to know that feels like, that process of pregnancy and understand even more of that physical level of how that must have felt for my biological mom to have had that experience and then to give that up, if you will. I am such an experiential learner I want to feel that and learn what that experience must have been like, for me to fully in a full circle kind of understanding? I think it would provide a lot of healing to go through that and just to understand and have a deeper sense of empathy and just the experience of that. [...] The birth part is…it would be great to know what it feels like.

Celeste's reflections on her intuition related to pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood revealed an ability to embrace these experiences and transitions despite not feeling experienced in these areas. Celeste also mentions her endeavors to find mentors and support systems to help her navigate these transitions, which became an emerging theme throughout the rest of the interviews:

> I grew up very detached from that nurturing relationship between a mother and a child. I never really witnessed it. I had never held a newborn or an infant until I held my own. But, beautifully and amazingly, being pregnant was very intuitive and natural and very

> graceful. I never had morning sickness with any of my pregnancies, I did natural home births for each of them and it was very clear that I even though I never had a role model, I was going to breastfeed. I found as quickly as I could a supportive community that resonated for me with the way that I thought you should do this mothering, pregnancy, baby thing.

Role of adoptive mother in parenthood transition. Childfree adoptees were asked how their relationships with their adoptive mother might change when they become pregnant and transition to parenthood. The responses varied vastly; some childfree respondents believed their adoptive mother would be a person they would and could look to for comfort, mentorship, and support as Rhonda explains:

> Yeah, definitely. I think that would be a neat process and experience to go through that…Because she didn't have that personal experience with me, she does know physically that's it's like. I know for some adoptive parents, that not the case. She would get it and she would also see again, that piece of me as an adoptee and what that means in a different way, too. Yeah.

Conversely, in Valentina's case, she is not planning to seek support from her adoptive mother and explains why:

> My friends who grew up with their biological mothers, they can talk with their moms about the pregnancy, what was their mom's pregnancy like when they were pregnant. I can't talk to my mom like that. I can't. That scares me. I'm not really comfortable talking to my mom about that stuff and I don't think I want to. It's very strange. She's never been pregnant. She doesn't know what it's like. It would be very very hard to have to talk to her about that or even be around her.

Valentina's response mirrored some past experiences of the adoptees who are already parents. When asked if they relied on their adoptive mothers for support during or after their pregnancies, four respondents stated they did not rely on their adoptive mothers. As Sophie recalls:

> I couldn't really look to my adoptive mother in that way. Things were just so uncomfortable and I look back now I realize why and it was because she was very jealous of me having my own baby. Because she had not worked through her own infertility and not being able to have a biological child and so, she just…

Some adoptees who are parents recalled their adoptive mothers reactions to their pregnancies or childbirth; Charlene describes a difficult experience:

> When I was pregnant, my mother, my adoptive mother was very uncomfortable with it. She was very uncomfortable with it […]. It was never like, "do you need any help dear?" [...] She couldn't have that feeling of the baby kicking you and she couldn't have that feeling of the delivery. You know, that moment. I feel badly for her in that way. She didn't have those experiences [...] But, it was hard on me…Recovering from my pregnancies and taking care of my newborns and breastfeeding and all of that stuff, that made my mother very uncomfortable and that was kind of a rift. I was almost treated like I was shoving it her face, when I was just living my life. I was just having a life. And this is what it entailed and I had working parts, and I'm not going to go and adopt my babies. That was hard. It kind of, there was a rift there already, but that kind of solidified it…

Charlene's experience of her adoptive mother's feelings of jealousy were echoed by Lucy, who was initially looking forward to the bonding that might occur between her and her adoptive mother when she was pregnant:

> I thought it was going to be the most amazing thing. I thought "this going to bring us together. She's always wanted to have a grandchild, she's so good with kids." And it was the opposite. She was so angry and she made it all about her. […] And she eventually, at one point, we were having some discussion and she broke down in tears and she was just like, "I was never pregnant and I never had a birth, and it just makes me think of the miscarriages that I had." It became clear that she is reliving something that she was never able to work through.

Transition to Parenthood – Hopes

Adoptees were asked to reflect on their hopes and dreams about creating a family and becoming a parent. Hoping for healthy children was explicitly stated throughout most interviews. Beyond their child's physical health, a number of common categories emerged and included hopes about themselves as current or prospective parents. Differences in parenting emerged as a common theme, even among adoptees who had referenced idyllic childhoods; these differences mostly included aspiring to instill emotional wellness in their children. For many adoptees the prospect of seeing a biological relative and experiencing that type of connection for the first time was expressed as a salient hope.

Instilling emotional wellness. Many adoptees referenced experiences of emotional disconnect in their childhoods and described how addressing that became an intentional focus of theirs as they parented their own children. Charlene stated, "the one thing I just didn't get as an adopted child and was bound and determined to give to my own children was just understanding about being different…If you want to be different, that's ok." Other adoptees describe this parental focus thusly:

> Now, I would say in our generation and the way that I'm raising my own children, there's a very strong element of emotional capacity that I did not grow up with. […]. Because I don't have the same depth of emotional connection and interaction that I do with my children that I'm raising. And, that's very conscious. And I've made different choices and different compromises to support that over supporting say, the sort of actual physical wealth that I had and the physical opportunities that I had to get a really great education and be able to travel and have experiences that I really value (Celeste).

> I wanted my children to feel like they are being seen. That they were encouraged to be strong, which they certainly were. Also a feeling of connection. I really wanted to feel connected to them. Which I did and I do. Which would be reparative on a level of ways. (Shelby).

