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Understanding the concept of adoption: a qualitative analysis with adoptees and their parents

Diana L. Baltimore
Iowa State University

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Understanding the concept of adoption:

A qualitative analysis with adoptees and their parents

by

Diana L. Baltimore

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Program of Study Committee:
Sedahlia Jasper Crase, Major Professor
Ron Werner-Wilson
Mack C. Shelley, II

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of children's and adults' experiences with adoption. This qualitative study used individual interviews to examine 25 participants—8 adoptive mothers and fathers, and their 5- to 14-year-old sons (n=5) and daughters (n=4) adopted before 18 months. Data were collected using a phenomenological methodology and analysis of the data was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are children's and parents'[1] overall experiences with adoption? (b) What is the social construction of adoption? (c) What do children understand about the concept of adoption and how do they construct that understanding? (d) How do language and word choices influence the concept of adoption? (e) What would you like others to know about adoption? Analysis followed steps defined by Moustakas and others and revealed five interactive themes that resonated among all families (a) parents' beliefs/experiences, (b) the need for education and change to promote adoption and positive adoption terminology, (c) communication, (d) children's understanding, (e) and identity. Limitations, future research possibilities, policy implications and implications for those who counsel, teach, and work with parents and children who have experienced adoption were identified.

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[1] The term "parent (s)" used throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted, refers to the parent (s) who adopted a child. The terms "birth parent (s)" or "biological parent (s)" refer to the parent (s) to whom a child was biologically born.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Adoption of children into a family occurs in all societies around the world. However, there has never been one, comprehensive national data collection bank to monitor, assess, and track all adoption activity in the United States and its territories (Javier, Baden, Biafora, & Gingerich-Camacho, 2007). Thus, the following statistics are comprised of a combination of data sources and in many cases are estimates. In the United States, 1.7 million households have at least one adopted child, which translates to 1.6 million adopted children under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). According to the National Council for Adoption (NCFA, 2002), the total number of adoptions increased from 119,766 in 1996 to 151,332 in 2002. The largest group of children adopted each year comes from the foster care system, with approximately 51,000 adopted from foster care in fiscal year 2005 (www.acf.hhs.gov/programs), over 20,000 children adopted from other countries in fiscal year 2006 (U.S. Department of State, n.d.), and approximately 13,000 children adopted domestically each year (Hamilton, Ventura, Martin, & Sutton, 2004). However, despite the different sources and circumstances from which children are adopted, one similarity exists for many adoptees: they feel different from other children they know "Adoption in the Schools Report," 2006). Thus, this section contains a review of the research literature concerning (a) adoption as a stigma (b) the possible effects of stigma on an adoptee's self-identity and self-esteem; and (c) the language used in association with the concept of adoption. The information from these reviews served as a basis for this qualitative, phenomenological study, which explored the concept of adoption. Implications for

counseling, public education, and intervention strategies concerning adoption can be derived

from this study.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

While many studies have been conducted on various aspects of adoption, researchers in the social sciences agree that important research in the area of adoption and adoptive families is still lacking (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Some researchers have concluded that children who are adopted are two to five times more likely than their non-adopted counterparts to seek psychological treatment ("Adoption in the Schools Report," 2006). While it is generally accepted that adopted children are over-represented in mental health facilities (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994; Brodzinsky, Radice, Huffman, & Merkler, 1987; Caballo, Lansford, & Abbey, 2001, Grotevant, 1997; Haugaard, 1998; Rosenberg, 1992), researchers do not understand very well why this phenomenon occurs. Although some propose that adoptive parents seek help for their children with greater ease than do other parents (Warren, 1992), other researchers such as Sharma, McGue, and Benson (1998) caution against concluding that adopted individuals are less-well adjusted. In fact, their research comparing a large, non-clinical sample of individuals adopted before the age of 15 months with their non-adopted siblings and norms revealed that adoptees demonstrated higher levels of psychological functioning in some areas and lower levels in other areas. The authors hypothesized that those small differences in psychological functioning in some areas among adoptees may account for the increased rate of clinical presentations.

Clearly society must hold some belief that adoption is not as natural as biological parenting or the question regarding whether or not adoptees are over-represented in mental health facilities would not be researched (Miall, 1996). Merely asking the question appears to be a stigmatization of adoption. In fact, many researchers have found that the social

construction of adoption can and does involve stigmas (Kline, Karel, & Chatterjee, 2006; March, 1995; Miall, 1987; Wegar, 1997, 2000). Thus, the remaining literature review will explore adoption as a stigma, the possible effects of stigma on an adoptee's self-identity and self-esteem, understanding the concept of adoption, and the language used in conjunction with adoption.

Adoption as a Stigma?

According to social science researchers, stigma is defined in multiple ways. Link and Phelan (2001) defined it as the co-occurrence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. Goffman (1963), the prominent social researcher who studied stigmatization, defined it as a discrediting attribute that reduces the bearer from a whole and normal person to a tainted and discounted one with social failings (Goffman; Link, & Phelan; March, 1995). Additionally, Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) indicated that stigmatized individuals are believed to possess some attribute or characteristic that others believe to be devalued in a particular social context or as a social identity.

The conceptualization of adoption and the stigma attached thereto may be key determinants of an adoptee's psychological well-being (Link & Phelan, 2001.). In fact, scientists have studied these concepts to understand how people form categories and associate these categories with stereotyped beliefs. For instance, some studies have determined that both adoptees and adoptive mothers report that others perceive them as abnormal or somehow second-rate (Hollingsworth, 2000; March, 1995; Miall, 1987, 1996). Kline et al. (2006) found that 52% of media news stories about adoption contained stigmatizing claims, such as depicting adoptees with emotional and identity issues. Additionally, Creedy's (2000) broad analysis of print, advertisements, and media stories

found numerous advertisements and news reports that reinforced negative misperceptions about birth families, adopted children, and adoptive parents. Thus, Creedy recommended a broad public education campaign about adoption to raise awareness of adoption relationships and language that should be used to describe them. In the future, researchers should attempt to bridge the gap between empirically-supported information concerning the psychological functioning of adopted individuals instead of using stereotypes and hearsay to describe differences that may or may not exist (Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998).

Other researchers have concluded that such stigmatizing beliefs can make the social construct of "adoption" a personal identity issue which becomes challenging for adoptees (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000). These characterizations or stigmas may manifest themselves in some adoption participants as feelings of social prejudice or social differences. March (1995) studied adoptees' perceptions of others' reactions to their adoptive status. Her analysis determined that adoptees' reactions from others created a sense of stigma, social discrimination, and exclusion based on their lack of biological ties to their families. For example, one adoptee reported his uncle stopped the family tree at the adoptee's father because "the blood line ended there." In the same qualitative analysis, four adoptees reported receiving no inheritance from adoptive grandparents because they were "not blood." Adoptees also reported a sense of stigma by the adopted individual not being able to answer questions regarding their adoption, biological family, or circumstances surrounding their adoption. March concluded that incidents such as these support adoptees' perceptions of social stigma based on others' views of their legally-missing blood lines. Thus, March identified adoptees' lack of biological ties as the basis for their feelings of "social failing" which is consistent with Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma.

The stigma of lacking biological ties has also been identified in studies of involuntarily childless individuals. A qualitative analysis of 71 involuntarily childless women revealed these women reported feelings of stigmatization in terms of social censure and self-identity (Miall, 1986, 1996). They also reported feeling discredited, negative, sexually inadequate, shameful, isolated, and guilty. Another study concluded that motherhood and womanhood are based on the assumption that women should have children with biological links (Miall, 1996; Roach, 1992). Additionally, involuntary and voluntary childlessness have been conceptualized as deviant attributes which are subject to stigma because they violate norms of acceptable behavior, specifically failure to procreate (Miall, 1986, 1996; Veevers, 1980).

Additionally, Creedy (2001) acknowledged an adoption stigma perceived by pregnant, unmarried women. The majority of these women failed to consider an adoption plan for their child because the unmarried women viewed adoption as "bad." In fact, the number of women in the United States who make adoption plans for their unborn children has declined from 40-50% in the 1950s and 1960s to fewer than 1% today (Creedy). Data from a nationwide adoption survey conducted by the National Council for Adoption (NCFA) show domestic infant adoption placements declined further since last measured in 1996. According to the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute Website, there were 50,000 adoptions in the United States in 1944 and 175,000 in 1970. However, there were only 130,269 domestic adoptions of children by relatives and non-relatives in 2002. Adoptions from other countries increased significantly from 11,303 to 21,063 during the same period. According to the U.S. State Department and the Evan B. Donaldson Website, international adoptions more than doubled between 1992 and 2000 (from 6,472 to 19,237). However,

transnational adoptions have decreased by 15% in the last two years (U.S. State Dept. of Statistics, 2007). Thus, these statistics indicate people wish to adopt children but do so via transnational adoptions because the number of birth parents who relinquish their children in the United States is decreasing. These statistics are also consistent with Creedy's findings that pregnant, unmarried women are choosing to raise their children.

Similarly, in another study, Daly (1994) surveyed 300 high school students in a midsized city in southern Ontario with a 58% ($n = 175$) response rate. When asked whether they would make an adoption plan if they or their partner were to become pregnant, only 6% said they definitely would make an adoption plan for their unborn baby. Interestingly, 17% said they probably would, 36% were unsure, and 40% said they would not. The most commonly cited reason for not choosing an adoption plan was the perception they would be abandoning their baby. Thus, according to Daly, adoption appears to possess a "devalued status" in that Americans regard it as a last alternative to having biological children or a last alternative to keeping one's biological child. Also, the current trend in the United States is that once a woman becomes pregnant, it is viewed as her obligation to keep her child which is different than in other countries, such as Korea where unwed mothers are still stigmatized.

As Creedy (2001) noted, many Americans believe it is harder to love an adopted child than a biological child. This perception is corroborated by an Evan B. Donaldson Foundation (2002) study where one-fourth of those surveyed thought it may be harder to love an adopted child as much as a child born to them. Furthermore, only 57% of those Americans surveyed thought adoptive parents obtained the same satisfaction from rearing an adopted child as they would from raising a child born to them. However, these numbers are more favorable than those found in the benchmark survey administered in 1997 ("Benchmark Adoption Survey

Report on the Findings," 1997). Apparently Americans in general may now be viewing adoption in a more favorable light than previously. However, Creedy contends that adoption might be a stigmatized institution because society still deems it as second best, which is illustrated by the statistics noted above. In fact, North America and other countries of European origins view family as synonymous with biology, and this cultural bias leads to ambivalence concerning adoption (March & Miall, 2000).

Research outcomes make it clear that adoption is a status which the majority of Americans appear to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid (Freundlich, 1998). For instance, the proportion of unmarried white women who make an adoption plan for their children dropped from 40% in 1960 to about 1% in 1999 (Chandra, 1999). Daly (1994) found that only one in five pregnant adolescents who made an adoption plan for their children felt their peers favored the idea of adoption. Additionally, each year more than 1 million patients seek fertility treatment in the United States rather than adopting a child (Nelkin & Lindee, 1995). In fact, Hollingsworth (2002) found that only 15% of 10,019 women treated for infertility had ever attempted to adopt a child. Also, the number of live-birth deliveries as a result of assisted reproductive technology (ART) procedures rose from 20,840 in 1996 to 49,458 live-birth infants in 2004 (Wright, Chang, Jeng, Chen, & Macaluso, 2006). Greil (1991) asserted that patients who are unable to conceive a biological child are surpassed only by cancer patients in their willingness to subject themselves to costly, painful, and sometimes fruitless medical procedures. Apparently, adoption is most likely chosen only when a "fertility" patient has reached a state of utter desperation, if then. Lastly, according to Finer and Henshaw (2005), more than 42 million legal abortions occurred from 1973 through 2002. Clearly, millions of women undergo abortions and fertility treatment despite the option of

making an adoption plan for their unborn child or adopting a child. More importantly, Freundlich (2001) proposed the need for future studies to explore these stigmatizing attitudes on an adoptee's sense of self.

Adoptive Identity-Self identity, Self-esteem, Stigma, and Adoption

Adoptive identity, an extremely multi-faceted phenomenon, is the sense of who one is as an adopted person (Grotevant et al., 2000). Its development is based on how an individual constructs meaning about his or her adoption. All individuals, and especially adolescents, form a sense of identity. However, according to Grotevant (1997), adoption adds another dimension of "differentness" to assimilate into one's sense of self. Additionally, adoptive identity cannot be understood without placing it in the context of societal attitudes toward kinship and adoption (Grotevant et al.). Thus, others' definitions, formed through social interactions, play an important role in the development of every person's identity.

Several studies have compared adopted and non-adopted adolescents (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994; Hoopes, Sherman, Lawder, Andrews, & Lower, 1970; Stein & Hoopes, 1985) and found little or no differences between the adolescents' identity formations. Clearly, many adopted and non-adopted individuals undergo identity confusions that are totally unrelated to adoption.

Kohler, Grotevant, and McRoy (2002) also studied adopted individuals' identities and concluded that identity confusion is not an inherent outcome for adopted individuals. Furthermore, these researchers surmised that some adoptees may be troubled by the social construction of their adopted status as opposed to having psychological difficulties. They contend that focusing on the psychological issue of identity formation may be erroneous because in many cases the stigmatization of adoption is the root cause for identity confusion.

Thus, cultural or systemic causes should be explored as contributors to an adoptee's identity confusion.

According to Nickman (1985), the social concept of adoption contains elements of rejection and relinquishment. Furthermore, his studies found adopted children expressed "status losses" arising from feelings of stigmatization within one's family or society at large. Adoptees may perceive these beliefs from their social environments, which may elicit negative feelings of self-worth or self-identity (Grotevant et al., 2000). For example, March's (1995) qualitative study revealed that adopted individuals reported a common theme of being "different" due to their adoptive status. Specifically, the theme was associated with adoptees' perceptions of adoption as a social stigma and desires for original blood ties. March also found that adoptees developed their identities based on definitions from others and their social interactions. Adoptees who exhibit emotional or behavioral difficulties may be troubled by the social construction of adoption. On the other hand, their problems may be unrelated to their adoption similar to nonadopted individuals who possess behavioral or emotional problems.

Certainly, much remains to be understood about the formation of "adoptive identity" and the role social contexts play in its formation. According to Link (2001), researchers and society should attempt to reduce these stigmas because they lead to attitudes and beliefs resulting in labeling, stereotyping, setting apart, devaluing and discriminating. Thus, Link contends society must be cognizant of the social labels used when speaking of adoption. Furthermore, he contends the labels are connected to undesirable attributes that can cause adopted individuals to feel "different."

