The Significance of Story:
A Qualitative Look at Adoptive Identity and Family Bonding

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Abstract

Due to the evolution of and increase in adoptions, families and helping professionals often seek guidance on how adoptees can form healthy bonds with their families. This has led to many quantitative studies conducted to measure attachment in adopted children and to better understand both overall family bonding as well as risk factors for attachment disorders[1]. Furthermore, it is widely recognized that adoptive identity development is an extensive process that takes place in the lives of most adoptees'[2]. However, a gap in qualitative research exists when looking for the adoptees' perspectives on this process, and the factors which aid in the continual development of strong family bonds and secure adoptive identity. Upon approval by John Brown University's Institutional Review Board, the researchers conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to interview fourteen adoptees, who were adopted as children but are now eighteen years of age or older. The study was focused on their personal experiences growing up within their adopted families. In their interviews, the adoptees were asked what factors and experiences helped or hindered healthy familial bonding and positive adoptive identity formation. The researchers recruited adoptees of diverse personal demographics who had been adopted under a variety of circumstances. Through a process of open coding, the researchers analyzed the transcriptions of the interviews to highlight the factors contributing to each participant's adoptive identity and sense of family bonding. This qualitative study of adoptees' reflections on their past experiences seeks to provide the missing voice of adopted children as well as the factors that can promote positive adoptive identity development and healthy familial bonding. Results which emerged included the adoptee's searching for normalcy, shared experiences with one's adoptive family, and understanding the unique factors of every adoptee's story. Consistent throughout all interviews was the need for both parents and adoptees to express openness with one another about their perspectives and stories.

Key Words: identity, adoption, bonding

1. Introduction

According to The United Nations Population Division, it is estimated that "some 260,000 children are adopted each year"[3]. Researchers have long ascertained that adoptees have increased "layers of complexity" as they face different backgrounds and "knowledge of their biological heritage," which can cause difficulty in the development of healthy bonds[4]. For all adoptees, making sense of their adoptive experience is a lifelong process. After reviewing numerous quantitative studies, there seemed to be a gap to the researchers of this study in the literature concerning the perspectives of the adoptees and their adoptive families. The voices of these individuals and families have not previously been heard because the research has mainly focused on quantitative studies which simply produce statistics.

In one of those rare qualitative studies, adoptees choose a non-adoptive friend who had a similar demographic to them and researchers observed the developmental similarities and differences between the two[5]. Results of the study

revealed that many adoptees, "viewed their parents as providing a source of meaning in life"[5]. However, those same adoptees reported having lower family and friend support than their non-adoptive friends. Furthermore, research has found that many adoptees can resonate with the following perspective: "I am defective and the world and people in it are dangerous and rejecting"[6]. Whether positive or negative, the experiences of adopted children needs to be taken into consideration because those experiences inevitably shape the way they view their world. Finding themselves in an adoptive family, adoptees begin the process of forming strong, healthy bonds anew with their new family members. This task may prove to be difficult, especially if the child has had previous struggles with attachment[6]. Like all human beings, adopted persons must develop a personal sense of identity, yet they are also given the task of developing an extra component referred to as adoptive identity. Besides "making meaning" of aspects of life such as gender and race, adoptees must also ask who they are as an adopted person and "how does this fit into (their) understanding of (their) self, relationships, family, and culture"[2]. Past quantitative studies have been conducted in order to explore these factors related to healthy attachment, family bonding, and adoptive identity development in adoptees. However, the perspectives of the adoptees themselves must also find its place. In this qualitative study, the researchers intend to provide that voice for adoptees, especially those who are no longer minors, as those adoptees reflect on their experiences and discuss their processes of familial bonding and developing an adoptive identity. Furthermore, with the information and perspectives gathered from these interviews, the researchers aim to explore the factors and experiences that adoptees believe contribute to healthy family bonds and positive adoptive identity. In one previous study conducted, Gatz and his colleagues compared the effects of adoption into adulthood on Swedish twins, one twin growing up in the biological parent household and another growing up with an adoptive family[1]. The researchers stated that "this retrospective study provides no insight into the individual's own coping processes and their impact on subsequent adaption"[1]. While the study revealed "the stress of the adoption itself is mediated by the type of rearing environment provided by the adoption process," there is a lack of perspective given from the adoptees and their adoptive families[1]. Based on these studies, it is clear that the whole family system plays a role in how the adoptees bond.