> I didn't have that stability starting out and things did become really, in a sense, for an infant and for a child, become traumatic, for the development. There was some trauma, mental trauma that I had to deal with that I'm still dealing with. So, it's been something I definitely have wanted to never have my child have to experience (Brian).

> I didn't get much nurturing as a kid. The first time my father ever told me he loved me, I was twenty-five and he was on his deathbed. My parents weren't huggers. Not at all. There was a lot of anger in the family; it wasn't a great childhood. And so, one of things that I resolved when I had my own kids was that it wasn't going to be like that at all. I was going to be involved. My kids were going to know how much I cared about them. I would have died to defend them (John).

Experiencing a biological connection. The majority of the adoptees mentioned how becoming a parent to a biological child included the opportunity to see themselves in another

person; for many who had not undertaken a search, this would be the first time experiencing such a connection and many marveled at the memory or future possibility.

> I had an amazing experience being adopted, but still that biological link, I don't know, is so phenomenal. I'm still explaining, like "oh my gosh, she does that like me, she looks like me, she has weird idiosyncrasies that I have. And we are already starting to notice those. I really love this. [...] When she was born…She had a ton of black hair and when I was born I had a ton of black hair. They told me on the ultrasound that it was so dense that she didn't have any hair. That's not a big deal, like whatever…So, when she was born, I cried when I saw it…I had that…and like, she has my Asian eyes, and I can see me in her […](Annie).

> With him I feel a connection biologically that other people have felt with their family that I don't feel and I've never felt. But, it's like hey, there is something is connected to me biologically and that I know. As an adopted child, not having that is, you don't, I don't think I ever really thought about it, but I'm sure it was in my subconscious all the time, because seeing him, I'm like, "Oh wow - he's connected to me on a different level than anybody else in this entire world. He is part of me, biologically, we are connected." That's been a completely new experience. You and I are connected like I'm not connected with anybody I've ever known in my entire life. And I would imagine it's that way for every parent. But not every parent is adopted so most parents or people who have siblings or biological relatives feel a connection with people on a biological level that I've just never experienced. I think in that sense, it's very different for adopted people, at least it was for me (Brian).

But, I feel like having a biological child, I mean, just the novelty isn't the word, that's too light of a word. Just the amazingness of seeing my genetic make-up in another human being…I can't even express the excitement that I feel at just the idea of that. I've never seen anyone with my face. And a weird thing that I know is that as an adoptee, biological families really take for granted how their genes create different things with their bodies. [...] I feel like that that's the closest I'm going to get to closing my adoption gap is to finally see me in another human being and be connected with them 100% the entire time (Jolene).

I think adoptees, we want children, that's the first real connection we'll have with anyone. When we have our own biological child. Some of us who have not found our biological families, that first time that we'll ever see someone that looks like us or acts like - that's the first family member we'll ever meet when we have our first child. [...] But, I want my own children to have that connection to grow up with somebody and see myself in someone (Valentina).

For Sienna, who grew up with her biological brother, the experience of experiencing another person with a genetic connection was not as salient as it was for others:

Not really. No, I don't think so, if you think about it, it's only going to be half of my genetics anyway. And maybe, I'm not sure. It's not like I have to see my biological family out in the world and therefore I want to produce my own. Maybe part of that too, is that I grew up with a biological brother, so. I wouldn't say it's a driving force that I want to see my own genes and know that they are mine out in the world in another way.

Transition to Parenthood – Fears

Adoptees were also asked about their fears or anxieties about becoming a parent. Responses were diverse and included many fears about the possibility of genetic problems due to unknown medical histories, especially for those who have not searched for biological family. Other areas of anxiety were related to a fear of projecting former emotional injuries on their children, to fears of feeling unequipped to be a parent and a fear of losing oneself in parenthood.

Genetic uncertainties. For nine adoptees, the lack of comprehensive medical history or background was a large source of anxiety. To alleviate these fears, most elected to conduct genetic or prenatal testing, as Renee recounted, "So actually, when we got pregnant, I went to the doctor and had every single test done." Sasha did this as well, but remarked on the gravity of not knowing:

> And probably the scariest thing about it was being pregnant and not having any of the family history or any of that knowledge. So actually, I did every possible test you can do when you are pregnant to look for birth defects and all that kind of stuff. I really was afraid about that. Everything turned ok. [...] My concern was not having any medical history and or genetic information. And it was such a big thing to me that I almost didn't have children.

Brian pondered the differences between readily accessible medical information and a lack of access:

> I don't know if certain things exist in my family, like am I predisposed to something, does that mean my child is going to be predisposed to something. There were a lot of fears there. Just not knowing. If you were in a situation with your biological parents you could kind of ask, "what did grandma die or what did grandpa die of" "what were my

great grandparents like? what did they end up dying of? ? did they have any medical issues?" […] For me, it created apprehension about having a child.

For those adoptees who had searched and found biological relatives, more information was not always reassuring, as in Sophie's case:

> I found out my birth mother passed away when she was thirty-two and I was only twelve when she passed away. And she passed away from breast cancer and when I found that out, I did…A huge fear came on me and it's so sad to say, but it did. […] I wanted to have children, because I wanted kids and I wanted my own family but I was just scared to try to get pregnant, I would not allow myself to do that because I was scared if my birth mother passed away young, I would too.

And in Sienna's case, educating herself and maintaining vigilance about her own health combats fears about the possibility of future mental health issues:

> Well, the family history of mental health issues is a fear for me. I haven't presented with anything and don't think I will but, just that underlying fear that that might be some kind of genetic thing that I don't know about or that could come out in my kids, so that's something I'm worried about it. But, I've already talked to my doctor about it…[...]