Rosenhan (1973) contended the use of labels results in depersonalization and powerlessness. Society recognizes the effects of labeling but continues using labels in subtle and insidious ways. For example, the construct of adoption is paired with stigmatizing language, word choices, and labels such as not being a "real" child and not having "real" parents. In this context, "real" means biological and thus the negative social construction of the word and its association with adoption (Bartholet, 1993; Miall, 1987). This finding is congruent with assertions made by Brodzinsky (1993) that either denial or insistence of differences may be problematic for an adoptee's sense of identity.

Adoption is a very complicated construct that is difficult to reduce to simple terms, especially when conveying information to children regardless of claiming differences or not. Brodzinsky et al. (1981, 1984) found that children ages 2-4 years are fairly incapable of understanding this complex issue; however, the majority of parents fail to understand this developmental inability to understand the concept of adoption. In fact, these researchers concluded that parents often believe their children understand more about adoption than they actually do.

In conclusion, much remains to be understood about the links between adoption, identity, and the social contexts in which these evolve and develop throughout an adoptee's lifetime (Grotevant et al., 2000). Thus, more empirical research must be conducted to adequately address issues concerning adoptees' identity development.

Understanding Adoption as a Concept

Most experts agree adopted children should know they are adopted. However, they disagree on when and how adoption ought to be discussed with them (Nickman et al., 2005). The majority agree it is an intermittent process that occurs over time (Nickman et al.) and

that adults should be honest with children (Triseliotis, 1985). The prevailing practice has been to tell adopted children while they are toddlers or preschoolers (Bernard, 1963; Brodzinsky et al., 1981, 1984; Mech, 1973; Melina 1989, 1998; Raynor, 1980). For instance, Triseliotis' (1973) study of adult adoptees revealed that being told of their adoption at an early age led to greater feelings of satisfaction. Those who were told of their adoption after age ten reported feeling confused about their self-image and identity and angry at their adoptive parents. Stein and Hoopes (1985) found that 92% of the children in their study had been told of their adoption before the age of 6, with the majority of them being told between 3 and 5 years of age – and all of the adoptees indicated satisfaction with being told before the age of 6 years. Additionally, Melina (1998) subscribes to the "early-telling" philosophy regardless of nationality differences between an adoptee and his or her adoptive parents.

In contrast, experts such as Wieder (1977), Schechter (1960), and Peller (1961) contend that telling a child about his or her adoption at a young age can cause permanent emotional damage. For example, Wieder's clinical data, gathered as a psychiatrist who counseled individuals who are adopted, demonstrated that early communication containing too much information contributes to children feeling anxious, confused, and obsessed with their adoption story. Furthermore, Watkins and Fisher (1993) determined that the 3-year-olds in their study felt vulnerable to being kidnapped or reclaimed by their birthparents. Also, the 4-year-olds equated "being given up" with assumptions of being a bad, unlovable, inadequate, or abandoned child. Other research conducted with adult adoptees revealed common questions asked by the adoptees, such as "Why didn't she want me?" and "Why did she give me away?" (Triseliotis, 1973).

In addition, a study of 60 non-adopted children clearly confirmed the developmental trends in children's understanding of adoption (Brodzinsky et al., 1981), as with other abstract concepts. Researchers concluded that children's acquisition of social knowledge, and thus adoption, is constructed in the same way as their knowledge of the physical world which includes qualitative changes in their understanding of adoption as their age increases. These findings are consistent with theorists' accounts for children's acquisition of social knowledge (Chandler, 1977; Damon, 1977; Furth, 1980). Brodzinksy et al. also recommended that adequate "telling" must take into account each child's cognitive development as opposed to "early-telling." More importantly, however, the Brodzinksy et al. study demonstrated the need for more empirical research to understand children's conception and understanding of this complex concept.

Another debated issue among professionals is whether adults should use the words "adoption" or "adopted" around children younger than three or four years of age (Komar, 1991). For instance, Donovan and McIntyre (1990) disagree with the notion that adoptees need to "know" about adoption. This finding is congruent with Brodzinsky's (1993) assertions that either denial or insistence of difference may be problematic for adoptive families.

In another study of 200 adopted and non-adopted children, 4-13 years old, Brodzinsky et al. (1984) found most preschool children did not fully comprehend adoption despite the fact that adopted children were labeled "adopted" by their parents. Further, the researchers concluded these children failed to comprehend this label but repeated what their parents had told them. Interestingly, children in this study also focused primarily on negative characteristics of adopted children and biological parents when conveying their

understanding of why biological parents make adoption plans. For example, the children's main explanations were that biological parent(s) did not like the child, could not financially care for the child, or had abused and neglected the child. Also, this study did not show many differences in non-adopted and adopted children's comprehension of adoption over time. Thus, these researchers are reluctant to agree with the practice of "early-telling" because their study indicated that younger children are not able to fully comprehend their adoptive status. This study also supported theorists' views of how children acquire social knowledge based on their environment and cognitive development (Brodzinsky et al., 1981, 1984; Chandler, 1977; Damon, 1977; Furth, 1980). Brodzinsky et al. (1984) concluded that adoptive parents need more specific and realistic guidelines based on empirically-supported research regarding how, when, and what is told to an adopted child about the concept of adoption. They firmly believe the guidelines must take into account children's cognitive developmental changes. In conclusion, they proposed that future research emphasize the process of understanding adoption from a child's cognitive ability levels as opposed to research on the process of adoptive parents "telling" the adoption story. Clearly, adoption is an inherently confusing concept for children and requires further examination.

Adoption Language

Another consideration in "telling" children about their adoptive status is the language used to convey this construct. Currently, there is a shift for parents and professionals to use positive, respectful language that is less suggestive that adopted individuals are "different" or "unnatural." Many professionals believe it is important to use language respectful of adoption and its participants. For instance, it is preferable to say "birthmother" rather than "natural mother," to avoid suggesting that there is something "unnatural" about adoptive

mothering (Grotevant et al., 2000). As children grow in their understanding of the

relationship with their biological family, they may become concerned that just as they were

"rejected" by their biological family, their adoptive family may also reject them (Keefer &

Schooler, 2000; Watkins & Fisher, 1993). Therefore, it is important not to tell a child he or

she was "given up," but rather that the biological family made an adoption plan in the best

interest of the child's future and to the best of their abilities at the time.

Other practitioners have urged parents to re-frame the adoption experience as a

positive plan and one of being wanted as opposed to being unwanted (Brinich, 1990; Winkler

et al., 1988). For example, Hummer (2000) recommended avoiding terms such as

"abandoned," "surrendered," "released," "relinquished," "gave up for adoption," "adopted

out," or "put up for adoption," which could convey that children are unwanted possessions.

Hummer also suggested using these words to describe the man and woman who conceived

and gave birth to the child: "birth parent," "birthmother," and "birthfather." Furthermore,

Hummer recommends avoiding terms such as: "real parent," "real mother," "real father," and

"real family" because they can be construed to imply that adoptive relationships are artificial

and temporary, and word choices such as "natural parent," "natural child," and "one of your

own" can suggest that because they are not blood-related, the relationships in an adoptive

family are not as strong or lasting as relationships by birth.

It is important for professionals, society, families, and the media to understand better

the complexities of this societal construct since the number of international and foster care

adoptions continue to increase dramatically ("Overview of Adoption in the U.S.," 2002). The

concept of adoption is so complex that many facets of it are still undiscovered. The preceding

literature clearly supports the need for further empirical research to explore adoption as a

concept, its societal connotations, its understandability, and the language used in conjunction with it.

Purpose of the Study

Qualitative information concerning experiences of adopted children and adoptive parents is lacking despite the large number of children adopted in the United States. Hence, the purpose of this analysis is to explore societal beliefs about adoption; adopted individuals' development of their adoptive identity; how, when, and what the "telling process" should be that are in the best interests of adoptees; individuals' understandings of adoption based on cognitive developmental changes; and the use of language and reframing to explain adoption-- to possibly derive theories related to these adoption issues. Possible recommendations for future community-based measures of beliefs surrounding societal constructs, such as adoption, also may be derived (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Lastly, information gleaned from this analysis also may prove beneficial in providing implications for those who counsel and live with adoptees. As a result, intervention, prevention, policy implications, and public education strategies may be developed and implemented concerning the concept of adoption.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

A Phenomenological Approach

The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of adopted

children and their parents. Thus, a phenomenological approach was employed in this

qualitative study to obtain detailed descriptions of each participant's experiences and

thoughts concerning adoption. According to Welman and Kruger (1999, p. 189),

"phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena

from the perspectives of people involved." Furthermore, a researcher using the

phenomenology approach is interested in learning about the lived experiences of the people

involved, or who were involved with the issue that is being researched (Greene, 1997;

Holloway, 1997; Kruger, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001; Robinson & Reed,

1998). Phenomenology also allows participants to convey their thoughts, experiences, and

understandings in their own words, without biases. Thus, employing this approach uncovered

meanings of experiences from multiple perspectives relating to the complex social

phenomenon of adoption. The open-ended analysis also brought forth rich, descriptive data

from a variety of personal ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings. In conclusion, this

analysis elicited a broad overview of the many variables associated with the social

phenomenon of adoption (Weiss, 1994).

Data Collection

Because the phenomenological approach utilizes individual interviews for data

collection (Creswell, 1998), adult participants were interviewed one-on-one using a semi-

structured, informal, interactive, open-ended interview guide that addressed many facets of

adoption as described in preceding paragraphs. On the other hand, due to the sensitive nature of this topic, minor participants were interviewed one-on-one but through the use of a predetermined list of questions approved by the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each parent reviewed the prescribed list of questions prior to agreeing to participate in the study and was given the opportunity to delete or change any question. All parents provided consent for each question, prior to each child's interview. Interestingly, no parent changed or deleted any interview question. A copy of the consent is located in Appendix A. A copy of the minors' questions is located in Appendix B. The parents were welcomed to be present during their child's interview.

The researcher audio-recorded and personally transcribed each interview and searched for common patterns and themes in the interview data during transcription, after transcription, and after re-reading all transcriptions. (This process will be fully described in the section below). All interviews were conducted one time with each participant and in locations convenient to each participant such as their home, office, or a library. All interviews were face-to-face with the exception of two families who each lived more than sixty miles from the researcher's residence. These interviews were conducted via telephone due to poor weather conditions in the region. The telephone interviews did not appear to affect this researcher's ability to gather adequate data for this study. A demographic form was also completed by all families to assess each participant's age, adoptive status, gender, family income, education, ethnicity, and overall family status. A copy of the demographic form is in Appendix C.

Participants

First, participants were selected via criterion sampling. According to Creswell (1998), criterion sampling is a sampling of individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon. Participants in this research were children who were adopted before 18 months of age and at the time of the interview were between the ages of 5 and 14, and their adoptive parents. The first participants were families the researcher knew but subsequent participants were selected by snowball sampling, a method of selecting participants by asking previous or current interviewees if they know others who have experienced similar phenomena so they can be interviewed as well (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Finally, the remaining participants were selected via purposeful sampling, a method by which participants are selected by rationale or criteria for the sample group to identify information-rich participants with both depth and breadth of experience who also share commonalties (Morgan, 1988; Patton, 1990). Thus, purposeful sampling was conducted to recruit adopted females and their adoptive parents to ensure data saturation and transferability since the first five minor participants were adopted males. All families were from the upper midwestern region of the United States.

The 25 participants included 8 mothers and fathers, 5 adopted boys, and 4 adopted girls (one of the families had two children who fit the criteria for adopted children for inclusion in this study so both were included as participants; see Table 1). Three of the adoptions were from Korea, two were from foster care, and the remaining four were from domestic, private agencies. Half of the families had at least one biologically-related child and all of the parents chose adoption after infertility diagnoses. In addition, 5 families had other adopted children who were not able to participate in the research because they did not meet the criterion. Non-participant 1 (NP1) and NP5 were adopted after eighteen months of age;

NP2 and NP6 were too young for the criterion; and NP7 was too old for the criterion. NP8

chose not to participate. However, information regarding these non-participants' experiences

was collected and will be referred to throughout the findings section. Each family provided

me with information regarding their age, highest level of education, ethnicity, number of

biologically related children in their family, and types of adoption experiences. All adults are

Caucasian and their ages ranged from 37 to 51 years. Three children are Korean, six are

Caucasian, and their ages range from 5 to 14 years. Family profiles are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Family and Adoption Profiles

Variable	Age	Gender	Last grade completed
FAMILY 1-Adoption from foster care; 1 biologically related child			
Child (C1)	5	M	Pre-K
Non-Participant (NP1) [1]	8	F	3
FAMILY 2-Domestic adoption; 1 biologically related child			
Child (C2)	14	M	8
FAMILY 3-Transnational adoptions; 1 biologically related child			
Child 3-A (C3-A)	9	M	3
Child 3-B (C3-B)	11	M	6
FAMILY 4-Domestic; 0 biologically related children			
Child 4	7	M	1
Non-Participant (NP4)	3	F	N/A

[2] Non-participant refers to an adopted child in the family who was not interviewed but

information from his or her experiences was documented.

Table 1 (continued)

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Variable	Age	Gender	Last grade completed

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FAMILY 5-Foster Care; 0 biologically related children

Child 5 (C5)	9	F	2
Non-Participant (NP5)	10	M	3

FAMILY 6-Domestic; 0 biologically related children

Child 6 (C6)	8	2	6
Non-Participant 6 (NP6)	2	F	N/A

FAMILY 7-Domestic; **0 biologically related children**

Child 7 (C7)	11	F	4
Non-Participant 7 (NP7)	16	F	10

FAMILY 8-Transnational; 2 biologically related children

Child 8 (C8)	13	F	8
Non-Participant 8 (NP8)	14	M	9

_____

I attempted to interview C1 but he did not respond to any questions and thus has no responses represented in this work; however, his parents' comments are represented in these findings. Two other families (not included above) with adopted daughters declined to have any members of the family participate in the study; both sets of parents indicated their daughters were "At the age (10, 13) where adoption becomes a sensitive topic."

Ethical Considerations

All participants in the study signed an Informed Consent Form, indicating they understood the nature of the research and the safeguards to be employed to protect their rights. All parents provided consent to the predetermined list of questions for their children prior to agreeing to participate in this research. All minor participants gave verbal consent

and signed a Child Assent form and adults signed participation consent forms for themselves

and their children. The researcher explained the assent form to each minor participant before

he or she signed it. All verbal consents were obtained at the onset of each interview before

the audio-recorder was turned on and afterwards. Parents were also offered the opportunity to

be present during their child's interview. Lastly, all consents, assents, adults' grand tour

questions, and children's questions were approved by the Iowa State University Institutional

Review Board (see Appendix D). Copies of each consent, assent, and grand tour questions

are in Appendix E.

Participants were assured they were free to withdraw from this study at any time. All

parents were also asked to indicate their interest in possibly being contacted at a later date to

participate in further research if the researcher should decide to conduct a longitudinal study

for her dissertation. Every adult enthusiastically agreed to be re-contacted.