Therefore the researchers of this qualitative study believe the results will equip adoptive families and helping professionals when it comes to growing healthy family bonds and aiding continual development of a positive adoptive identity. In addition, the findings from this study will provide new insight and give voice to an unheard perspective. They believe that finding and articulating the stories of adoptees as adults will equip and further provide a stronger base for parents, children, and the whole family affected by adoption. While attachment and adoption are both well researched topics in a broad sense, they still have many unknowns and subtleties on an individual level that can greatly affect the individuals around them.

1.1 History

Adoption is defined in the Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society as "a social and legal process whereby a parent-child relationship is established between people not related by birth"[7]. It is a practice that many people in the modern American society have been closely affected by or have been a part of themselves. However, the tradition itself and law surrounding it have evolved in this country throughout history, specifically undergoing dramatic change since World War II. Prior to the twentieth century, adoptions in America were much less common than they are now, and the process also typically took place through "private legislative action"[7]. Only in recent history has adoption been a concern of child welfare reformers. This inflow of domestic and international adoptions in the United States continues to shift over time. The number of domestic adoptions far outnumber the amount of international adoptions; in fact, almost 85 percent of all adoptions are domestic[3].

Although the numbers of international adoption generally rose within the past two decades, there was a drop between 2004 and 2006 from 45,000 to 39,000 intercountry adoptions[8]. The reasons for this decrease in international adoptions are complex. Some believe that "intercountry adoption should be slowed down or halted" due to the adoption fraud, human trafficking, or other government corruptions around the world[8]. Despite the controversy surrounding this topic, Selman concludes his article by stating that the National Council for Adoption and other supporters will continue to promote "transparency, best practices, and much-needed reform" in international adoptions, since they feel that the process acts greatly to ensure that more children find loving families and lasting homes[8]. In today's society, adoption generally focuses on the benefit of the adoptee; still, adoptive parents often desire particular characteristics in their future children and seek out specific orphans intentionally. Adults may have an idyllic picture in mind as they begin the adoption search; however, the available children needing adoptive families may not fit those desired ideas. For example, children adopted domestically tend to be older, but many families prefer to adopt infants to facilitate a smoother transition[9]. Roughly sixty percent of adoptive families are seeking children who are ages five and under,

whom they cannot find domestically[3]. Therefore, due to the desired age range or other personal preferences, adoptive families pursue available adoptees from other countries.

1.2 Adoptive Identity

All adoptees undergo the process of learning to understand their unique identities, just as every other individual must do, yet adoptees may face a more complex task as they integrate an added aspect of their pasts into who they are now[7]. Adoptees who were adopted into U.S. families from overseas also have a unique experience with identity development in contrast to domestic adoptees; Juffer and van Ijzendoorn reference a "divergent identity" of ethnicities and cultures as international adoptees make sense of two backgrounds[8]. For any adoptee, whether they move from a different country or another city, developing an identity means interpreting who he or she is in relation to both birth family and adoptive family. The term "adoptive identity" is used in literature to refer to the added aspect of identity that adoptees must form for themselves as they make sense of their adoption into a new family[2]. Approaching each individual adoptee's life narrative with sensitivity rather than assuming that every adoptee has the same experience helps adoptive families and helping professionals learn how to guide future adoptees through their identity formation[2].

1.3 Bonding

Healthy familial bonds are critical to the overall well-being and harmony of the entire family. The quality of familial bonds also create monumental repercussions for an individual adoptee. Sadly, healthy bonding is often incredibly difficult for adoptees and their families. A research article written by Maria Escobar and Maria Santelices details the overwhelming struggle that exists for adopted children, specifically for adolescents in Chile[10] Reiterating much of the current research, they found that adopted individuals displayed "a predominance of insecure and disorganized attachment patterns" when compared with individuals raised in their biological homes[10]. "Bonding is more than an intense emotional feeling," and when people use this term lightly, especially in the helping fields, it can result in great harm for all the individuals involved[11]. For example, there is a common misconception that some children simply bond easily and thus experience little emotional distress as they are shuffled from home to home[11]. When looking at bonding, it is important to note the widely varying contexts in which it occurs.

2. Methodology

This study investigated the experiences of adult adoptees, asking them to reflect on their formation of an adoptive identity and how they bonded with their families. This research was conducted through a qualitative phenomenological structure. The researchers chose to undergo this method because, "the diversity of situations experienced by adoptive children... will provide adoption researchers rich opportunities for further understanding of the complexity and intricacy of adoptive identity development[4]." Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to gain insight into specific individuals' unique adoptive experiences by using reflective questioning. Upon completion of the study, the researchers completed interviews with a total of fourteen participants. Each of the interviews lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes and were recorded on private devices to ensure accurate transcriptions. All of the adoptees interviewed were over eighteen; this was done in hopes that those who have reached adulthood would have gained more clarity after reflecting on their identity development, as well as to ensure their capability to participate without requiring parental consent. Participants were in a developmental stage known by psychologists as emerging adulthood, 18-25 years of age. Every adoptee's experience was unique, including his or her family background, nature of adoption, race, and many other factors. In this particular study, nine of the participants were adopted domestically in the United States and four who were adopted internationally. Three were born in Asian countries and one in Eastern Europe. In regards to race, all of the nine domestically adopted participants were Caucasian, while the international adoptees were either Asian or Eastern European.