Transmission of former emotional injuries. Throughout the interviews, adoptees expressed a range of emotions about their adoption experiences and those who were left with emotional wounds, sometimes feared transmitting those to their children and worked intentionally to avoid that. For Valentina, who expressed excitement about finally having a biological connection to someone, examined her expectations of that experience:

> One of the fears I have is am I going to put a burden on my child? What if my child is born and they don't look like me? And they look like their father? What if they don't

> have the same talents as me, what if they don't have my personality? Am I going to be resentful? Because they are not like me and that's what I've always wanted? Is that kind of thing going to happen as an adoptee? What if the kids we've always wanted our whole life, grow up as someone who is not like us? There is no guarantee that they will look like us. Will I resent my child if my child is not like me? Is that going to put too much of a burden on them?

Feeling unprepared. Several adoptees mentioned fears related to feeling unequipped for the role of parent and often related these fears to experiences from their childhood. As Sophie explains, as a child, she felt compelled to be a high achiever and when it came to being a parent she shared this:

> […] Because I wasn't born into a family like everybody else, could I even do it or was going to be "good enough" to pull it off? I think I grew up almost like I was faking it a little bit…Like fake it until you make it type thing […].

Shelby had a different perspective; she grew up as an only child and while raising her two daughters, realized she had missed learning about or experiencing the dynamics between siblings:

> The thing that was I afraid of the most was having girls. Of course I wound up having two girls. I bought this book when I was three months pregnant. It was basically about the struggle between mothers and daughters. I read it and I was terrified. I had not been super close with my adoptive mother and I was just, I just felt really unequipped, felt like I don't know if I could do that. [...] I didn't know…I feel like one of things that I didn't know to be afraid of that I should have been afraid of is that I was an only child. And so,

when I ended up having two children, I could not deal with their having sibling squabbles or issues. I couldn't cope. I had no skills. I had no experience.

Loss of oneself. One adoptee shared fears related to the possibility of losing herself or parts of herself in the process of becoming a parent. Celeste recounts her initial thoughts here:

> Oh god, I was so afraid. I cried for nights on end after I found out I was pregnant. [...] Then, what came up for me was… The thing I would sob about in the night, was "my life is over for the rest of my life and I'm going to be stupid and fat." (Laughing) That was like, I just…Stupid and fat is much bigger than those two words…It was this sense of like, all the dynamic being-ness of who I am and who I hoped to be, is now just done….It's in this box and it's just done (laughing).

While this reaction may occur with any new mother (adoptees and non-adoptees alike), perhaps greater significance exists for an adoptee experiencing the prospect or fear of the loss of oneself, especially if integration of one's sense of self with one's adoptive narrative was painstakingly undertaken.

Experiences of Adoptees with Children

During the interviews with adoptees who are currently parents, they were often asked to think back to the days before children, which inevitably offered opportunities to update their memories with how reality has shaped their experiences. For example, Shelby, a mother to two daughters, shared a unique perspective that had not been verbalized in other interviews; she articulated complicated feelings related to birthing her children as related to her own experience of being adopted:

> I think I've always been really aware of their non-adoptive privilege. Like they weren't adopted, so they have all of their birth stories, they have pictures from the minutes they

were born, they were clearly…They got this grand entrance into the world and into our family and they were celebrated in a very public way. They had birth announcements and it's everything that most babies have. Every time I did that with them, I was so aware of my own birth and how it was nothing like that. It was the worst secret ever. It was shameful, nobody knew about it, many people still don't know about it. It brought up a lot of grief for me. And also a little bit of resentment. Like you don't even know how good you have it, girls. You know what I mean? You have no idea what you take for granted that people are actually happy that you were born. I think that's been something I've struggled with. It was completely unexpected that I would feel envious of their experience and the more that I did for them, the more…I mean, like it got kind of tangled. You know?

Parents who had completed searches for their biological relatives sometimes made connections between their experience as parents and uncovered information about their biological roots. For example, Charlene stated she always made a point to expose her children to a variety of ways of being and living and though her biological mother was deceased, through stories from others about her, she realized the two were similar in many ways:

> My mother was very flamboyant and artistic. She was a librarian, but she did a lot of … she posed for artists…One of her best friends was transgender and he was at her funeral…And like, she was very much the kind of person […] When my girls were little, I was involved in the arts, hosted poetry readings, my door was always open, there was always one derelict, homeless person sleeping on my couch. They knew it was a place where they could come a get a hot meal. My daughters would make sandwiches and bring

> them down to the homeless people under the bridge…This was the kind of life that I led. And it makes so much sense now, that I know who she was.

For Renee, finding out more information about her biological mother shed light on the likelihood that she was born with fetal alcohol syndrome and she related her later feelings of initial disconnection and confusion after the birth of her son to this:

> I got pregnant with my first son in 2008 and I gave birth to him. And my mom said when I had him, I was disconnected. And I felt it but I didn't know why. I loved him and I would hold him but I would let everybody else hold him and feed if they wanted to. I wasn't like attached. My mom and I thought it was because I was adopted and just kind of overwhelmed at the fact that he is now my first bloodline.

Lastly, Celeste had shared an initial fear about losing the dynamic parts of herself to motherhood and was able to illuminate the reality of her experience:

> […] This mothering business…this becoming a mother has made me SO much more dynamic, has motivated me to become so many many things…so much more dynamic than I could have ever possibly been. [...] I think that was my biggest fear, was that I would lose myself in raising children and if anything I have become so much more myself and such a better person because I am so intentional and so conscious about my thoughts, my words, my actions when I'm pregnant and then through each stage of their lives.