All data and identifying information were securely stored in the researcher's home in

two different locked safes so identifying information is separate from collected data. No

identifying information was stored on any computer or electronic device and all gathered

data were password protected on the researcher's computer to further ensure confidentiality.

The researcher communicated this important safeguard to each adult verbally and in writing

via the consent forms.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data began with an intense review of field notes and

verbatim transcripts of interviews. Steps specific to phenomenological data analysis, as

identified by Moustakas (1994), were employed to search for common patterns and themes in

the gathered data. The first step, epoche and bracketing, is the process by which the

researcher repeatedly analyzes the data without preconceptions, biases, and prejudgments (Moustakas). Using an approach similar to what Esterberg (2002) referred to as open coding, categories were identified line-by-line in the transcripts without biases or preconceptions. These analyses were conducted during each transcription, after each transcription was done, and after all of the transcriptions were done for a total of three constant comparative analyses. Another dimension of phenomenological reduction, horizontalizing, is the process by which every participant statement is deemed equal (Moustakas). Thus, codes were derived by reading and re-reading each of the transcripts to identify common words, phrases, concepts, and quotes within each individual transcript and then between collective transcripts.

The next step, delimiting horizons or meanings, enabled the researcher to delete overlapping, irrelevant, and repetitive meanings and cluster the remaining meanings into themes. Finally, the last steps involved transforming the themes or clusters into meaningful descriptions for each individual participant and clustering the integrated themes into collective, overall descriptions of the phenomenon representative of the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). Ultimately, this process resulted in a rich understanding of the lived experiences of parents and children by utilizing participants' quotes to support each theme.

Researcher as Instrument

Phenomenological reduction (reflexivity) requires the researcher to reflect on her own perceptions, memories, and judgments to understand her own meanings and awareness (Moustakas, 1994). Because in qualitative research the researcher is an active participant in the data collection process and thus becomes a part of the research, it is crucial to address my personal beliefs and experiences as the primary researcher so others can understand the lens

through which I will interpret the results.

I earned a Bachelors of Science degree in Psychology with a minor in Child-Parent Community Services and am pursuing a Masters degree in Human Development and Family Studies. I am also an adult who was adopted as an infant, the parent of a child who was adopted as an infant, and an adult who has found her biological family. Through these perspectives, I have personal knowledge concerning many facets of adoption. Therefore, I have developed my own understandings of how a child, a parent, an adult adoptee, and my family experience adoption.

I have always been interested in the topic of adoption. I was adopted when I was eight days old and was reared in a family with one adopted brother. We both have "always known" we were adopted and it became part of our identities. However, my curiosity about adoption was extremely heightened when we adopted our daughter. It was not until our daughter asked if she came out of my tummy that I began questioning this extremely complex construct. Specifically, I pondered adoption-related experiences, thoughts, word choices, social stigmatizations, media portrayals, communication, and misperceptions. More importantly, my biggest concern was "how do we ensure that our daughter does not feel any differently because she is adopted, especially since we have one biological son?" Other ongoing questions I have are (a) "How do we tell her she is adopted without making her feel like she is different from other children, our son, or anyone else?" After all, we don't tell our son he is 'biologically-related' to us; (b) "How do we ensure that she does not feel she was "unwanted" by her biological parents?" (c) "How do we ensure that she knows and understands she was part of a bigger plan for all of us?" (d) "How do we convey all of this to her in a positive manner and help her comprehend such a complicated phenomenon,

especially considering the fact that societal constructs of adoption have been, historically, less than favorable?" and finally, (e) "How do other families deal with this multifaceted issue, especially since it is misunderstood by so many adults, professionals, and researchers, let alone a child?" Most importantly, my sole concern for this study and main role as a researcher is to clearly and accurately understand others' experiences with adoption.

Indicators of Rigor

Rigor was enhanced through trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability by eliciting rich, thick description, and by performing member checks, triangulation, peer reviews, and reflexivity (phenomenological reduction). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), rich, thick description allows readers to determine transferability due to the researcher's detailed description which allows others to determine if they have experienced same or similar occurrences. Next, according to Merriam (2002), one type of member check is asking participants to comment on the researcher's interpretation of findings. Member checks were conducted with all subsequent adult participants by creating new interview questions for each newly-identified theme. After each theme was constructed, the primary researcher formulated new questions to reflect those themes and to determine if all new participants agreed or disagreed with each emergent theme, based on their own experiences. A list of these emergent questions is located in Appendix F.

Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) provided the opportunity to assess what other participants were saying and allow new participants to comment on the accuracy of their inferred statements and the reasonableness of the primary researcher's interpretations and conclusions. Thus, each subsequent participant was able to confirm or disconfirm the new theme by responding to each newly-devised question. Additionally, each participant

received a copy of his or her transcribed statement and was encouraged to restate, clarify, or change its content if it was not accurate. None of the participants changed their statements. Lastly, each adult received a final update from the researcher including all of the findings. They were encouraged to indicate if they had any disagreements or concerns with my interpretations. No participant disagreed with any of the findings or interpretations. In fact, they were all very excited about the direction and were anxious to see the results published in various forms.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation is the use of multiple sources of data, multiple settings, and multiple methods of data collection to support emerging themes and explain research findings. Triangulation was employed by comparing findings from multiple sources, specifically, within and between the eight families, nine children, and sixteen adults. Wolcott (1994) recommended displaying findings in a chart to compare cases. Thus, a matrix tracked findings from each interview and between all interviews as themes emerged. The researcher's field notes were also used to triangulate data she recorded before and after each interview. Field notes were comprised of verbal and non-verbal communications, ideas, and thoughts from the researcher and each participant.

Additionally, peer reviews were conducted by a fellow graduate student in Human Development and Family Studies, one non-student reviewer, and my major professor to ensure agreement on coding and themes. Each person reviewed derived patterns and themes to ensure consistency in interpreting the participants' experiences. Lastly, phenomenological reduction, or reflexivity, was performed by the primary researcher to relay her own perceptions and judgments so other readers may better evaluate these findings, limitations, and analyses. In conclusion, rich thick description, member checks, triangulation, peer

reviews, and reflexivity (phenomenological reduction) enhanced the rigor, trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability of these results.

CHAPTER 4

Results and Discussion

In this chapter I have provided a composite description of the lived experiences of

fathers (F) and mothers (M) who adopted children before the age of 18 months and whose

adopted children (C) who are now between 5 and 14 years old. Other adopted children in

these families, who were not study participants (NP), are also identified to capture more

experiences related to this phenomenon. The number following the letter refers to the family

number (e.g., F1, M1, C1). I have also provided a discussion and interpretation of these

findings.

Finally, this last step in Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological data analysis, narrative

report, includes a discussion of major themes and sub-themes that emerged during my

interviews. Following is a list each of these 5 themes and 25 sub-themes.

THEME 1: Parents' Overall Experiences/Beliefs
    Sub-themes: Positive Experiences
        Faith-based responses
        Many who adopt think they are more grateful, eager, and committed to
         parenting than some other parents
        No differences/matter-of-factness
        Lack of medical information

THEME 2: Need for Education/Change/Positive Media Portrayals of Adoption
    Sub-themes: Societal beliefs and changing definition of "family"
        Increase media portrayal of positive stories
        Promote positive adoption language/word choices
        Dispel societal misperceptions
        Enlighten public about the adoption process
        Increase number of people who experience adoption (birth parents who
         make adoption plans and families who choose adoption)
        Change child welfare system--biological ties need not prevail

THEME 3: Communication
    Sub-themes: Early telling
        Open and honest

Adoption Day Celebrations
Child-directed answers to questions for ongoing communication
Parents consider their children's cognitive abilities when
disseminating adoption-related information
Older females more curious than parents realized

THEME 4: Children's Understanding
Sub-themes: Children know what their parents tell them
Birth parents too young, could not care for them; parents accurately
assessed what their children would articulate
Older children gain knowledge through social construction
No difference between families who adopt and those who do not

THEME 5: Identity
Sub-themes: Children are most curious about their biological families, heritage, and
where they came from; least curious about paternal figure
Parents' concern for stability and family permanency
Many children make adoption a part of their identities

Additionally, all of their narratives should enable the reader to begin to comprehend

the phenomenon of being a parent of adopted children and being a child who was adopted at

a young age.

Theme 1: Parents' Overall Experiences and Beliefs as a Result of Being a Parent of Adopted

Children

Almost every adoptive parent described his or her overall experiences with adoption

as being positive, "rewarding," and "fulfilling." In fact, most of them continually used the

word, "blessed," to explain their families and experiences. Additionally, the adults I

interviewed also believed that (a) their parenting experiences are the same as all other

parents' experiences and their families experience adoption as a matter-of-fact issue, (b)

parents who adopt children are more grateful, eager, and committed to be parents when

compared to some other parent, (c) they do not have a lot of medical information for their

children, and (d) society needs to be further educated about many facets of this complex

issue. My interpretations of their narratives should foster a better understanding of their

views as parents of adopted children.

      *Positive experience*s. All parents believe they are fortunate to have their children. The

following quotes reveal how amused parents are when people say their children are lucky to

have been adopted by them.

> F1: It (adoption) is very rewarding…. there are very few things that are as rewarding. I always find it funny that people always say that your kids are so lucky to have you. Well, I think we are lucky to have them…It was the best decision we ever made.

> M1: Most of the time it's like, "Bless you." I laugh at that, it's like, "Yeah, we did it all just for our…we get as much from it as the kids do." … It's an awesome experience! Because, honestly, the whole process and everything we went through, I thoroughly enjoyed the entire process.

> M8: People would tell us…how lucky the children are that you've come into their lives. You know, you develop those answers of, "Our reasons were totally selfish. It has so little to do with the children they were mostly to do with us."...

      Likewise, these parents expressed their thoughts about being parents of adopted

children:

> F2: It's a very rewarding experience.

> M4: Overall, it's been wonderful. We were so blessed with (C4). I never dreamed it could happen again. I guess that's one of the reasons I was so hesitant to do it the second time. It went so well the first time. Surely, it can't go that well again.

> M6: Pretty good. You know, I wouldn't, the fact that they're adopted, I would say, is probably irrelevant, at least this point in time, in terms of parenting. So, I would say, it's all great, it's wonderful to have two children; it's just the way they came into our lives' we're incredibly blessed! We realize that very often that we have two healthy children.

> F7: It has been very, very exciting from the first day that you kind of find out….You kind of go through your high's and low's where you don't hear anything for six months and you think, "This is never gonna happen." Very, very, exciting, very, very, interesting, quite a ride, very neat….Both of our families have accepted it very, very well. It's been very, very interesting. We've definitely had the high's and the low's and definitely all worth it!

M2: We really haven't had anything negative.

F5: ...Which we always thought of as some sort of a miracle (that NP5's biological mother relinquished him to be adopted).

Furthermore, this mom explained that adoption is "completely fulfilling":

M8: It's completely fulfilling. We've had friends who have went through infertility that did not make it through that process (got divorced) because they thought they had to have biological children in order to be complete. The first time, that strong connection you make with that child, whether it's when you get the picture, definitely the day when you get to hold them, that it's completely fulfilling, whatever parent role it is you're looking for.

Finally, these parents shared how extended family members' previous concerns disappeared once their first child joined their family:

M3: …My dad comes from "that generation" and my grandma…and we were so worried about them accepting this whole foreign adoption. We didn't want to tell them. We were just really worried. (F3's) family accepted it right away. We were just sick about it (worry). My dad, he was probably the one most against it. He's prejudice, there's no doubt about it. And, when (C3-B) came off the plane… my dad was the first one who made him laugh. And then it was just instant (a bond), and it's still that way. I mean, (C3-B) is kind of at that age where (C3-B) is grandpa's favorite. And it's kind of a special thing, and it's all from that first (interaction), it's really cool. And my grandma loved both boys because she loved big boys. Big, happy, round boys so she couldn't be happier….It's incredible! I love our family the way it is. I can't imagine not adopting, really….Everyone in our family has accepted them for who they are it. It's cool!

F3: I think it goes back to once that child comes in all those preconceived ideas or feelings you have go out the window because now this child is a part of your life….Love is blind.

All of the parents in this study are extremely thankful for their children and believe adoption is a gratifying method of adding to a family. In fact, this father wished they would have immediately considered adoption instead of struggling through infertility treatments:

F6: I wish adoption would have been the immediate course of action to take once we decided that, for a time, we weren't achieving pregnancy…. Looking back now, I wish we would've just looked right at adoption....Our children are gifts.

Also, this father indicated their infertility experiences were emotionally taxing due to treatments, miscarriages, grief, and loss. Here are his thoughts about their infertility problems:

> F5: …(We) initially tried to have our own children and then there was some infertility problems that we had to work with for a couple of years, so that's how it starts. That's kind of a rough place to come from….And I don't think that my wife and I ever really had healed from the -- everything that we went through with the infertility. We kind of jumped like from the frying pan into the fire without any sort of (healing)…. And there were some additional things we could probably have done to have our own children. And people at the beginning asked, "Why didn't you try that? Why did you stop at this point? You could have done this and this and this too," like we didn't try hard enough….But I'll tell you what, after what we had gone through, we were totally -- I think that in fact -- probably that was the beginning of our marriage breaking down was -- we had several pregnancies that after six weeks were no longer (viable). ….It was hard on me, and I don't think we ever processed that.

All parents in this study chose adoption after infertility diagnoses. Their comments about grief, loss, and gratitude for finally having children are almost identical with one another. Additionally, their diagnoses and treatments are representative of national statistics indicating one million patients seek fertility treatment in the United States rather than adopting a child (Nelkin & Lindee, 1995). According to Hollingsworth's conclusions (2002), parents in this study are the minority of parents who choose adoption. His results showed only 15% of 10,019 women treated for infertility had ever attempted to adopt a child. Lastly, these parents' encounters represent results found by Greil (1991)--patients who are unable to conceive a biological child are surpassed only by cancer patients in their willingness to subject themselves to costly, painful, and sometimes fruitless medical procedures. Furthermore, Greil concluded that adoption is chosen only after these patients have reached a state of utter desperation. However, as F6 declared, he wished they would have started the adoption process much sooner.

Because adoption has been extremely rewarding for these families, they want more people to experience adoption. In fact, their experiences have been so overwhelmingly positive that some of the following themes and sub-themes emerged in response to their desires to share this phenomenon with others.

Interestingly, I could not find other studies that replicated this finding in my review of the literature.

Faith-based responses. In congruence with these parents' verbalizations of feeling "blessed," many also articulated faith-based responses to their family's situations. For example, two parents commented that adoption was God's plan for their families:

F1: Whatever you want to say, I believe it was God's plan that these children came, just the way they called, we went and picked them up and they were ours….I feel, personally, myself, it was God's plan for us, the way it all worked out for us was a divine intervention….He (biological child) used to lay in bed at night and pray for a brother and sister. We say God gave you both.