2.1 Research Questions

This qualitative research study compiled several adult adoptees' opinions on family bonding and their adoptive identity development. The following research questions were used in order to provide a guideline for the study:

1. Which experiences, as perceived by adoptees, helped to promote and indicated the growth of healthy family bonds?
2. What factors do adoptees believe aid in the continual development of a positive adoptive identity?

In conjunction with the primary research questions, the researchers expanded their initial questions by developing six open-ended interview questions to ask their participants. Examples of these questions were: "Tell me about your experiences with family bonding," "Tell me about some memorable experiences you had growing up that helped you understand who you are as an adopted person," and "What advice, if any, would you offer to future adoptees and their families?" After receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researchers reached out to adoptees between the ages of 18-25 years old to inquire whether they would be interested in participating in the interview process. They first contacted them via email, phone or text message. Adoptees were located through personal connections or by referral. Before participating in the interview, the adoptees signed an Informed Consent form, and any questions they had about the study were answered. This Informed Consent gave the researchers permission to use any quotes, themes, or miscellaneous data received for the purpose and content of the research study. After each interview was conducted, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher who had conducted the interview. The participant was then assigned a pseudonym, and another researcher, who had not performed the interview, analyzed the transcription using open coding to find focus codes and themes. This was implemented by highlighting adoptees' quotes and then categorizing the concepts discovered. Each transcription was analyzed individually by all three researches and their findings were compared to ensure the proper and appropriate meaning of the research collected. The tentative codes found are further elaborated below.

3. Themes

3.1 Adoptive Identity

During the study, the researchers primarily recognized the category of adoptive identity (Figure 1), which was addressed in the majority of the data collected. This category explored the various processes of adoptive identity development within the lives of each participant. These findings identified several common factors for adoptees of forming a positive adoptive identity, as well as some of the hindrances of adoptive identity development. Within the category of adoptive identity, two focused codes were developed out of the qualitative data collected by the researchers.

The first focused code was the value of openness held by adoptees. For many participants, engaging in open conversations about their adoption process was a key factor in positive adoptive identity formation. One participant described the factor in this way: "[I] think it should always be an open ended conversation, like not, 'one time you were adopted,'…I think I will always have those questions, and I will always wonder, and I don't think age has more to do with it" (Amber). Within the focused code of openness, the following three axial codes emerged: questioning, searching, and consistency from adoptive parents.

The second focused code within the category of adoptive identity was identified by the researchers as the search for normalcy. Many adoptees often strive to normalize their adoptive experience throughout their process of adoptive identity development. From several different interviewees' perspectives, the researchers noticed that these adoptees made statements such as the following: "Adoption it's a big deal, it's great, and it's wonderful, but to me it's just my life. So that's what I know it as, but to other people it's such…a weird concept…(To me) it's so normal, it's like, yeah I'm adopted, what's the big deal? Right? This is how I got here" (Ruthie). This search for normalcy among adopted individuals appears to play a significant role in adoptive identity formation, whether that search is achieved through healthy means or not. Within the focused code titled the Search for Normalcy, the researchers developed the following three axial codes: the minimization of one's hindrances, the adoptive family's culture, and the adoptee's act of processing his or her identity.
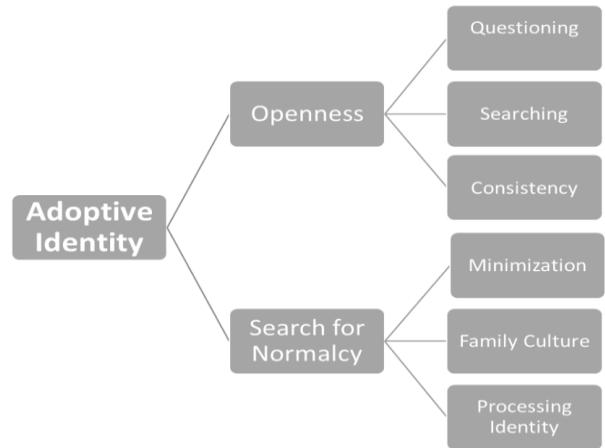
Figure 1: Theme of Adoptive Identity