This section offers a glimpse of the realities adoptee parents face as they navigate parenthood with a unique perspective that is different than non-adopted parents. Their perspectives are related to their adoptive experiences that, for better or worse, continue to shape their lives from birth to parenthood and beyond.

Summary

This chapter presented the major findings of this study based on seventeen semi-structured interviews with adult adoptees who were willing to discuss whether or not their experience of being adopted affected their decision to enter parenthood. Emerging themes collected from analyzed transcriptions provide the organization for the chapter. The following chapter will offer an interpretation of these findings, comparisons and contrasts of major discoveries, a review of strengths and limitations of the study, implications for the field of social work and ideas for future research.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The objective of this exploratory, qualitative study was to investigate if and how the experience of being adopted influences an adoptee's decision to create a family (or not). Narratives of a diverse group of seventeen adoptees were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews designed to elicit reflections (in the case of adopted parents) or projections (in the case of adoptees without children) about their deliberations to become a parent.

The major finding of this project is that, though the participants agreed their family planning decisions were affected by their adoptive experience, they were not ultimately hindered by any lasting effects of adoption. Further, participants often recounted how either their idyllic childhoods provided inspiration for becoming a parent or their experiences as adoptees promoted a desire to address adoption-related emotional injuries. Most of the adoptees interviewed had biological children (n = 12) and most of the participants (n = 4) who had not yet had children planned to so do and looked forward to the particular experience of being pregnant in the future, barring any problems with fertility. If fertility issues arise, most of the childfree adoptees would consider adopting their own children.

Other major findings include: 1) considerations of parenthood are shaped by one's overall adoption experience, 2) how an adoptee conceptualizes their identity informs the parenthood decision, and 3) a balance of hopes and resolution of fears related to parenthood is typically negotiated and achieved by the adoptee parent. The chapter considers thee major findings and the

reviewed literature and concludes with a review of strengths and limitations of the study, implications for social work practice and areas for further research.

Summary of Findings

For the first portion of the research question, *does the experience of being adopted affect your decision to start a family*, the resounding answer articulated by the adoptees interviewed was positive – all adoptees either reflected on or theorized how aspects of their adoptive experience informed their decisions to become a parent. For the second part of the question, *how does the experience of being adopted affect your decision to start a family*, responses were as varied as the participants themselves, who represented a diverse group of adoptees in terms of race, gender, age, ethnicity, and adoption narratives. As their stories unfolded, it became clear that though their decisions and plans to become parents were affected by their adoptions, explanations and correlations were often kaleidoscopic and sometimes difficult to categorize.

Interpretation of Findings

Relics of adoption. The legacy of adoption affects the adoptee in myriad ways and much of the tenor of lifelong "outcomes" has to do with beginnings – how the stage was set, who the players were, and what kind of drama ensued. Adoptees were asked to describe their adoptive narratives and most did so comprehensively.

Commonalities related to the adoptees' beginnings included narratives of their adoptive parents described as people who were earnestly seeking an opportunity to open their home to an adopted infant, either to resolve problems with fertility or to fulfill an articulated purpose in life. Literature reviewed on the long-term psychosocial wellbeing of adoptees as related to the focused intentionality and positive mindsets of adoptive parents predictably mirrors this finding (Borders et al., 2000; Brodinsky, 2000).

Emphasis on the strengths of the bonds between adoptees and their adoptive parents and siblings was also observed; the importance of these connections is supported by research focused on the quality and consistency of early attachment relationships, independent of biological status (Bretherton, 1992, Parker 2007). Parker (2007) added this attachment-related observation:

> The good enough mother uses her well-enough developed ego-organizing and integrating capacities to provide a space in which her infant can experience a continuity-in-being over time. Indeed, he needs that to develop his nascent capacity to experience and integrate sensations, perceptions, and desires spontaneously, in a Winnicottian true-self (p. 107).

Adoptees who spoke about relishing their childhoods and those who reflected on their parents' intentions around building a cohesive family seemed to have positive foundational experiences that offered them an ideal start in constructing a positive sense of self, which may have contributed to their later interest and confidence in starting a family of their own.

Almost all interviewed adoptees, no matter how positive their experiences with their adoptive families were, mentioned feeling "different" from their parents and siblings. Sometimes, this sense of difference was overcome by intentional work on the part of the family by navigating dissimilarities (e.g. facilitating attendance at culture camps) and sometimes this felt difference left unfortunate indelible marks on the adoptee. Adoptees who reflected on past or current strained family relationships often reported feeling as though their differences were never addressed or resolved and they carried a sense of isolation and alienation with them into adulthood.

As relinquishment is the requisite action that precedes adoption, most adoptees knew and reflected on how they understood that aspect of their beginnings. Adoptees who conceptualized

the act of relinquishment as one of abandonment or rejection by the biological mother also usually shared how this negatively affected their self-esteem or sense of self. Brinich (1980), suggests the internalization of relinquishment as an indicator of a "maladjusted" adoptee has grave potential for lasting impacts:

> […] many adopted children experience themselves as unwanted despite their adoptive parents' best efforts to emphasize how much they want and love their adopted child. These feelings are certainly related to the fact that the adopted child usually has been rejected by his biological parents, which cannot be concealed from the child (p.113).