M3: I just reminded him, God didn't, we didn't get you all the way from Korea and God didn't get you to us and this agency….You're more special than that. You didn't just happen upon us. You were chosen. You were given and gifted. Sometimes we try to use that if they're feeling down to let them know this was no accident. The pieces all fit together….Because we could have said no to either one of them but we wanted them. They came along, every tiny piece fit together at the right time. That didn't just happen. I think that can really help them realize that even if they are mad or things aren't going their way, there's a reason they're stuck in Iowa.

Also, one mother shared how their biologically related son prayed for siblings before their two children were adopted:

M1: (Our biologically related son said) "Mom, I used to lay in bed at night and pray to God to bring me a brother and sister and He did." So his insight and appreciation into, which makes me feel good, he relied on his faith for bringing us together.

One father said he questioned his faith because they were not able to have children, but relied on his faith to provide a family:

F3: Also, you question your faith when you don't have a child that way. You wonder, why is God not doing this?...You know, when God gives you a child, you don't get to choose because you just have to accept it, you would accept it…. Or, why are we not having a child. I think that is a big element and you have to keep questioning yourself. In our situation it was, "Hey, there's a reason why, God has a plan, I don't know what the plan is, you just have to believe that it's gonna happen and when it happens, it's going to fall into place."

Additionally, this young girl told me God spoke to her and told her she was going to get a baby brother:

C6: God speaked to me and told me that I was going to have a baby brother.

Also, her dad mentioned that others may think infertility is God's will so people should not adopt but he does not agree with those thought processes:

F6: Some people may say this (not being able to conceive a child) is God's will, whatever they see or how they define God, may look at a lot of things like, this is God's will, and that's the way things are. But, I don't agree with that…

This father defined adoption (and children) as gifts from God:

F7: My definition would be a gift from God that He has given to us, take care of, raise, to love, ,….they're not our own but they are our daughters.

Finally, this father explained how his divorce affected commitments to his children, family, and faith:

F5: I personally felt that I was breaking my commitment to (NP5) and (C5) and to their biological parents and the social workers and the judge, that I personally made -- maybe just me, I don't know, but this internal pledge to God and pledge to them, as little as to their souls, that I would do everything I could to take care of them. And also, you know, I come from a family, a Lutheran family, and we've always had a lot of -- very strong beliefs about family and the role of family.

Data regarding religious affiliations was not collected with other demographic data so this researcher verbally collected the data after this sub-theme emerged. Two families reported they are Lutheran, four are Catholic, one is Missouri Synod Lutheran and Catholic, and one is Missouri Synod Lutheran. Most participants in this study articulated faith-based

beliefs, thoughts, and references to God when talking about their adoption experiences. Additional inferences about their gratitude for having children are outlined below.

I was not able to locate similar, faith-based findings related to those who adopted children. However, I found one study that examined women's spirituality related to infertility diagnoses. The results revealed that spirituality was a part of their lives and helped these women navigate through conflict, coping, and growth relative to their infertility (Kress, 2006). Thus, parents in the current study may have used spirituality for these same reasons. In fact, their faith-based responses appear to be indicative of their growth and gratitude for the opportunity to finally have children.

More grateful, eager, and committed to parent than some other parents. Another prevalent insight provided by these adults is a belief that they were more grateful, eager, financially secure, and emotionally prepared to parent than some other parents. A discussion with the second parent elicited a theme that subsequently emerged among all other parents: these parents believe they may be more appreciative of their families and children than some other parents. Additionally, after reflecting for some time, this mother said a higher level of commitment sometimes exists in parents who adopt children. Here is how she answered my question, "Do you think adoptive families are different from other families, and if so, how?"

> M2: You know, I want to maybe believe (not), but there is always that sense of, "yes." I do try to have a sense of appreciation for adoption, for the families (making adoption plans for their children)… for that realization that I could not, can not take care of these children, I need to remove them from my care for their own betterment. And, it's the same way for my sister's daughter. The letter that came with them was exactly like that--we are poor peasants, she was an unwed mom, she could not take care of this child. That, to me, I think that does add a stronger bond because there is a higher level of commitment and appreciation for all parties… I do have to think back to that question. "Are those families different?" It's a totally different road you go on to become a family. How can you not be a different type of family?

Additionally, the following parents acknowledged they went "through a lot" to have their adopted children. As a result of their ordeals, they feel a great appreciation for having the opportunity to parent. Here are their answers to this emergent question, "Do you think that sometimes parents who have adopted children are more appreciative of their children, families, or the process?"

> M7: I think we love them more….I just think that we have gone through so much to have them…a greater appreciation for what we've gone through. That was always hard for me, you know, when you can't get pregnant, other people are getting pregnant…

> F7: …If anything, I would have a tendency to think that parents who have adopted may even have a stronger, more loving relationship with their children and their families. You know, their parents loved them a lot to get them into their families I don't know if I can say love them more but I think there's a deeper, sometimes, a deeper bond.

> F4: In some cases yes and in some cases no…the only thing I can say about it is you have to go through a psychological test, a background screening where a lot of people, all they have to do is get pregnant. I think you end up with a little bit more controlled parents with adoption….People who really want to be parents.

> M5: I think they (parents who adopt) had probably thought more about family relationships and why they are important and I suspect they value them in a way that other families don't have to think about. You come by that, often times, by a lot of loss and a lot of grief and you just perceive it differently. I think they (parents who adopt children) just don't take those relationships for granted….More mature.

> F6: Oh, I think so because they have to go through a series of loops, state laws that require them to prove themselves. If you do that, you're not going to take for granted what a gift children are. Or, depending on your circumstance, whether you're adopting because of infertility or it's just something you want to do, again, that's going to give you an experience that has a deep appreciation for, again, our children are gifts.

Likewise, this mother indicated her appreciation is different for each of their circumstances. In addition to being grateful for all of her children, she is grateful to her adopted children's biological moms for making adoption plans for them.

M3: You do go through a lot. We went through a lot to have him biologically, he was a surprise, but it's a different appreciation. I think there's something inside of me, but for (C3-B) and (C3-A), when I get frustrated I remember, too, that there's a birth mom that I owe something to. She entrusted me with this child, right or wrong, I need to do my best. So, I do feel like some kind of gratitude toward her.

These parents felt they were more emotionally prepared and financially secure to

parent since they were older when they adopted their children:

M8: I think it's more the age factor, we were older, we were in our mid-30's (when we adopted) and much more emotionally prepared....as well as financially prepared.

F2: I think so, to a certain extent....We were married nine years when we adopted (C2), when he joined our family. You know, you're real mature when you go through that process, also. We got married when we were twenty-two. If we would have started having kids right away...our family could have been completely different because there's a big difference between 22 and 30. I think parents are older and ready to make a more mature decision.

Furthermore, the next father realized the financial commitment they made to adopt their

children and thinks this may create a greater sense of commitment to being a parent.

F3: I would say they're not different, other than the aspect of financially what they've put into it with the adoption. Because with the child being born biologically, here or wherever, you have insurance to cover it, when you go through the adoption process, you are financially making a commitment to this child that this is what you're worth. That's never brought up...It's never going to be brought up.

Additionally, I asked him if he believed parents who adopt children are more appreciative of

their children than other parents. He responded by saying parents who adopt children are

sometimes more "grateful."

F3: **Grateful**.[3] I think that initially, when it happens, being able to have both (biological and adopted children), it's just a sense of, especially with our situation where it (adoption) was our first, it was that it was **so worth it** and you think that you

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[3] The researcher used bold type throughout the participants' narratives to emphasize the importance of certain statements they made.

finally have a child and someone to call your own and raise the way you want to. I think that's the biggest aspect.

He explained how grateful they were to adopt their first child and how they made their sacrifices up front, meaning their financial commitment to adopt children. He further expressed how frustrating it can be to see parents who take their roles for granted because they don't realize how lucky they are to be parents.

> F3: When you look at some people who have children and how they're treated, it's like, that's probably the point where adoptive parents are probably like, you don't know how lucky you really are. I think that is probably more prevalent in adoptive families….That's probably about how lucky they were and it's (having children) not as easy as they think it is. We don't say we love our kids more than you do. You start looking at people and saying, "If only they knew how difficult it really it was or what you go through (when you can't have children)".…I think all parents make sacrifices….When you go through adoption, you've made your sacrifice up front, already.

> This father believes there may be an additional sense of parental commitment when

you adopt a child:

> F5: …I would say for me personally, probably being an adoptive parent has brought out this extra commitment in me to do the extra work, the extra self-improvement. And, you know, you want to think I would have done that for my biological children…. It's almost like you feel like there's more pressure to be a good parent I think with an adoptive parent than biological. I don't mean that people don't - but it almost feels like you have a double commitment there…

Obviously parents in this study deem themselves to be more committed to parent based on their age, emotional maturity, financial status, and deep appreciation related to their many trials and tribulations to have children. Overall, they relayed they are grateful and appreciative of their children, unlike some other parents. Their beliefs are similar to findings reported by Hamilton, Cheng, and Powell (2007). They analyzed data from the ECLS-K Longitudinal Kindergarten-First Grade, 1998–2000 study, to determine educational outcome differences related to various family types. Participants and family types were comprised of

two adoptive parents ($N = 161$), two biological parents ($N = 9,661$), biological mother and

other father ($N = 881$), biological father and other mother ($N = 84$), biological mother only (N

$= 2,410$), biological father only ($N = 189$), related guardians ($N = 243$), and unrelated

guardians ($N = 96$).Their findings revealed that two-adoptive parent families provide more

economic, cultural, social, and interactional resources to their children than do parents in all

other types of family types, holding all else equal. These researchers concluded that the

parents' high levels of investment are related to their higher income, education, and maternal

age. Additionally, they hypothesized that adoptive parents may enter into parenthood with

greater levels of commitment than other parents. Also, according to Rothman (2005),

adoptive parents may be more committed to parent due to their endless planning, effort, and

disappointments related to infertility and the adoption process. Thus, the beliefs of parents in

this current study are similar to quantitative measures and results reported by other

researchers.

> *No difference/matter-of-factness.* While the majority of parents believe they are more

appreciative of their child than some other parents, every parent adamantly contends that

parenting an adopted child is no different than any other parent's experience, except for the

fact that their children joined their families in a slightly different manner. They believe

adoption is just one of many different ways to add to a family.

> M4*:* There's absolutely no difference. They become yours.

> M6: I guess that we don't see our children any different than our children.
> F1: We don't make a distinction in our family (that any of the children are adopted or
> biologically related to us), nor have we ever. It has never really become an
> issue….They're just brother and sister.

> F3: It's a matter of fact. We're a family, that's the way it is.

M7: I would say it is the same as any parent….Taking care of children, raising them as babies….except for that it started eight weeks later… it's a casual part of our lives….It's kind of a non-issue….It's just a part of our lives.

M5: I think on a day- to-day basis, everybody's got laundry to do, homework, they have the same sets of issues I think as biological families do. It really is no different on a day to day basis. It is nothing more than a unique way of building a family, it is not anything more than that, and yet that is everything…

Also, the majority of them said most people don't know their children are adopted.

M3: Many people don't know they're adopted. When you see us together, no one would assume that. It's just spooky sometimes, I'll pull out my pictures and when I was (NP1's) age, there are a lot of similarities.

M5: There is no reason that anyone would think that either of our children are adopted, they are blond-haired, blue-eyed kids.

F4: A lot of people don't even realize that either one of our children are adopted….I imagine that the majority of the experiences of parenting are the same whether they (children) are adopted or not….It's by slightly different circumstances but it's still bringing a new child into the family.

The following narratives are from parents who have both biologically related and adopted children. Each asserts that parenting a child is not a matter of blood ties because their children are not their "biological or adopted children;" they are their "sons and daughters."

F2: To be honest with you, I don't see that it's that much different than (raising) a biological child. We've really tried hard not to differentiate the two, not treat them differently. We have certainly tried not to say that we're different from anybody else.

F8: It's interesting because my experience, 94% of the time, I don't think about having adopted children. They're my sons and daughters, not my biological or adopted children.

However, he believes there are differences in experiences:

F8: They've (families who have adopted children) had different experiences. Not different in a good way or not different in a bad way, just different. I think different adoptions are different. The fact that we have mixed nationalities is different than

maybe if we had children who were of the same nationality. Just because it raises different issues, different questions, different dynamics, everything involved. Differences in that we don't know the exact medical history of our children. So, yeah, there are differences!

M8: I think it's probably not much different....Also, as a parent of two biological children, not a whole lot different. We've just raised them as if they're our own children. We've never made that be an issue....You know, that whole blood is thicker than water. You know when people talk about blood relations being so important. For us, it's not the blood that is important it's the value bond that we establish. And, we have a saying in my husband's family and in our family, "The (Anderson) Umbrella." And if you possess the name (Anderson) in any way, whether it's birth or marriage or however you have it, there's a standard you are to live to because it's the (Anderson) Standard. I guess it's how we instill values into the kids. It's not because Dad and I think it's true, it's the (Anderson) Standard!

Furthermore, this mother adds that having adopted children has made a positive impact on her biologically related children. For example, her daughter does not question whether or not she would adopt a child if she has infertility problems.

M8: Our oldest daughter is going to be married next year so she and her fiancé have talked about children and all of that kind of thing. Female infertility seems to have run in my generation of women in my family and I guess, for some people, they have that turmoil of what if we can't have children, would we really need to have someone that is ours genetically? I don't think our two older (biologically related) children have that worry at all.

Likewise, the majority of children also said that being adopted is not any different and that their families are no different than other families. Their narratives are outlined in subsequent paragraphs.

Certainly, these families do not think of their children as adopted or biologically related and the phenomenon of adoption is a "non-issue" for them. Some parents said all families, children, and circumstances are different but they all agreed that on a day-to-day basis, differences do not exist because all families have "homework, cooking, cleaning, and

laundry." Lastly, they all contend that adding to a family through adoption is no different

except that, "it started seven or eight weeks later than other parents' experiences."

Interestingly, I could not find other studies researching parents' beliefs on this facet of the

adoption experience.

Lack of medical information. Many parents voiced concerns regarding the lack of

medical information they have for their children. However, the parents realized that younger

birthparents, in most cases, do not have much of a health history—but you have the

increasing medical history of the parents and grandparents as they age, but you don't have

that for the adopted child, unless you know the birth parents.

> F4: The only place where we run into problems is when we have medical problems
> with the children and having very little history. That's one of the harder parts….
> Just when something special, medically, comes up, and we don't have any history on
> it. That does make it kind of tough.

> M5: We don't have a lot of (medical) information… there are pieces of information
> that you don't know…. It's always a guessing game.

> M1: I don't feel we ever did get a very good health history on the kids. I was
> expecting more from DHS (Department of Human Services) in having better health
> history. With a younger mother and younger father like that, their health records are
> so short.

> F8: …We don't know the exact medical history of our children.