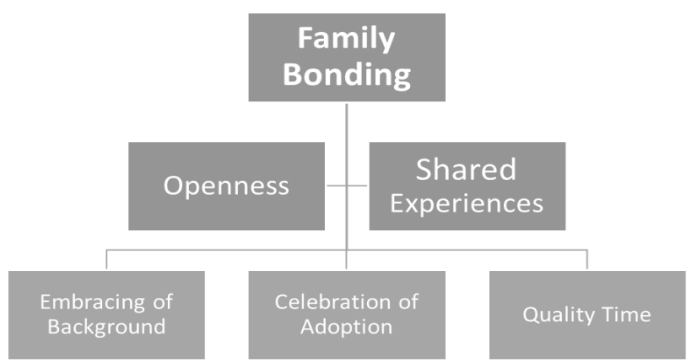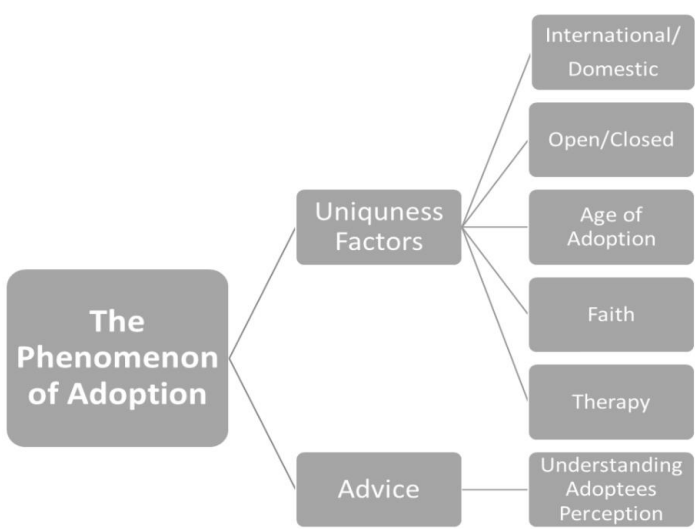

Figure 2: Theme of Family Bonding

Figure 3: Theme of Phenomenon

3.2 Family Bonding

The researchers identified the second category in this study to be the concept of family bonding (Figure 2.). This category addressed some of the core messages and struggles found through this research. Throughout this study, the concept of family bonding, while a broad one, acted as a lens to reveal key factors in the adoptees' development and future success. This category also addresses some of the misconceptions concerning adoptive bonding. "Katie", one of the participants in this study, highlighted one of these areas when she said: "I think our culture tells us that adoption means that you are going to saving someone's life and they are going to be grateful, but it is just not how it works...It seems like pain definitely can draw people closer together but only if they are willing to sacrifice together, and I think that is what brings people closer together…more than, like, the pleasant things (Katie)." Understanding the above concerns and perspectives can empower helping professionals and future adoptive parents. Being able to truly understand the journey that many adoptees endure is foundational to encouraging a healthy transition and acclimation to their new families. Within the theme Family Bonding two focus codes were further developed.

   The first of these codes was Openness. Within this code, adoptees were able to articulate their unique, personal experiences within their own families as they relate to bonding. The participants spoke of the easier transition and instinctual desire that openness provided and encouraged. "Laurel" explained, "I have been really grateful to have parents who were extremely open ... I've been lucky to have parents who are and always have been really open about being adopted, even from the beginning …Yeah, it made me feel like it wasn't some weird thing, it was normal thing for them." Continued openness from both the adoptive parents and the adoptees proved to be a key indicator of adoptees' emotional and familial bonds. "Amber" reported, "I know they are not keeping anything from me," yet "it should always be an open ended question ... not, 'one time you were adopted from so and so'… and then that is it, because I think I will always have those questions, and I will always wonder, and I don't think age has more to do with it" (Amber).

   A focus code found in this theme was Shared Experiences. Within this code, adoptees presented certain experiences or elements that created spaces for continued family bonding, or caused a lack thereof. This code is closely correlated with the code above as it seeks to narrow the focus to certain experiences. From Andrew's experiences, when his adoptive dad would "play with (him) in the (McDonald's) tubes for hours" or show "physical emotion," the researchers recognized that moments like these were crucial to overall family bonding for adoptees. These shared experiences also stretch to siblings' bonds, as "Madison" explained through the following quote:

> Over the years...one thing that did bond us as sisters us that all three of us are adopted and we could always relate to one another um…If one sister was struggling with their adoption she had two sisters to talk to about it, or if somebody wasn't getting along with mom or dad…there was just, like, always someone to relate to them.