This lowered self-esteem sometimes hindered these particular adoptees from experiencing satisfactory levels of trust or commitment in their romantic relationships and gave their deliberations of entering parenthood another aspect to consider. This finding also echoes the work of Borders et al. (2000) who asserted the following after studying 100 adult adoptees (including those who had conducted a search for their biological family and those who had not) and their non-adopted friends:

> There was one exception to the general findings related to search status – adult attachment. There was more similarity among the adoptees, both searchers and non-searchers, on attachment classification. Both adoptee groups were different from their friends, with fewer adoptees classifying themselves as securely attached and more adoptees describing themselves as pre-occupied or fearful/avoidant. This result suggested that more of the adoptees felt discomfort about being close to others (although they did not avoid close emotional relationships at any higher rate, as only about 8% in each group classified themselves as dismissing/avoidant). Clearly then, for attachment, being adopted, not search status, affected the classification.

Interestingly, the adoptees in the present study typically sought resolution for their emotional pain through therapy, non-fiction creative writing, or by becoming involved in adoptee advocacy work.

Analysis of the emerging findings related to the foundation of an adoptee's life (i.e. birth, relinquishment, adoption, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood) reveals that for many of the adoptees interviewed, reflections of childhood and relationships with adoptive parents and siblings were generally positive – they consistently expressed feeling wanted, loved, and valued. At the same time, most adoptees cited instances of feeling different than those around them and often, either to avoid upsetting their adoptive parents or because they felt a lack of emotional connection, refrained from exploring these feelings of difference within the family unit. Lastly, when framing the beginnings of an adoptee's experience, it is important to also consider the details surrounding relinquishment, which has the potential to positively or negatively shape one's initial understanding of self and identity.

Identity. Although most of the participants reported their conceptualization of an adoptive identity is a salient part of their overall identity, pinpointing particular aspects of identity that contribute to an adoptive identity proved difficult for most. Some participants suggested simply feeling different among adoptive family contributes to their own understanding of their identities. Others traced personality or physical attributes to either unknown relatives or to reunited biological family – this ability to look beyond the adoptive family in order to understand oneself was a unique and personal characteristic related to an adoptive identity. Still others connected their emotional or interpersonal struggles to their adoptive identity, suggesting if they weren't adopted, perhaps some particular challenges wouldn't exist.

Racial and ethnic identity. Adoptees who were adopted into a family of a different race or ethnicity most often connected their understanding of themselves as an adoptee with their racial or ethnic identity, suggesting an automatic integration of the two concepts. Interestingly, though their adoptive and racial/ethnic identities seemed to be equally salient, transracial adoptees reported feeling disconnected from their respective race or ethnic group. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute's (2009) report supports this finding about international adoptees:

> While being equal to Whites in agreeing they [179 surveyed Korean transracial adoptees] were happy about being a member of their ethnic group and feeling good about their ethnic background, they were less likely to have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group, despite identifying more strongly with it. They also were less likely than Whites to feel welcomed by others of their own race (p. 5).

Transracial adoptees reporting a positive racial/ethnic identity most often had intentionally sought experiences to connect them to their culture (e.g. traveling to native countries, attending culture camps, seeking and building specific community within their racial/ethnic group); as young adoptees, participants often shared memories of their parents facilitating these experiences.

White adoptees placed within same-race families predictably focused less on their racial/ethnic identities during the interviews, although a few mentioned relying on or experiencing the privilege of "passing," (appearing to be biologically related to their adoptive parents) which they attributed to being placed with White families.

The study included two participants who identified as Black or bi-racial (Black and White) who were placed within African American families, which is rare – black or bi-racial children have historically been placed transracially. Even with the racial similarity of their

adoptive parents, these two participants reported negative racialized experiences either inside or outside the home, suggesting complexities exist whether an adoptee is intra- or transracially placed. To underscore this particular aspect of racial difference, Valentina shares her experience here:

> It was really hard. Race plays an important role in it too. I think that's something people don't acknowledge enough. Cause we're adoptees but we…to me, I'm a black person as well and that's how I identify myself and people are always going to see my race before they know I'm adopted so of course it's going to play a role.

These two adoptees also explicitly spoke about attending to race and caring for this aspect of their child's identity as a parent in the future.

Sense of self and search and reunion. Exploring an adoptee's sense of self was the intention of the question about adoptive identity and responses were understandably nuanced. For all of the participants who had conducted a search and been reunited with biological family members, this experience seemed most conducive to completing the adoptees' conceptualization of self and adoptive identity, suggesting adoptees grapple with at least two concepts of identity throughout life – one related to biology and one related to adoption. March (1995) agrees and found through a study of sixty-nine reunited adult adoptees, "before reunion with the birth parent, these adoptees claim a sense of incompletion from their inability to fully integrate their biological background information into their identity structure" (p. 653).

Although it's not exactly clear how, the process of searching for and reuniting with biological family ultimately affected (or is affecting) many participants' decisions to become a parent. For a few adopted parents, their search and reunion narratives coincided with their decision to start a family; many reported becoming focused on retrieving medical or genealogical

information in order to be prepared for any challenges a pregnancy might bring. Pacheco and Eme (1993) found similar inspiration in a study examining seventy-two adoptees' motives for searching and the following reunion outcomes; within the surveyed sample, pregnancy or the birth of a child prompted the majority of searches. In the present study, if reunification between adoptees and biological families occurred and resulted in the sharing of medical information, participants recalled feelings of reassurance. Those who weren't reunited relied on prenatal tests and screenings to try to ensure a healthy pregnancy and infant.

Other adopted parents reported wanting to be connected to their biological roots in order to be able to offer this connection to their children who they presumed would eventually be curious about their mother or father's biological family. Finally, for a number of participants, meeting biological family offered them the opportunity to engage with different parenting models and sometimes find a mentor within these new relationships.