> M7: She knows we don't have a lot of information about her birth parents so we just
> don't talk about a lot except for her height issue because birth dad is (tall).

In spite of their desire to have more health information about their children's

biological families, none of the parents indicated this has been a major obstacle for them.

Other studies have reported that the lack of medical information is a concern for

families who adopt children (Smit, Delpier, Tarantino, & Anderson, 2006). In fact, some

states such as Illinois and New York have adoption registries that allow biological family

members to provide ongoing medical information to their biological offspring who have been

adopted.

In summary, parents in this study declared their adoption-related experiences are very

positive, are no different than other parents' experiences, and they may be more committed,

eager, and grateful to parent than some other parents. The lack of medical information for

their children has not been a major obstacle for them. All parents also talked about their faith

and concluded wide-spread, adoption-related education is necessary.

Theme 2: The Need for Education/Change/Positive Media Portrayals of Adoption

Most all parents indicated the need for more public-wide education concerning

adoption. Therefore, this theme was constructed since many sub-themes emerged from

parents' overwhelming list of education-related suggestions and ideas. The sub-themes

include (a) educating society about the many definitions of family, (b) persuading the media

to portray positive adoption stories, (c) promoting positive adoption language and

encouraging sensitivity to word choices used in conjunction with adoption, (d) sharing the

process to alleviate fears, unknowns, and misperceptions, (e) encouraging all people to

experience adoption, (f) dispelling societal misperceptions of adoption, and (g) changing the

overall child welfare system to make it work for the best interests of children.

Societal beliefs--changing definition of family. All parents contend society is

becoming much more accepting of adoption. Their views are corroborated by research results

from the National Adoption Attitude Survey (2002) which revealed that the proportion of

Americans with very favorable opinions about adoption increased from 56% in 1997 to 63%

in 2002.

Here are a few parental responses to my question, "What do you think society, in general, thinks about adoption?"

> M4: I think it's good. I think it has changed over the years, from the way it used to be. It was always kind of a quiet, hush-hush thing.

> M2: They have become much more accepting of it and don't, I don't think people question it or think much about it anymore.

> F2: I think it's very accepted.

> F4: It used to be that secret, back-room thing that nobody really ever talked about until they brought home a baby and they weren't ever pregnant. It's like, sssshhhh, don't say anything about it. It was kept a secret. I have some friends, here in town, that were adopted, at least one of them was. It has been a secret….I think things have changed a lot. It's become a more open topic.

In fact, this next father shared how he and his cousin found out his cousin was adopted—at the age of fourteen or fifteen. His cousin was devastated:

> F5: And, you know, I remember when I was probably in my, I don't know, 14 or 15, they (cousins) are playing at his house. There were all kinds of relatives there. And some older kids told me, they said, "We know Francis (cousin) is adopted." My parents never told me he was adopted. He didn't know he was adopted….So then that night when we went home and my parents then finally, you know, told me, "Well, yeah, he was adopted, but, you know, nobody talks about it."…I guess some -- a doctor in a small town delivered a baby to a teenage girl and the baby was immediately removed from that girl and given to my aunt and uncle and that was the end of it. So then they had to tell him. He heard he was adopted from other cousins and….And he was very devastated. I remember hearing stories later about how emotional it was for his parents to have to sit down at the table and tell him. I think he was devastated. I don't think he ever had the same relationship again with his family….So that's my experience with adoption. Otherwise, you know, people kind of whisper about somebody being adopted….

His cousin's response was consistent with Triseliotis' (1973) findings that adoptees who were told of their adoption after age ten reported feeling confused about their self-image and identity and angry at their adoptive parents.

F5 further explained that adoption is now very prevalent and just a "matter-of-fact":

F5: And, of course…we know all kinds of people that have adoptions. It's just, like, as a matter of fact now….And there are adoptive families everywhere. It's open and -- people -- there are single adoptive families. There's same-sex couple adoptive families I know. There are people looking to adopt. Single mothers, I've known, that have gone to China for three weeks. So you hear about it all. And some people you know very well. So it's (adoption) just part of the fabric (in this midwestern town).

Some also believe today's society understands many definitions of what constitutes a

family.

F3: I think they are much more accepting (of adoption) now than 30 years ago. I think they realize that people have made choices that they think are for the betterment; I think adoption, many years ago, was looked upon as girls who screwed up and this is her way of getting out of it. In today's society, the old family tree is not quite what it was 20 years ago.

M1: I think that shrill and veil (of adoption) has gone away. It is much more open so I think as a general society that's okay. I think in (this midwestern state), especially, people understand the meat of it and that it is ok….There are so many divorced families and mixed families or they live with other children in the home but they may not have any biological connection to them but they are siblings. I think we are in an era where it is more understood about what is family.

M6: Now, I think adoption is just such the no issue.…Families are so different so I'm hoping that makes adoption more a non issue because families are so different today than they were before, even 20 or 30 years ago, where it was such an intact family unit….I think it's a non issue anymore and maybe 20 years ago it may have been…

M8: ...The definition of what a family is and that changes continuously as we find whole new ways of creating a family in ways we've maybe never imagined….So, there's so many different definitions of, some of our children have friends whose families have extended generations, many generations, living in the same house, like it was a 100 years ago. So I think it's that whole accepting of the definition of family and for whoever defines themselves as family to realize there's permanence to that word family and you don't get to change just because it becomes inconvenient.

Their comments are consistent with other researchers who report the attention given

to adoption is related to many people acknowledging the need to accept and tolerate family

diversity (Javier et al., 2007). This next quote is indicative of these findings:

M8: I think the world has to become more accepting of people and wherever they are in their place within the world.

Several parents also referred to adoption as being "stigmatized," but all believed it is becoming less of a stigma. Likewise, many researchers have also found that the social construction of adoption can and does involve stigmas (Kline, Karel, & Chatterjee, 2006; March, 1995; Miall, 1987; Wegar, 1997, 2000).

F1: There isn't near the stigma that there was in the past because it's not one of those things when you read some of the stories about how elaborate they were in the past- how they faked pregnancies, 40, 50, 60 years ago. But, you think about that at that time society and parents were not thinking about what impact that has on the child. They went to such lengths to keep this quote, "secret," quiet obviously there was something bad attached to it.

This mother maintained adoption is becoming less of a stigma, but believed the overall system still functions as if children do not have rights. She explained that some persons think all children should unequivocally be reared by their biological parents. Thus, she stated society needs further education about adoption and what constitutes the best interests of children who are not property.

M5: If we were going to pick the highest priority (for educating people) it would be that biological ties need not prevail, always, and in fact, sometimes it's the most inappropriate thing to do I think that there's still a big piece of society that thinks we shouldn't have to do it (adoption). I think it goes back to some of the stuff we were talking about with the Human Services systems and that sort of view of children as property and not having rights of their own….There was sort of a stigma that was attached to it. I think we are going away from that.

Another mother thought society is more accepting of people who adopt children, but not of birth moms who choose adoption plans for their children.

M7: I think it's a mixed message. Wow, it's so great that you adopted like we're saints or something. But then, on the other hand, it seems like girls that (make adoption plans) are kind of put down a little bit or are not as good as others. I really do think that society… it's not that it's just okay to have a baby out of wedlock but I

think there's almost a stigma about (making an adoption plan) and that's unfortunate because there's a lot of women out there that should not have kids.

Her assessments are consistent with Creedy's (2001) research results wherein a majority of unmarried, pregnant, women did not make adoption plans for their children because they viewed adoption as "bad." These thoughts are consistent with Daly's (1994) findings where high school students reported they would not choose an adoption plan for their baby if they or their partner became pregnant. The most common answer for that response was the perception they would be abandoning their baby.

All parents reported that society's views of adoption are changing but various opportunities for improvement exist for adoption-related education. In fact, their comments are congruent with information contained in a newly-published book, The Handbook of Adoption (2007). The authors indicated that sometimes the greatest obstacles members of the adoption triad must overcome are stigmas and stereotypes related to adoption.

Thus, the next five sub-themes represent ideas from parents in this study to enhance the public image of adoption.

Increase media portrayals of positive adoption stories. Many parents indicated that societal beliefs about adoption are related to the media's portrayal of it. Thus, most believe society's perceptions could be enhanced if the media made a concerted effort to share positive adoption stories. This mom's quote summed up their contentions.

M8:…So much of what society thinks is based on the media…

In addition to media exposure, this father believed parents who have adopted children should share their experiences with others.

F1: Of course, they (media) have the PSA (public service announcement) ads. They have more information out there. I think continue to educate. Probably the best sales people are probably you and I, to be honest.

Surprisingly, almost every parent talked about their knowledge of "horror" stories in the media. They remembered U.S. media portrayals of biological parents reclaiming their children after they had been adopted by other parents and negative situations where adopted children were later diagnosed with mental illnesses or disabilities. In fact, a few parents speculated the reason more people choose transnational adoptions is related to fears that biological parents might successfully reclaim their children long after an adoption is finalized.

F4: Prior to us adopting, all of the horror stories. All you'd hear about was horror stories. You'd never hear about the good ones...the horror stories will always be out there, as long as the media…when they're ready to print a story, there will always be those. Those are the ones that get the attention. There's not much of a story in hey, "Let's see how normal and happy these people are."…Parents, they'd adopt children and bring them into their homes, children would turn out to be psychotic, mental problems, and this and that. There's been so many problems with the adoption system, for domestic. I know (this midwestern state) has tried to correct that. They had that incident where, I can't remember that baby's name. She got to be 2 years of age and all of a sudden the birth mother changed her mind and she fought to get her back and they won (The Losing Jessica case-a situation where the biological father did not know he had a biological daughter. Once he found out he had a daughter, he and the biological mom fought to gain custody of her. The biological father and mother successfully reclaimed their daughter despite the fact she was over two years old and adopted by another family)….That was traumatic for the child, the adoptive parents, just black eyes for that program. I don't know if other states have advanced as far as changing that policy. Someone offered that up as why more people are going (adopting) international, recently…the chances of getting your child taken away are a lot slimmer.

M6: I would say a lot of people still have a lot of false ideas about it and about a lot of it, the media plays up the stories about children being taken away to portray that and they don't explain that things were not legally taken care of…this isn't this wonderful family that was all normal and then, 3 years later someone knocks on the door and says, "I want my kid back." I don't know that they cover it in a way… those kind of things need to portray adoption as a positive option. I think society is okay with it and all of that….I think it is so much more open and so much better… I guess,

sure, if the media did a lot of positive adoption stories that always does help with things like that…in the spotlight…

Also, this is her opinion as to why there are more transnational adoptions:

M6: The other thing is probably the fear that somebody's gonna come and take their baby back.

These next two parents indicated that negative media portrayals of biological parents

reclaiming their children affirmed their decisions to adopt children from another country.

M8: Many children were… there were lots of lawsuits with children trying to be returned by their biological parents so there was that whole unrest of it….At that time, Baby Jessica was big in the news. And that was exactly the time that we were exploring adoption so international seemed like it was safe….We figured that parents don't necessarily come across the ocean to take children back.…With domestic adoption, there are so many fears that play into it. I can't remember the big case about that time, it was about eleven years ago….(Losing Jessica) where the whole adoption thing came in. I guess that was our biggest factor….We didn't want to go a few years down the line and all of a sudden have someone come knocking on our door saying, "We're here to get him."

Finally, this mother relayed concerns their extended family expressed regarding what

they have heard in the media:

M6: A lot of people wanted to know do we communicate with birth parents, do we see them, can they find us? That's where, probably, family, extended family has some concerns about relationships with birth family….My extended family, my husband's extended family. I guess because we're the first family (to adopt within our family) there's a lot of concern that they'll (birthparents) come and like, "Are you sure it's all okay and they're not going to come and take them away because you hear so many stories on the news like that?" So, you try to explain that those were never finalized and there was always something wrong, and rightfully so, the adoptive parents wanted to keep them, so things were never finalized but they never say that on the news when they announce on the news when they just say they took back that 3 year old. You know, it gives people that horror image.

Furthermore, the parents' memories are consistent with Creedy's (2000) broad

analysis of print, advertisements, and media stories which revealed many negative

misperceptions about birth families, adopted children, and adoptive parents. Additionally,

these parents' desire for more positive media portrayals of adoption is congruent with

Creedy's recommendation to implement a broad public education campaign about adoption

and positive adoption language. In summary, it is a likely assumption that if positive media

stories outweigh negative stories, more birth parents might choose adoption plans for their

children and more families may adopt children.

Promote positive adoption language/word choices. Almost every parent said society

needs further education about positive adoption terminology and word choices used in

conjunction with adoption. Their opinions are congruent with practitioners' advice that

people should re-frame the adoption experience as a positive occurrence (Brinich, 1990;

Winkler et al., 1988).

The next four parents reported that when people use insensitive language it is because

they have limited knowledge of appropriate adoption terminology. Here are their answers to

my question, "Do people ever use the words, 'real parents' with you or when they're asking

questions? If so, what do you think about those words?"

> F8: Well, if they've ever said it to me, I let it roll off. I consider it to be someone who doesn't know what other words to use…of course, you hear it on T.V. and in the media on a regular basis but again it's because they don't know what other term to use and they know that everyone will understand it.

> M8: Personally, I think that's a person who doesn't have enough knowledge and their vocabulary is limited because that's where I leave it, their knowledge is limited and they don't exactly know what they're talking about.

> F6: I think it's common sense that speaking in front of adoptive parents to call somebody else a real parent who has biological ties, I think everybody knows that's, with a little bit of thought, that that's not really appropriate and it's not true.

> F5: Yeah, I think I've heard people use that. It's only because -- well, biological parents is like a politically correct term or there's no emotion attached to that, so that's why we use it and why we use it with our children. But some people who maybe

aren't tuned into that, have said real parents. You know, they might say, "Well, what were their real parents like, or who was their real mother or what happened, why…."I don't correct -- yes. But I just make sure I use the words, "biological parent." It hits you like that when somebody says that because it's like I'm the real parent….But I'll just make sure that the conversation isn't finished without me saying biological parents.

This next mom explained they are real parents and they use positive adoption terminology.

> M6: We're both their real parents and we always refer to their birth parents as their birth moms and we say "placed" instead of "given up." We really try to emphasize, well especially, with (C6), because she's older…this was done as a good thing. You know, her birth mom and that any time it comes up it will be the message with both of them…it was purely unselfish, absolute maturity, and all of that…

One father recounted his wife's responses to people referring to birthparents as real

parents.

> F3: I remember (my wife's) answer to that, "I am the real mom. How can you say I'm not real? I'm here, I'm living, I'm breathing, I'm with them."

Furthermore, a majority of mothers are adamantly opposed to birth moms being

referred to as real moms because according to these moms, real moms raise, parent, and

nurture their children.

> M3: Yeah, I don't like the word real. It bothers me…. He (child) said, "You're not my real mom." I said, "I wiped your butt and cleaned your puke, I **am** your **real** mom."