The articulation of this focused code clearly displayed the importance of these moments in the adoptees' lives and provided relevant and practical tools for helping professionals and future adoptive parents.

3.3 The Phenomenon Of Adoption

The third category that was identified by the researchers was the phenomenon of adoption (Figure 3.). This category addressed patterns that the researchers found in two or three interviewees rather than common patterns among the whole. One participant touched on the uniqueness of one's adoption story by saying, "I think I am a little hesitant to give advice to another adoptee as a generalization just because we have already established it is a very unique experience and it would be like saying do you have any advice for kids who are born?" (Katie). According to many participants, adoptees have a unique story and cannot be generalized into one category. In this section the researchers seek to highlight these differences. The researchers do so by recognizing common patterns between open and closed adoptions, international and domestic adoptees, age of adoption, faith, and therapy.

   Within the category Phenomenon of Adoption, the researchers identified two focus codes. The first focus code was the uniqueness factors. Within this code, the adoptees spoke about whether their adoption was open or closed, international or domestic, when they were adopted, how their faith impacted their adoptive experience, and if the adoptees had been to any types of therapy. When one participant was asked about advice, he stated, "It depends on the child. It depends on the story. We're all different," (Andrew). Overall, adoptees said that understanding these

unique factors is beneficial to providing support for any adoptee. Every story is different and unique and these factors contribute to how an adoptee can bond with their family and form their adoptive identity over the course of their lives.

Another focused code developed by the researchers through this process was advice from adoptees. This code was further developed into two axial codes: open-ended conversations and embracing the uniqueness. This openness continued despite the nature of different adoptions, one participant encouraged other adoptees to "talk to your family and if it is an open adoption get a good relationship with your biological family if that is possible. if it is closed then then [...] be open about it and be willing to ask questions and accept answers as they come even if they are hard to hear" (Jennifer). Uniqueness of story was also a prevalent advice topic. Every adoptee stressed the differences that there are in adoptive stories and the subsequent development and bonding. Every child adapts differently, no matter the commonality in the actual adoption. For "Elliot" his advice was that parents "have to be patient and understand that because like they could be the perfect parents but there is still gonna be stuff in the kids mind because people hurt them" and even the child may not know how or why. As loving and open as parents may be, adoptees often benefit from having someone else in their life who went or is going through the same things. By embracing the unique aspects of the adoptees stories, like developing relationships with the biological family or adopting other children, parents and helping professionals can enter the adoptive development process with greater tools for understanding and bonding with the adopted children.

4. Conclusion

Through this qualitative study, the researchers were able to gain insight into the experiences and perspectives of adult adoptees when it came to topics such as family bonding and adoptive identity. The researchers believe that this insight will equip helping professionals and future adoptive families. As professionals and families interact with adoptees, these results are intended to aid them in understanding the complexity of an adoptee's identity development and desire for connection. A key finding the researchers were able to identify is that every adoptee's story is unique and specific to his or her own personal experiences. Therefore, these findings highlight the uniqueness and value of every adoptee's story. After identifying the main focus codes, the researchers found the following implications most prevalent: overall openness, minimization by the adoptee, and the uniqueness of the individual story. The researchers hope that through articulating the stories found through this study, adoptees can feel validated in both the joys and the struggles of their own adoptive experience. In her own words, "Ella" fully embraced this ideal: "I've come to a point that even when I feel misunderstood when I share my experiences, my story is still worth sharing."

4.1 limitations

The researchers examined their methods and results in order to consider the possible limitations to their study. One of these limitations was availability of participants. The majority of participants had some type of relationship or connection to each researcher, which may have impacted the demographics and the information gathered throughout the interview. Furthermore, the researchers were unable to approach the interviews in a fully objective manner due to their personal relationship and biases towards adoption. In addition to the personal connection the researchers had to each participant, there was a limited amount of time available to conduct the interviews. Another limitation that may have affected this process was the use of phone interviews, as they did not allow the researchers to react to the participant's non-verbal cues and could have prevented the asking of the proper follow up question.

One further concern with this method was the level of the researcher's' expertise. None of the researchers have had experience conducting an IRB-approved, qualitative study; the researchers were therefore limited in their initial knowledge of the overall process. Another limitation was the researcher's' lack of background knowledge of the academic and personal world of adoption. This contributed to how the researchers conducted each interview. Because there were three individual researchers, each of them approached the research questions and structure of their interviews from different backgrounds. Regarding ethical considerations, adoptees were previously informed that answering the interview questions and sharing their past experiences could pose the risk of a negative emotional response. Due to the sensitivity of this topic, the researchers are aware that this risk could prevent participants from sharing fully, and the data could be incomplete.

5. Acknowledgements

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