Parenthood: hopes and dreams, fears and concerns. Reflections of adopted parents and projections of prospective adopted parents related to their decisions of becoming a parent provided the most substantial content for the research question and generated two thematic categories – hopes and fears. Analysis of the data revealed commonalities and difference among these themes and what follows is a discussion of the most poignant of these collective hopes and fears.

Hopes and parenthood. A majority of adoptees interviewed explicitly mentioned how parenthood offered them the opportunity to be biologically connected to another person for the first time in their lives. This sentiment was shared by even those adoptees who had already searched for and been reunited with birth families, suggesting generativity held greater salience for the adopted parent than exploring connections in the past (which was also expressed as very

important for most participants). Remarkably, within the Findings Chapter of the present study, the four participants highlighted (their sentiments on this subject were expressed most poignantly) as the most motivated to experience a biological connection in respective corresponding section, had not yet searched for or been reunited with biological family. Two of these participants were relatively new parents, which might account for some of their excitement, but the other two are not yet parents, and still emphatically long for a biological connection with a child in the future.

The hope reported second most often related to becoming a parent was the participants' focus on striving to provide an environment where their children could be themselves. Participants related this hope to recollections of feeling as though parts of their identities, especially parts that were not attributable to an adoptive family member (e.g. style of laugh, hobbies and interests, or body shape) were sometimes disavowed. A majority of the current parents and prospective parents were explicit in their stated intentions around instilling emotional wellness and helping their child through any feelings of difference or loneliness that might occur. Adoptees and their non-adopted peers most likely share this desire to encourage wellness and individuality in their children, but adopted parents might be more likely to have experienced feelings of isolation or difference previously, which seems to inform their decision to privilege this aspect of their children's identities.

Fears and parenthood. Uncertainties pertaining to unknown medical backgrounds and genetic lines were the most often reported fears as participants reflected on the past or hypothesized about the future. As discussed above, to counter these apprehensions, most adoptees were proactive in seeking prenatal exams and screenings and reported they ultimately were content to hope or pray for positive outcomes.

How some adoptees planned to rely on (or not rely) on their adoptive mothers for support during or after pregnancy was a surprising and significant finding and one that relates to both the status of an adoptee's relationship and history with their adoptive mothers and fears related to challenges in identifying support systems during the transition to parenthood. One recent study examining first-time mothers and their sense of competence suggests if mothers have the ability to rely on social support systems (e.g. relatives, friends, partners), their sense of competence and confidence in raising their child increases (Ponomartchouk & Bouchard, 2015). Additionally, it was found that the "social support increases the mothers' level of well-being and self-esteem, which then reflects positively on their sense of competence in the parenting role" (Ponomartchouk et al., 2015, p. 1978). To be clear, many adoptees in the present study identified their adoptive mothers as actual or possible positive supports, but those who shared details about difficult relationships with their adoptive mothers were more likely to imply they had not (or would not) seek their adoptive mother's assistance or guidance and some would actively try to avoid it.

Other areas related to fears and concerns emerged as significant and surprising. For example, some adoptees reflected on the lack of fanfare or information about their own births (e.g. birth announcements, details of delivery) and expressed feeling conflicted as they created a celebratory experience when their own children were born. Conflicted emotions reported were happiness and excitement mixed with discomfort, resentment, and sadness, related to feelings of loss and grief for what had not been for them. This grappling with loss and grief is an enormous presumed and actual theme in the lives of many adoptees and given the numerous studies focused on the adjustment (or maladjustment) of this group, perhaps this finding should not have been so surprising (Leon, 2002; Penny, Borders, & Portnoy, 2007; Verrier, 1993). Perhaps it's

the depth and breadth of the effects of adoption that become stark when compared to the lives of non-adoptees that should be labeled surprising.

Strengths, Limitations, and Researcher Bias

The design of the study was successful in achieving a diverse sample of its named target population – adopted current parents or adoptees who were contemplating becoming parents and willing to discuss how their adoption experience influenced their decisions. Throughout the study, the voices of the participants remained a focus and ultimately strengthened the findings, which were often novel and significant. The research question itself is a topic underserved in the literature about adult adoptees; this study aimed to add to the growing body of research about this population and the navigation of developmental stages of adults.

Limitations included the converse of the achievement related to a broad sample; because the study is small with seventeen participants, generalizable results for the greater population cannot be assumed. At times, this researcher wondered if a more narrowly focused sample (e.g. all men, a particular age range, or only adoptees without children) might have yielded results that were more easily connected to the existing literature about the adopted population.

Reliability of measurement and validity are to be considered; responses to the interview questions were generally consistent, indicating reliability. However, whether or not the precise focus of the research question was addressed consistently is arguable, suggesting the need for enhanced validity. The interview guide was designed by the researcher and included mostly open-ended questions designed to elicit a wide range of responses (and it was successful in this) but perhaps more narrowly focused questions would increase the specificity of particular responses related to the parenthood question.

Other major limitations within the study are related to sample bias and researcher bias. Participation of respondents who were self-selected might indicate these particular adoptees are generally more reflective of their adoption experiences; indeed, several of the participants had published books, articles or blogs about their adoption narratives or were involved in adoptee advocacy groups. Some adoptees who had created an online presence related to adoption (e.g. blogs) were contacted by the researcher and chose to participate presumably to help the project and to share their story in a different way. Lastly, two participants were known to the researcher prior to the study and were personally encouraged to respond to the call for volunteer solicitation.