> M7: I'm her real mom.

> M4: I hear that and I think I am the real mom.

> M5: Sometimes I hear real parents. I think I really want to make a distinction that that is their birth mom or biological mom….And I want to say, "I'm his mom." They mean nothing by it but I have had people refer to their biological parents as their real parents or their natural parents. …I don't want there to be any question for them that I am their mother.

In fact, a few parents have corrected others' word choices. For example, these parents

explained how they rephrased questions asked of them to reflect correct terminology.

F4: Mom is a role you assume. It's not something that you just naturally get….Just because you can get pregnant you are not automatically a mother….They (others) think of the real mom as the birth mother…. (They'll say) "The one who gave birth to him? Well, you mean birth mother?"…The real mom is who has shouldered the task to accept the responsibility, willing to become the mother.

M5: So, I see it, a lot of times with the use of, with the use of the real parents thing has a value judgment attached to it. And I have not heard that very often and certainly not from close friends. But, the natural parents part of it, I think it's just an opportunity to educate somebody. And so I maybe will say, "As opposed to their unnatural parent?"
In addition, this mother asserted that there is a lady who gave birth to her daughter

but she has not earned the title of mom. Here's how she has responded to others' inquiries:

M1: …They'll ask, "What was the situation with her mom?" A lot of times I'll go ahead and correct them, "No, I'm her mother. That was the birth lady."…I have strong opinions on that. I hear a lot of people use the words birth mom….I am the caregiver, the provider, the daily guidance for this child's life. I am her mother. There's a birth lady out there who gave birth to her but she's not her mother. And so, that's how and why I feel strongly about it. Yes, you can have multiple women who are important in your life but you only have one mother...

Furthermore, this is her definition of a mother:

M1: A caregiver who provides guidance, and, direction, and daily oversight into a

child's physical, mental, and social development and well-being.

Obviously, she has a strong aversion to using the word mom in relation to the person who

gave birth to her daughter.

Likewise, her husband contends "words have power in our society." He stated that

just because someone can get pregnant she should not automatically be called a mother.

F1: My wife even goes to the point of saying birth lady because she is not a mother. She does not deserve that title. I'm sure that almost all women who have been through this process can relate to what I'm talking about. Because again, words have power in our society. In that, just because you can get pregnant and have a baby doesn't mean that you are a mother.

In fact, I asked every child to tell me their definition of a mom. Interestingly, every child defined a mom as someone who takes care of her child. Some participants gave concrete examples of how mothers care for their children while others provided definitions:

C3-A: Someone who cares about you and loves you and comforts their kids. They're here to help us, let us learn, teach us, and takes care of us.

C4: A mom is somebody who takes care of children and loves them.

C2: The person that raises you from childhood.

C7: Someone that takes care of you and they tell you that they love you.

This 13-year old was the only child who made a distinction between a birth mom and a mom.

C8: I guess your birth mom is the mom who gave birth to you but mom is the, basically, parent or guardian….Mom, I think of as a parent or guardian who takes care of you, hopefully a female.

Interestingly, not one child indicated that a mother is someone who gives birth. Likewise, no parents included the role of giving birth in their definitions of a mother. In fact, this mother clarifies the definition of birth mom for her children:

M3: We've tried to establish that that was her role. Her job was giving you birth and then you went to foster care, we tried to establish that role.

She also explained they use the word birth mom instead of birth lady because it is easier for children to say.

M3: I think mom comes out easier than lady.

Lastly, this mother recounted a situation when I asked her whether it was difficult for her son to understand he had two "mothers" because he would spend time with his birth mom but lived with this mother. She said that when his adoption was finalized and he no longer

saw his birth mom, he didn't call his (adoptive) mother any name even though he had

previously called her mom.

> M5: You know this is interesting….(NP5) was in foster care with us from two days old and he was a two or three day placement that turned into this incredible saga…. He was two she released him for adoption, a total surprise….She, totally out of the blue, released him. So, he would have been going on two, so he's just starting to talk now, and for the longest time he didn't call me anything….He didn't….We had always referred to her (biological mom) as Mamma Helen, I think. And I was mom. So, I was mom and she was Mamma Helen. So, when she's out of the picture, he called me nothing for, he just didn't refer to me, he didn't use any name for me…probably for another six months. So, I don't know what was going on for him.

This was a very interesting discussion and prompted both of us to question how

confusing it may be for children to comprehend the difference between a birth mom and a

mother who raises them. Thus, adoption-related words, terminology, and their

conceptualizations probably warrant more research to determine their effects on children.

These next parents' statements correspond with research results cited by Keefer and

Schooler (2000) and Watkins and Fisher (1993):

> F3: We don't say give away. We try to correct that when other people say that. We try to use the term adoption plan because you want them to not feel like they were something to be just given away, a toy, an item, traded, or whatever, so we always say adoption plan.

> M6: To me, (given up) sounds uncaring, like they didn't care, I guess. Where placed is a conscious decision, it's a choice, it's something they've thought about. That was one of the, we talked with the social workers about words, you know, words that sounded better. It gives you a different perception when you hear things in different ways.

These researchers maintain it is important not to tell a child he or she was given up, but

rather that the biological family made an adoption plan in the best interest of the child's

future and to the best of their abilities at the time. Interestingly, only six out of sixteen adults

in the current study knew what the term adoption plan meant. This mom's statement sums up

most of the parents' questions about this terminology:

> Interviewer: Has anyone ever asked about the circumstances of why an adoption plan
> was made for either of your children?
> M7: What does that mean, "adoption plan?"

Also, only one child out of nine knew the definition of an adoption plan. Here is how

this father responded when I asked him how his 13-year old daughter would answer my

question, "Can you tell me why an adoption plan was made for you?"

> F8: First off, she wouldn't know what an adoption plan was.

Lastly, following is my conversation with the one child who knew what the term adoption

plan meant:

> Interviewer: Can you tell me what an adoption plan is?
> C4: Planning that a child will live with somebody else.
> Interviewer: Why is an adoption plan made for some children?
> C4: For families to take care of them.
> Interviewer: Why did Debbie (birth mom) make an adoption plan for you?
> C4: For mommy and daddy to take care of me.

Certainly more media exposure is needed to convey positive adoption terminology

especially since eighteen out of twenty-five participants in this study were not aware of some

positive adoption terms. As F1 noted, "words have power in our society," thus, these parents

would like others to be more cognizant of how word choices affect people, relationships, and

especially children. Their notions are also corroborated by Hummer's (2000) positive

adoption terminology research. Hummer recommends avoiding the word real because it may

imply that adoptive relationships are artificial and temporary. Furthermore, he suggests

avoiding the word natural which can suggest that non-blood relationships are not as strong or

lasting as relationships by birth.

In conclusion, parents in this study shared many ideas similar to results documented from other adoption-related research--there is an ongoing need to promote the use of positive adoption terminology.

Dispel societal misperceptions about adoption. Most of the parents know of or have experienced others' misperceptions of adoption. Here are their answers to my question, "Do you think there are any misperceptions people have about adoption?"

> F7: That birth parents want to get rid of a kid… I sometimes think maybe that if kids struggle or are struggling, like in high school or when they get older, or if they get into trouble they (others) may say, "Ahh, they were adopted, there's something wrong with them." Or, "Maybe their family didn't try as hard with them as they would have it they weren't adopted ."

> M5: I think I have had some people not understand the fact that adoption is permanent and that when those parental rights are terminated, you are sort of, inserted as the legal parent. People don't realize that they change the birth certificates.

> M3: I think sometimes people think we don't bond with our child.

This father explained how people question their open adoption:

> F5: There are some people who have thought that -- older people thought that it was a mistake to have an open adoption. They question it. They criticize it. They question it or -- well, act surprise when we tell them that they still have contact and we exchange photos. And they think, well, is that safe, you know?...That underlines a lot of -- even the older generation or people who have never had anything to do with adoption….you know, these older people have made comments where -- people, you know, from church, very casual acquaintances, who will say -- they immediately question open adoption or they are confused by it, or they will just state an opinion that they think that this trend is wrong, this open adoption is being promoted by, quote, the state or whatever, by the bad social workers, is wrong, and …criticizing our situation….And I believe this a hundred percent, yet it needs to be open as much as possible. I mean, there has to be limits, but I'm glad that we did do an open adoption.

One mother shared a few misperceptions she has heard such as the fear birth parents will try to reclaim their child, it is difficult to successfully adopt children from the United States, and birth moms are taking the easy way out.

M6: …Because so much of the news portrays only those stories where someone is taken back (by birth parents)….So many people, I think, are surprised that we were able to adopt both our kids domestically. Like, we went to the pediatrician and the nurse said, "Like, domestically?" And I was like, "Yeah"…."How long did it take?" "Right about a year"….I don't think people are aware there's a lot of birth moms out there….I think a lot of people think it's the easy way out for them (birth moms).

These fathers wondered if society believes adopted children are "damaged."

F4: I think sometimes they think there's something wrong with that person because they have to be adopted.

F1: .…That these (adopted) children are damaged. I would guess that some people think they cannot be good children… that they would be a disruption to the family.

Furthermore, this father adds,

F1: I suppose some people feel they could not love another child like their own. Like, they could not love an adopted child like they could a biological child...

Unfortunately, two mothers had people ask them if they loved their adopted child.

M7: I've had a couple of real insensitive comments. I'd say that 99% of people have been wonderful. I had two different people that, after we'd had (NP7) after several months, and I don't really remember what the conversation was but this gal used to work with me. She turns to me and says, "Do you even love her?" And I just looked at her and said, "Are you joking?" And she pretty much back-peddled. And another gal said something to the effect, you know, she was expecting at the time, and she was talking about adoption and said, "I suppose someone could learn to love a baby that wasn't theirs." I don't get too wrapped up in that because for the most part people mean well.

M2: People have asked, "Do you feel the same about your kids?" (because one is biologically related and one is adopted).

The preceding misperceptions are also substantiated by other research results. Creedy (2001) noted many Americans believe it is harder to love an adopted child than a biological child. This misperception is also corroborated by an Evan B. Donaldson Foundation study (National Adoption Attitudes Survey, 2002) where one-fourth of those surveyed thought it

may be harder to love an adopted child as much as a child born to them. In fact, this next

mother, who does not have any biologically related children, has questioned this herself:

> M5: I know how much I love my children and I think how would that be different?
> Could I love them more if they grew inside of me because that's such an intimate
> thing? Then I think, 'How could anyone love children any more than I love mine?'

However, one father mentioned that the love for a child whom is adopted may be

even greater due to the circumstances and commitments:

> F5: …One thing I would say is that, don't worry about loving them because I can't
> imagine loving a biological child any greater. Perhaps I love them (adopted children)
> more because of the incredible extra commitment, so I would say they are not second
> class….They are not emotionally second class in your life and so don't worry about
> not loving them less…. And now, you know, for me it's kind of the end of the line
> genetically, but that doesn't mean that -- I mean, things that I've thought about, but
> that doesn't mean I love them any less….Yeah, you love them more or the same as
> biological children.

Lastly, this mother remembered comments made to them about parenting children

from other countries:

> M8: There are a lot of needy children here in the U.S. why did you have to leave the
> country?...And, how could two Irish, Norwegian, German people think they could
> possibly raise Asian children and do a good job with it?...I guess our answer has
> always been, "We didn't really know we were raising our biological children
> German-Norwegian, so I guess we'll muddle through poorly with our Asian
> children."….Again, with international adoptions, there's the misperception that
> heritage is huge in a family and how can parents who are not racially the same as
> their children raise their children to understand their heritage? In my opinion, maybe
> there's that misperception. Maybe I'm the one that has the misperception and
> maybe there is a part that we are missing out on.

She also thought some believe adoptive parents don't treat their adopted children the

same as their biologically related children. However, she stated "adoptive parents know that

is a fallacy."

> M8: And then I think there are those people who do think that you don't treat your
> adopted children the same as you treat a biological child. I would imagine that
> only adoptive parents know that is a fallacy. You can ground them just as easily.

Obviously, society has misperceptions about adoption since parents in this study cited examples they have experienced, such as (a) parents who adopt children do not love their children as much and treat them differently compared to those whose children are their biological offspring, (b) parents do not bond with their adopted children, (c) birth parents can easily reclaim their children after they have been adopted, (d) it is difficult to adopt a baby from the United States, (e) birth moms are "taking the easy way out" by choosing an adoption plan for their child, (f) parents are not able to adequately raise children who are from a different country or nationality, (g) there is something wrong with children who "have to be adopted," (h) adoption does not create a permanent family, (i) open adoption is not a good decision, and (j) there is no need to go outside of the United States to adopt a child. Thus, these parents wish to create a positive, realistic portrayal of adoption which is, according them, rewarding and completely fulfilling. They also want to dispel these "fallacies."

Process questions. Every parent said the most frequently adoption-related question asked of them was about the adoption process. Thus, these parents vehemently contend the entire process must be continually and accurately shared with the public to increase the number of individuals who choose adoption. The following statements elucidate what the majority of parents told me:

> F4: I'd like to make the whole process known to everyone and how wonderful it can be. There are a lot of success stories.

> F8: We've certainly had a lot of questions from different people as to the adoption process. There's a lot of people who don't understand the process, if there are costs involved, how do you go about finding the child, those types of questions.

M5: I've had people ask my why and being curious about our process. It's hard now, because closer to when we went through the process, we had more (questions). I think most of it was about process.

M1: I think people still don't understand how clean cut some of these adoptions are in our society, for the good, bad, or indifference. I think there's still a lot of unknowns for people about adoption.

Obviously people are interested in the adoption process since all 16 parents indicated this is the most prevalently asked question. Also, all parents in the current study would like more individuals to experience adoption since it is very rewarding. Thus, it's a feasible assumption that more people may choose adoption if they fully understood how it works.

Increase number of people who experience adoption. Almost all parents in this study wished more birthparents would make adoption plans for their children and more people would choose adoption as a way to add to their families. Again, they thought the best method for increasing the number of adoptions is through widespread education and personal recommendations.

F1: You can have all the PSA's (public service announcements) in the world but unless you actually talk to somebody who has actually done it and had a positive response to it…(you won't be as apt to choose adoption as an option to add to your family).

M2: I think it's a great experience! I personally think there should be more of it because I think there are a lot of bad choices made out there.

F2: I would definitely recommend it (adoption) either way, for a couple considering adoption or for a girl trying to make a choice either to keep or to (make an adoption plan for) a child.

Furthermore, the following two parents wished more Christians understood that God adopted all Christians to be His children because He certainly did not conceive them. According to them, Christians are His adopted children so why wouldn't more Christians adopt children in the same manner?

M1: I just wish more people would take the initiative and do it (choose adoption)…I see these verses in church about God adopting us, being adopted in the kingdom of faith, so, what, only God loves Jesus? So, I don't understand why a lot of Christians don't understand adoption because it so engrained in our faith that He's our Father but it's more through adoption, not conception.

F6: There's a lot of Biblical reference to our identity as being God's adopted (son or daughter) and that's good enough for anybody.

These next parents declared adoption should be more frequently presented as an option to birth parents.

M4: I almost feel like adoption isn't presented enough as an option to people. It's just such a wonderful thing. I don't think the word is out there enough….More teenage girls are thinking they can raise them on their own. And they seem to have more support from their parents to do that. The parents step in and say, "Okay, we'll help you raise this child." And, I don't know if that's always a good thing.

F4: I think that it (adoption) should be the first course of options placed in front of anybody who is in a situation like that….They should put a little more training of that into schools. They teach sex education, driver's education, they ought to teach a little bit about adoption….It's the best course of action if you don't know what to do. If you're a birthmother and you don't know what to do, that's the best course of action. There are families out there who are ready, willing, and able to take care of a child.

M5: I wish that more people, who find themselves unable, for whatever set of reason, to adequately care for a child about to be born or one that is, saw adoption as an option.

Furthermore, this mother personally advises young families to consider adoption as a way to add to their family.

M3: It's an awesome experience….Try it (adoption) you'll like it. I tell young people as much as I can, if you are able to do it (adopt), do it. Even if you are able to have biological children, try it. It's the highest high and the lowest low you'll ever experience.

Several parents were emotionally charged in their conversations about encouraging birth parents to choose adoption plans for their children. In fact, this emergent theme elicited

the development of the next sub-theme wherein many parents believed the entire welfare

system must change.

Change overall child welfare system—biological ties need not prevail. Most all

parents expressed the need for the U.S. legal system to change to operate in the best interests

of children. These parents adamantly exclaimed that biological ties to a child should not be

the primary factor in deciding who should parent a child. Rather, they believed children

should be placed in loving, nurturing, stables homes, regardless of biological ties to an adult.

First, to best understand parents' overall beliefs about adoption, I asked them to define

adoption. Here are their definitions:

> F1: You open up your home, your heart, your family, to somebody who is not biologically connected.

> M1: Legally bringing a child or a family member to your existing family.

> F2: Kind of a rescue. I would say it's giving a child a better life than they probably would have had.

> M2: I guess just adding to your family not through birth.

> F3: You're taking a child who is, you are giving a child an opportunity that they probably wouldn't have otherwise. An opportunity that their mothers were not able to give these boys, that we had the opportunity to give them.

> M3: It's the placement of a child in a family.

> F4: Including someone into your family unit who wasn't originally in your family unit.

> M4: Bringing a child into your family and raising that child as if he/she had been born to you. There's absolutely no difference. They become yours.

> F5: For me it was a lifelong commitment to the child no matter -- you know, what the child -- once you make that commitment, you make it both, of course, economically and financially; but most importantly -- you know for me it was a commitment to that child as someone who can't take care of themselves but has tremendous potential…. And so adoption is a commitment of love, lifelong commitment of love and

acceptance, of support, commitment to help the child be the best they can be which means, you know, taking them to Sunday school, helping them in school, do the best they can in school, make sure they get the right medical care.

M5: Clearly, it's a legal process and that's important because children need to know where they belong and to whom they belong. It has always been perfectly clear that you are ours. Beyond that, it's an emotional thing. An opening of your heart, your home, your wallet, your life, basically to a child, and in creating a family.

F6: Making someone who is not your biological offspring a member of your family.

M6: Somebody who was born to someone else and they were placed into another home.

F7: My definition would be a gift from God that He has given to us to take care of, raise, to love. They're not our own but they are our daughters. It's wonderful.

M7: Getting a baby from a set of birthparents that are unable to keep their baby and taking over those responsibilities and experiencing the joys.

F8: Bringing into a family someone that is not biologically, not yours. I guess it's about that simple!

M8: To legally state that we accept this child as ours regardless of biological connections.

Clearly, a salient theme among all their definitions emerged—adoption is adding to or creating a family regardless of biological ties. In fact, more than half of the parents vehemently contend the child welfare system needs to change. The following three mothers frustratingly declared that, in some cases, returning a child to his or her biological family can be detrimental to the child.

M5: Working with the human services departments is not easy. Working with the values and assumptions that a blood relationship/biological relationship is everything is very frustrating when you can see such deficits in what the child is either going to be returned to or come out of so I think it's very, very hard to do that. I think there is a bit of stigma about that…..That's where our system totally fails our children!... There are ways that smart, fair, objective people could sit down with some criteria. Is there going to be some grey? You bet, but the vast majority is going to fall here, clearly fine, or here, way not fine in this case, and then there's going to be some grey in the middle. But just think how we could streamline the system…. If we were going

to pick the highest priority (for educating people) it would be that biological ties need not prevail, always, and in fact, sometimes it's the most inappropriate thing to do…. The human services systems and that sort of view of children as property and not having rights of their own.

M3: I think the biggest frustration I hear is that we (the system) are going to keep these kids with their birth mom no matter what. The people that decide that don't see the day in and day out. I mean, teaching preschool, we've got kids who, holy buckets, mom is 18 with two kids and goes out drinking every night and there's no sense of family, manners, nothing is there. I don't understand why that's more important than giving them a loving home. That is my biggest, ooh, it just kills me. I'm not saying there aren't situations where it would be okay but there are so many times we go to the extreme to keep them with the (biological) moms. It breaks my heart because there are so many good people out there who that would be willing to do more….And seeing preschool kids, and I mean, I did in-home daycare and every two days they'd have to be hauled back to mom (children reunified with birth mom). She's (birth mom) sleeping off a high and a dresser fell on him, he dropped it on himself, while mom was sleeping off the high. But, by God he was going back to her. And it wasn't doing him any good. I saw the repercussions (of him going back to birth mom). I'd think, please, enough, it's hard on the child and it costs some repercussions down the road. We've had contact with him. He's struggled. It just gets me!

M1: I hope that more of our court systems eventually get to be more understanding of that whole….That perception that just because you give birth to someone that you are going to love him/her more than someone else. It just doesn't, and that seems to be the court systems' thing, "Oh no, we don't want to put them up for adoption because we'll give mom another chance. Dad's in prison but we'll give mom another chance. She just missed a few classes." What's really in the best interests of the children?

This father's children were part of the state's child welfare, reunification system. He

is certain the reunification process was detrimental to them as they were reunited with their

biological parents many times:

F5: Well, I would, just from my experience, I would say that, looking back, it (the goal of reunification with his kids' biological moms) was detrimental to them probably in some way, (C5) much more than (NP5), detrimental to their growth at the most key stage of their biological development, you know. Their brains are being wired and they need to be attached. So, you know, if you look at it from that standpoint, it's hard to believe that the legal rights of the parents can be…are valued so much more than the children's welfare.

He further shared his thoughts about how and why the U.S. legal system does not necessarily

work for the best interests of children. He explained that people who are educated in the field

of child development or social work know children should be placed quickly in supportive

environments. However, he said the laws do not support what is in the best interests of

children--they support political agendas:

> F5: I don't know if there's a better way to do it (take care of the children's best interests) because it's (reunification) like -- the worst way to do it….A lot of it is politically motivated, social politician, political….the family-oriented laws that are made to make those people feel good and maybe not necessarily in the best interest of the children, but they are in the best interest of those people's political beliefs. And then at the other end of the spectrum you have people that probably would -- I don't know if it's a legal -- it's not liberal-conservative thing, but it's family values kind of thing, where if they put the children in front of the parents' rights, it probably would be much quicker to relinquish them….People in the social work or people that are trained in the areas of child development and the people who come at it from either scientific or a -- just looking at -- you know, it takes a village to raise a child, that the children should be put in supportive environments as quickly as possible, where the other side says that who are we -- only God should make these decisions about where a child goes….There's a lot of laws that are our legislature makes that are more about enforcing someone's moral or religious agenda rather than actually trying to help people….Maybe there's more and more of them (laws to prevent children being taken away from their biological parents too soon) because you hear lots of stories -- or for a while there, anyway, in Florida or wherever, the kids are being taken -- stolen from their parents. And then there was moral outrage in the legislature. And then they strengthened the laws so even the social workers wouldn't take them away. I remember hearing a bunch of stories about that….

Later, he hypothesized that there may be more transnational than domestic adoptions in the

United States due to the certainty of getting a child when you adopt from another country

because they do not have reunification goals:

> F5:And so that would -- and because of all of these laws, I think for a while there it was probably legally easier to adopt from China or -- I think that's changed a bit -- Central America….It was more, you know, there wasn't any foster care in the middle….So probably international adoptions were easier. There are less babies born in the United States. The laws probably make it harder to adopt them.

He further explained that the United States' foster care system is the "easy way out" for

lawmakers in that they do not have to make difficult decisions about who should parent a

child. He voiced that the United States' process leaves many children in foster care without

permanent homes.

> F5: And also, you know, from my viewpoint, there has been sort of this re-emergence
> of people who have these very strong moral beliefs….Well, foster care is the easy
> way out for society. You have these over here that are over concerned about family
> rights, and other people may be social liberals, and they are all concerned about the
> welfare of the children. Whom you can't get together. So what do you get? A big
> bunch of kids in foster care where no one has to make a decision…. And then, of
> course, a lot of states have capped the number of social workers that can be hired, so
> you -- they can't do their jobs.

Likewise, one father questioned how the system could become more balanced while

protecting kids, not prioritizing family reunification:

> F1: Obviously, there are a lot of foster parents that have very strong opinions about
> the way our society handles this situation. The way the state handles it, because
> there are some real horror stories out there….It's a delicate balancing act on all
> this. You don't want the state so dictatorial on it that every parent has to worry about
> the state coming in and taking their children away from them. But, again, you want to
> protect the children…and of course the state's number one goal is family
> reunification…almost to the extent of the family. I guess there has to be some more
> lee way about the state having more control than what it does. But, once you start
> heading toward that, where do you stop?

These parents' beliefs are consistent with practitioners', policy makers', and

researchers' views and attempts to make the system function better. According to The

Adoption Handbook (Javier et al., 2007), the reality of "family reunification" had long-term,

negative impacts that are now being dealt with by the foster care system such as the

implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. Additionally, the authors

reveal there still remains much controversy as to what is in the "best interests" of children

and whose definition of "best interest" will become the standard. Thus, adults' beliefs in this

current study are congruent with a national controversy that is yet to be determined.

Finally, this quote represents all parents' statements:

M8: You know, that whole, blood is thicker than water? You know when people talk about blood relations being so important….**For us, it's not the blood that is important it's the value bond that we establish.**

More importantly, parents in this study maintained that creating a value bond is most

important when creating a family, not blood relationships. Furthermore, they adamantly

proclaimed that a permanent, stable, home with a loving, caring, mature, emotionally

responsible adult is in the best interests of children, not merely biological ties to an adult.

In addition, every child provided his or her definition of a parent and not one said a

parent is someone who gives birth to or has biological ties to a child:

C2: A parent is the person that raises you from childhood.

C3-B: Someone who cares for you and takes, gives you shelter….Gives you a friendly environment.

C3-A: Someone who cares about you and loves you and comforts their kids…. They're here to help us, let us learn, teach us and takes care of us.

C4: Parent is another name for mom or dad. (A mom is somebody who takes care of children and loves them.)

C5: My definition of a mom is…um, well, that they take care of kids, they take babies for a walk whenever they need to go for a walk, they change little baby's diapers, even if they stink….And they go to work.
Interviewer: What would be your definition of a dad?

C5: Nice, caring, takes good care of you, and he has a lot of good rules.
Interviewer: And, what's your definition of a parent?
C5: Everything I said earlier (definitions of mom and dad).

Interviewer: What is your definition of a parent?
C6: Tucking you in, making your bed, ummm, helping me get up in my bunkbed. Sometimes my mom cleans my room for me without being asked when it's seriously

messy….They wash your clothes.

Interviewer: what is your definition of a parent?
C7: Long pause…The same thing (as definition of mom-someone that takes care of you and they tell you that they love you).

C8: Adult that takes care of you and provides food, shelter and clothes….Someone to look up to I guess.

Clearly, all children in this study deem a parent to be someone who loves, takes care of, and is responsible for a child on a day-to-day basis. Their definitions are consistent with these parents' beliefs that biological ties "need not prevail" when deciding who should parent a child. These parents' thoughts are consistent with results reported by Hamilton, Cheng, and Powell (2007) —the absence of non-biological ties between parents and children may encourage non-biologically related parents to fulfill, and in many cases, exceed the expectations of being a parent. In their study, adoptive parents were better at allocating resources to young children when compared to those who were afforded the title of "parent" based on biological ties.

Also, results reported by Johnson (2002) concluded an adoptive family is a remarkable environment for a child healing from emotional and physical trauma and reversing developmental deficits. More importantly, Johnson reported that one group, normal infants placed within the first year of life, offers the best opportunity to explore whether loss of a birth family and growing up in an adoptive home has a negative effect on children's development. Thus, the current study offered opportunities to assess the long-term effects of adoption on children adopted before 18 months of age.

Also, most all parents stated the current U.S. child welfare system does not work in the best interests of children. Furthermore, as F5 indicated, fewer children may be in the

foster care system if children were relinquished and adopted at a younger age similar to other countries' systems. Unfortunately, the most current foster care data show more than 115,000 children are waiting to be adopted from the United States foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Additional quotes supporting the notion that the system needs to change are referenced to in the above sub-theme entitled, "increase number of people who experience adoption." While all parents thought society's view of adoption is becoming more favorable, they all declared it could and should be enhanced through increased media attention. They felt positive media attention could dispel adoption-related myths, facilitate more adoptions, change the overall child welfare system, and promote positive adoption terminology. Ultimately, all of these methods should have a positive impact on children who are adopted or are waiting to be adopted.

Also, these parents believed ongoing, adoption education is needed to achieve the aforementioned goals. Their thoughts are consistent with research results of psychologists' self-reports where 90% of those psychologists surveyed (*n*=210) indicated they needed more adoption-related education. Surprisingly, 86% of the psychologists reported having no adoption-related coursework during their undergraduate schooling and 65% reported no adoption-related teaching in graduate school. The authors of the study concluded that better knowledge of adoption-related issues may contribute to a better understanding of human development and counseling outcomes (Sass & Henderson, 2000). In conclusion, findings from the current study confirm that social scientists have much to learn about various family structures, adoption, media, education, and their advantages or disadvantages to children.

Theme 3: Communication

Communication is extremely important and occurs within all families. Thus, this theme is crucial in understanding children's conceptualizations and family's interactions concerning adoption. Readers will understand how parents converse with their children and how children talk about adoption through reading the rich, thick descriptions in the following sub-themes (a) early telling, (b) open and honest communications, (c) child-directed questions for additional answers, (d) consideration of children's cognitive abilities for disseminating information, (e) older females are more curious than their parents realize, (f) adoption day celebrations, and (g) parents accurate parental assessments what children know and will communicate.