Within this study, researcher bias certainly exists as this researcher is a transracially-adopted person who is pondering the parenthood question. Further, as an adopted person, the researcher was aware of an urge to present both the literature and the participants' adoptive experiences in the best possible way to avoid furthering any negative stereotypes. In order to mitigate this urge and the presence of bias, this researcher relied on consultation with other adopted and non-adopted peers to screen for bias, asking questions about perceived omissions or selective emphasis on particular parts of a participant's narrative.

Summary

Asking a diverse group of seventeen adult adoptees how they believe the experience of being adopted affected (or affects) their decision to start a family has predictably led to an array of responses. When asked explicitly, nearly all adoptees agreed their decisions to start a family are or were influenced by their experience of being adopted. However, linking particular aspects of their adoption narratives to the decision of starting a family proved to be difficult, though a few conclusions emerged.

For most, whether one is adopted or not, the decision to create a family naturally has many points of consideration, but this study reveals there may be an added layer of deliberation for adoptees. How easy or difficult the deliberation is depends on a number of variables including: accessibility of medical and genealogical background of biological family; strength of relationships with adoptive family and whether support during and after pregnancy is anticipated; and how the emotional intensity of finally being biologically connected to someone serves as motivation for becoming a parent – generally, these are all significant areas of consideration for adoptees who are pondering the parenthood question.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Any clinician working with adoptees should create an environment where the subjects of adoption, grief and loss, adoptive or racial identity development, expectations around search and reunion (if any) can all be explored. Often, if adoptees experience emotional difficulties and present for therapeutic support, the experience of adoption sometimes goes unacknowledged and symptoms are attributed (possibly mistakenly) to other unrelated issues when considering an adoptee's beginning could be vital (Verrier, 1993).

Based on the findings from this study, mental health clinicians working with adult adoptees who are considering becoming parents might assess the relationships between the prospective parents and their adoptive parents, observing possible strengths and weaknesses, especially if the parent-to-be plans to rely on them for support.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study suggest that adoptees with strained relationships with their adoptive mothers may not anticipate (or want) support during or after pregnancy and childbirth. Future research might focus on the particular relationship between adopted mothers and adoptive

grandmothers who never experienced pregnancy, to explore how the two navigate their expectations and experiences around mothering and grand-mothering as related to the historical nature of their relationships.

Examining how biological children of adopted parents make meaning of their parents' adoption experience and exploring any unrealized effects on that particular generation might be a fertile area for future research.

If time and resources were limitless, this study could be enlarged to include both adopted and non-adopted people contemplating parenthood to observe how considerations and deliberations were similar or different. Lastly, though the study was open to both men and women, the majority of the participants were women. Examining the effects of adoption on the transition to parenthood from perspective of male-identified adoptees would offer an opportunity to advance this research question for a unique slice of the adoptee population.

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Appendix A
Human Subjects Review Approval

School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 7, 2016

Katherine Green

Dear Katie,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Claudia Staberg, Research Advisor

Appendix B
Participant Solicitation: Adult adoptee-specific forums (Adoption Voices Magazine, Adoption.com)

Hello,

My name is Katie Green and I am student at Smith College School for Social Work. This study is in partial completion of my master's in social work (MSW). I am conducting a study that seeks to answer the question, "does the experience of being adopted affect an adoptee's decision to start a family?"

I'm looking to interview adult adoptees who are either contemplating parenthood or who are already parents about their personal adoption narratives in order to observe if their experiences are related to their considerations of starting a family.
Interviews will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Participation criteria includes: 1) Adopted as an infant (age 0-1), 2) Be 18 or older and 3 Thinking of starting a family or be a parent already.

If this sounds like you and you're interested – great! Please touch base with me here or via email: adopteestudy2016@gmail.com or by calling (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

Or, if you know of someone who fits the bill, pretty please share this posting. I can conduct interviews in-person, via telephone or online, so location is not an issue!

Katie Green, Graduate Student
This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

Appendix C
Participant Solicitation: Facebook Recruitment

Dear Facebook Friends,

As part of my master's program at Smith College School for Social Work, I am conducting a study that seeks to answer the question, "does the experience of being adopted affect an adoptee's decision to start a family?"

I'm looking to interview adult adoptees who are either contemplating parenthood or who are already parents about their personal adoption narratives in order to observe if their experiences are related to their considerations of starting a family.
Participation criteria includes: 1) Adopted as an infant (age 0-1), 2) Be 18 or older and 3) Thinking of starting a family or be a parent already.

If this sounds like you and you're interested – great! Please touch base with me on FB or via email: adopteestudy2016@gmail.com or by calling (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

OR, if you know of someone who fits the bill, pretty please share this posting. I can conduct interviews in-person, via telephone or online, so location is not an issue!
Katie Green, Graduate Student

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

Appendix D

Outreach letter to adult adoptee bloggers and authors

Dear XX,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Katie Green and I have really enjoyed reading your blog (or book), XX. I am student at Smith College School for Social Work and am conducting a study in partial completion of my master's in social work (MSW). I am writing with hopes you might be interested in participating in my study, which seeks to answer the question "does the experience of being adopted affect an adoptee's decision to start a family?"

I'm looking to interview adult adoptees who are either contemplating parenthood or who are already parents about their personal adoption narratives in order to observe if their experiences are related to their considerations of starting a family.
Interviews will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Participation criteria includes: 1) Adopted as an infant (age 0-1), 2) Be 18 or older and 3) Thinking of starting a family or be a parent already.

If you might be interested – that's great – thank you! Please touch base with me via email or phone and we can talk about the next steps. My email address is adopteestudy2016@gmail.com and my telephone number is (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

Or, if you personally aren't interested but you know of someone who fits the bill, pretty please share this message.

Katie Green, Graduate Student

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

Appendix E

Participant Consent Form

2015-2016

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Smith College School for Social Work - Northampton, MA

……………………………………………………………………………

Title of Study: Adult Adoptees and Considerations of Parenthood: An Exploratory Project Examining Adoption Experiences and Effects

Investigator(s): Katie Green, Graduate Student, phone number, email

……………………………………………………………………………

Introduction

- You are being asked to participate in a research study about adult adoptees who were adopted as infants (between ages 0-1) and who are over eighteen.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you have indicated you are an adopted person who is either thinking about starting a family or you are an adoptee who has become a parent already.
- Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of the study is to gather information from adopted individuals to understand how they think their experience of being adopted impacts (or impacted) their decision to start a family.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: With your permission to record, participate in an interview where I ask about your adoption experience, how you feel about your adoptive family, how you feel about your adoptive identity, and how you feel (or felt) about the possibility of becoming a parent. The length of the interview will be approximately 60 minutes.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- The study has the following risk: the interview may elicit new or concerning feelings about your adoption experience. You may decline to answer any questions and if desired, at any point, you can end the interview.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- The benefits of participation are having an opportunity to talk about an issue that is important to you and the opportunity to contribute to growing research about adult adoptees that will aid clinicians to enhance their work with this unique population..
- The benefits to social work/society are: The experience of adoption is often understood through the perspective of adoptive parents or birth families and if research is conduced, typically younger adoptees are the focus. The present study seeks to add to the growing but limited body of research dedicated to adult adoptees, which will enhance the clinicians who find themselves working with this important population.

Confidentiality

- Your participation will be kept confidential. To protect your confidentiality, I will not label interview notes or audio recordings with real names, but will use pseudonyms instead. Additionally, I will lock informed consent forms, interview notes, and audio recordings in a file drawer during the thesis process and for three years thereafter, in accordance with federal regulations. After such time, I will either destroy the above-mentioned material or maintain it in its secure location. Finally, I will not use demographic data to describe each individual; rather, I will combine demographic data to describe the subject pool in the aggregate. In this way, study participants will not be identifiable in the final report. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. I will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 1, 2016. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Katie Green at adopteestudy2016@gmail.com or by telephone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx...If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you

have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974

Consent

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

………………………………………………………………………………………

Name of Participant (print): ____
Signature of Participant: _______________________________ Date: ___________
Signature of Researcher(s): _____________________________ Date: ___________

………………………………………………………………………………………

[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]

1. I agree to be [audio or video] **taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): ____
Signature of Participant: _______________________________ Date: ___________
Signature of Researcher(s): _____________________________ Date: ___________

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): ____
Signature of Participant: _______________________________ Date: ___________
Signature of Researcher(s): _____________________________ Date: ___________

Appendix F
Interview Guide

I. Building rapport/orientation to interview and study

II. Participant demographic information (to be ascertained throughout the interview)

Name	
Gender	
Age	
Race	
Ethnicity	
Religion	
Level of education	
Vocation/occupation	
Marital status	

Details about Adoption/Adoptive Family (to be ascertained throughout the interview)

Age at adoption		
Closed/open?		
AD parent's ages when adopted	AD MOM	AD DAD
AD parents still living?	AD MOM	AD DAD
AD siblings (bio to parents or AD too)		
AD sibling ages		
Age when learned about adoption		
Race same/different than adoptee		

III. <u>Open Ended Questions</u>

General/background-related:

- Can you describe the details of your adoption.
- When did you find out you were adopted?
- How was knowing you had a birth family?
- How were your adoptive parents in helping you understand what being adopted meant?
- How was adoption discussed in your home growing up?
- Did you know other XX children? (Asked if established the participant is different race than adoptive family)
- Was it difficult being different and how did you deal with it?
- Did you encounter any difficulties at home or in school, related to being adopted?

- What are your relationships with your siblings?
- How do you feel about your birth family? Have you ever tried to find them?

Attachment-related

- Can you describe your relationship to your adoptive parents?
- Was it always XX?
- Can you describe your connection to you adoptive parents?

Identity-related:

- When you think about who you are and how you became yourself, what comes up for you?
- What role did your adoptive family play in your own identity development?

For non-parents:

- Tell me about how you're thinking about starting a family.
- How do you think being adopted affects your thinking about becoming a parent?
- What's your greatest wish about starting a family?
- What's your greatest fear about starting a family?

For parents:

- Thinking back to before your first child, how did you come to know you wanted to start a family?
- How do you think your being adopted affected your decision to become a parent?
- What was your greatest wish about starting a family?
- What was your greatest fear about starting a family?

Final questions/ thoughts

- Is there anything I haven't asked about that you would like to share?

IV. Close interview with gratitude.

APPENDIX G

National Resources for Support

NAMI HelpLine
Phone: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)
Web: https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-HelpLine
The NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) HelpLine is a free service that provides information, referrals and support to people living with a mental health condition, family members and caregivers, mental health providers and the public.

Psychology Today: National Database of Therapists
Web: https://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/
Find detailed professional listings for psychologists, psychiatrists, therapist, counselors, group therapy, and treatment centers in the United States and Canada.

SAMHSA's National Helpline
Phone: 800-662-HELP (4357)
Web: http://www.samhsa.gov national
SAMHSA's (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) National Helpline (also known as the Treatment Referral Routing Service) is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental health and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free publications and other information.