One father used a metaphor to illustrate how adoption is discussed in their family; adoption is just a part of who you are, "like a birthmark." Here is his explanation:

> F1: We've said it's just who they are (adopted). It doesn't make them better, worse, it's just who they are. It's just like a birthmark or anything else that distinguishes you from somebody else.

Early telling. Every child in this study was told of their adoption at a very early age. Thus, each child, in his or her own way, verbalized they have known as far back as they can remember, that they were adopted. This concept is known by adoption scholars as "early telling" (Brodzinsky et al., 1981; Melina, 1998). One said she has known since she was five weeks old while others simply stated they have "known forever." Following are some of their answers to the question, "How old were you when you first found out you were adopted?"

> C7: I've known forever.

> C8: Basically as long as I can remember. I'm not exactly sure, it's been awhile.

> C2: Pretty young, I think. I don't really remember the exact age.

C5: I think about 4 or 5…weeks.

Their statements were corroborated by all parents who similarly indicated their children have "always known" they were adopted. This mother assumed everyone told their children from the beginning:

M2: It was just, always out there. I don't really recall that we ever just sat down and discussed it. I mean, don't they know right from the beginning?

These next comments are similar to what every parent said:

M4: We just always made it a part of our conversation. There was never a big moment when we said it. He's just always known.

M7: I guess we just always talked about it.

F7: Kind of from those first days, when she was able to understand the concept that she was adopted. We've never kept it a secret…. I think (C7) will say, "I've always known."

M6: If it comes up in conversation or if there are any questions, it's discussed, it is not a secret…I would say it's not a topic of everyday conversation, by any means. We try to have it out there so if a situation comes up…

Every family in this study subscribed to the early telling philosophy. Their decisions to tell their children as toddlers are consistent with other researchers' findings (Bernard, 1963; Brodzinsky et al., 1981, 1984; Mech, 1973; Melina 1989, 1998; Raynor, 1980; Stein and Hoopes, 1985). However, as indicated in other studies (Triseliotis, 1973; Wieder, 1977; Schechter, 1960; Peller, 1961) the current study did not address or reveal children feeling obsessed, abandoned, fears of being reclaimed which is certainly an issue that should be researched if parents are telling their young children they are adopted. Also, the next section illustrates how all sixteen parents revealed open and honest facts to his or her child(ren).

Open and honest communications. All parents reported they are open and honest with their children. This fact is illustrated throughout the next paragraphs where children explained what they know about their adoption, birth parents, and circumstances. For example, all children know their birth mother's proper name if it is known to their parents. However, proper names used in this paper were changed to maintain confidentiality. Some families disseminated facts via home-made adoption books which included pictures of birthparents while others read books about adoption or watched their adoption videos.

I asked each parent, "How do or did you explain adoption to (your child)?" and, "How is adoption discussed in your family?" so I could fully understand their parent-child communications about adoption. Here are examples from six parents indicating they are honest and open with their children:

F2: We never hid it. We always talked about it openly.

F4: It was never our plan to conceal it from him…

F1: We've always been honest with the children....So, if the children ever want to see it (more information) they can. I don't think it's fair for me, if they want it, to keep it from them. Because I can understand the curiosity that…some children,…some people want to know, are curious, and some people don't.

M1: I try to be as honest as I can. I try to be as honest with her as her questions are, she came home one day, I don't know if it was just through school discussions, she asked if she had more brothers and sisters that were not adopted. I had to be honest with her and say yes there were other siblings, but she hasn't asked anything beyond that.

M6: If it comes up in conversation or if there are any questions, it's discussed, it is not a secret….But (C6) knows, she knows all of it, I would say it's not a topic of everyday conversation, by any means.

F7: Very openly. We tell her very often not only that we love her but that I'm glad she's a Lang.

The following parents used published books and scrapbooks of their child's adoption

to further communicate about their personal circumstances:

> M6: We have the book *Tell Me (Again) about the Night I was Born.* So, we have that
> which is pretty relevant to her.

> M8: There is a series of books that are called *The Orphan Train*. We've kind of used
> those books as a means for that conversation in that their parents are all alive and it
> wasn't that they didn't want them, love them, or whatever, it was that they couldn't
> raise them and it took a great deal of love to realize that there was another world that
> would be better for them and it was possible that nobody would've survived if they
> hadn't changed those circumstances. That series of books were really helpful
> because it went really in depth with the grief that the mother had in that she had to
> give up her children in order for them to survive. When we've used those, there really
> haven't been any other questions.

> M5: We had photos of their biological family, photos of the adoption….We created
> a story for them. We would read them the story and they loved the story!...So, there's
> never been a point where you have to sit down and say, "I have something to tell
> you." They've always known….(C5) and (NP5) knows the name of their biological
> moms and every once in awhile we'll talk about Laura and Helen, if they come
> up....

> F5: He calls her (birth mom) Helen. That's something that we sort of tried to provide
> as, an example, leadership. And because of this book that we've read….We read it
> easily a hundred times. They still ask me to read it…. he (NP5) never says mother or
> even biological mother. But although -- I think they kind of forget. And I think they
> do call her (C5's biological mom)-- talk about her in like the third person, you know.

This child and another parent mentioned watching videos as a communication tool:

> C2: I guess my parents just told me. We had a videotape of it, so . . .

> M3: We have a video of him in Korea so we showed him that.

Furthermore, even though parents reported they talk openly and honestly to their

children, they all said adoption is not brought up a lot in their families.

> M8: I have no idea if anyone else talks about it (in our extended family) but we really
> don't, they are just our children.

> M4: Positively. It's not really mentioned a lot. It's not a big issue.

M2: I'd say it really is not (talked about) so much anymore.

These family's communication methods resemble the majority of researchers' findings--it is an intermittent process that occurs over time (Nickman et al., 2005) and that adults should be honest with children (Triseliotis, 1985).

Adoption Day celebrations. Despite the fact all parents said adoption is not discussed much in their families, five out of eight families discuss adoption at least once a year by celebrating adoption days with their children. Three families celebrate the day their children joined their family and the other two celebrate the day their adoptions were finalized. Also, one family celebrated "airplane day" as the day their children joined their family. However, they stopped their celebrations due to their busy schedules.

M6: With both of our kids we celebrate adoption day, the day that we brought them home.

This child knew they celebrated adoption day but was uncertain if the celebration was for the day she joined their family or the day her adoption was finalized:

Interviewer: Do you have an adoption story that you share with people?
C7: I just tell them I have an adoption day.
Interviewer: Is that the day that you joined your family or was that the day that your adoption was complete?
(pause)
M8: Joined. I don't think that we've ever really differentiated between
Interviewer: So, what do you do on adoption day?
C7: My mom will like buy me a DVD or something.

Her mother explained their adoption day celebrations in this way:

M7: We celebrate their adoption days. For me, that's the day they came home. I think that's been part of their lives and they're proud of it. You know, we'll go out to eat and I always give them a Precious Moments statue. I think it's kind of fun for them, they talk about it, people have just become aware over the years.

This family refers to their celebration as "family day." Here is this father's

explanation:

> F4: And, we try to celebrate what we call…"family day." They (both kids) are really close in placement days, (C4) and (NP4) are, so we kind of split the difference sometimes, and we'll spend the day with the kids and go do what they want to do. We kind of did it yesterday. We went to the…park as family day. We just hiked the trails and had some fun….When we talked to them about, we were going to have family day, we explained to them again, "(C4) you came to live with us on this day. (NP4) you came to live with us on this day. And, we picked this day for our family day."

The three families who do not celebrate adoption day also have at least one biological

child. One father said their family refrains from singling out either child because one is

adopted and one is biologically related. Here is his explanation:

> F2: Yeah, the situation (one biologically related and one adopted child)… that we are in is different than other adoptive families because that's the only thing they have is adopted children. Some of them celebrate the day of the adoption. To me, that's singling one child out over the other one-you're celebrating something special with this one that you can't do with the other one. That's something we try not to do is make one seem more special or better than the other one. You really have to watch what you say sometimes….On both sides of it, you try not to make the other one feel bad or the other one feel more special…

These families deem it important to be open, honest, and forthright with their children

concerning adoption-related conversations. These practices are consistent with many

practitioners' recommendations that parents be open and honest with their children. Also,

parents used various methods for communicating about their circumstances such as videos,

published books, and adoption day celebrations. However, I was not able to locate any other

research regarding these various mediums as means for stimulation ongoing

communications. Thus, parents in this study said they do not regularly discuss adoption in

their families but five out of eight discuss it at least once a year when they celebrate their

adoption dates. Lastly, these families only offer additional information as their children ask

more questions.

 Child-directed answers to questions. Statements from the next six parents illustrate

how they provide information as their children ask more questions:

> F4: It's pretty, it really doesn't get discussed a whole lot. If he ever has questions about anything he comes to us about questions. We haven't openly sat down, we figured as he gets questions he would come to us. He's really pretty good about, if he has questions, he'll come and ask…

> F8: Right or wrong, as the kids have questions, we answer them. But, at this point, they haven't had those dramatic questions that we've had to sit down and discuss at great detail….Openly. Again, as the subject or an issue arises, we discuss with them. We don't, like I said, we don't have a set time where we say, "Okay, let's sit down and talk about the fact that you were adopted or the adoption process."

> F3: We have both boys' history of the mother and kind of the circumstances behind it that we've kept. If they ever ask more that will be the time we let them read that information. If they don't ask, we'll just leave it with ourselves.

> F2: I don't think he's (C2) really asked specifics about how old she (birth mom) was or what the situation was or anything like that. We haven't really told him the specifics.….Yeah, he hasn't asked. That's not a real, something….(he's asked)

> M6: I try to leave the door open so if she (C6) has any questions to ask because I don't ever want her to feel like she's afraid to ask or doesn't know how to ask. I want to try to be preventive-you know, to ask.

> M3: We don't really push it. If they ask us, otherwise, we don't…but they know they can ask us. It's not like it's a closed subject… I think we've left them in control of those questions….I know I've had the discussion with (C3-B) that now you're old enough so if he ever has questions we have the answers. But, "We'll wait for you." He says, "Okay."…I want them to ask questions.

 Also, this mother interjected during her son's interview indicating they only talk

about adoption when one of the children brings up the topic:

> Interviewer: Under what circumstances ever do you talk about adoption?
> C3-B: Do you mean like how many times a week?
> Interviewer: Yeah.

C3-B: Every month or two months.
Interviewer: Is that at home or at school?
C3-B: Yeah, at home, usually.
Interviewer: So you guys talk about it as a family, or?
C3-B: Yeah,
M3: If they bring it up.

In summary, all parents reported using various methods to communicate about their circumstances and offering additional information when their children ask more questions. However, I was unable to find similar findings in a review of the literature. Finally, their reluctance to provide ongoing information may be related to their children's age or cognitive abilities.

Consideration of children's cognitive abilities when disseminating adoption-related information. Five out of eight families consider their children's age and cognitive abilities when revealing facts about their adoption. Following are comments supporting this notion:

F1: We have not specifically talked to him (C1) about that (facts surrounding adoption)… .Ah, probably for two reasons. Number one because of his age and number two, he really hasn't asked.…It's not the fact that we're trying to withhold it… It's just the fact he is, you know, and that uh, I'm not sure how much he'll understand of it….Of course, (C1) is too young. It will be very interesting to see as (C1) develops more cognitive skills. Number one, what questions he asks. Number two, how his perception is of it.

M4: He (C4) knows there is a birth brother. He knows his birth mother could not take care of him. Any other details, we've kind of kept back for a little bit later.

M7: …There are a few issues that we feel she (C7) needs to be more mature to discuss. So, when she gets older we'll discuss those things….We pretty much point blank tell people that we will tell the girls when they're 18 (years old)....You know you hear some stories about adoption that other people have experienced and I've thought, "I don't know if I'd share that…"

M8: I imagine that as they get into their later teens those questions might come about…

F4: We figure that when he (C4) gets a little older we'll explain more when he can understand a little better.

Additionally, I asked each parent how they explained adoption to their children. Three out of eight mothers told their young children they came from another person's tummy.

> M6: But, we've so far just explained that she grew in another woman's tummy and she couldn't take care of her and she picked us and now (C6's) here to live and she's our daughter and that's all she really knows or has been discussed with her at this point in time.

> M1: To (C1), it has always been the discussion that he was not conceived in my tummy. He came out of another lady's tummy. It's the same lady that (NP1) came out of.

This is what one boy told me and his mother during the interview:

> C4: My mommy wasn't adopted. I know why because you came out of your mother's stomach.

Also, here is a side-conversation NP4 had with her mother:

> NP4:… Beba in mommy's tummy.
> M4: No, you weren't in this mommy's tummy.

Finally, this is what NP4's father told me she knows:

> F4: (NP4) knows that she came from the tummy of a lady named Dolores. I think that's about all she knows at this point.

Obviously these children were told they came from another person's tummy and likewise, they tell others that fact. Thus, this may be an option for explaining adoption to a child younger than nine years of age. Additionally, these parents' consideration of their children's cognitive abilities corresponds with conclusions from Brodzinsky et al. (1981) that adequate "telling" must take into account each child's cognitive ability levels.

Older females were more curious than their parents realized. All parents indicated their ongoing parent-child communications mainly occur as their children ask more

questions. In fact, some mothers hoped this research would stimulate conversations and facilitate questions from their children. Interestingly, three older females revealed curiosities they had not discussed with their parents. In fact, one mother was surprised at her daughter's answer to my question, "Is there anything you don't like about being adopted?"

> C7: I have to wait seven more years before I get to see my real parents.

Here is my exchange with her mother regarding her answer:

> M7: (NP7) has always talked about finding her birth parents, but other than that, no. You know about what (C7) said about waiting until she was 18 to find them (birth parents), she has never, ever once brought that up as an issue. I had no idea. (NP7) has always wanted to know, from the get go, she always talked about it but (C7) has never said (anything about finding her birth parents until this interview).…We've talked about with (NP7), you know, this is when you can do it, blah, blah, blah,…so that was very interesting (that C7 told you she wanted to meet her birth parents) because she (C7) had never said that. Yeah, it was interesting because she (C7) had never said it!

Obviously, C7 had never voiced a desire to locate her birthparents before this interview, but her older sister has always talked about it. Therefore, her mom was surprised at her answers and indicated they would discuss these issues.

The next mother indicated adoption is not really discussed in their family. They used books to explain adoption to their children when they were much younger, but since then they have not discussed it. Likewise, their children have not asked many questions. Here is our discussion:

> Interviewer: How is adoption, in general, discussed in your immediate family? Over and above (these books), or is it discussed?
> M8: I honestly don't know that we do.…I have no idea if anyone else talks about it but we really don't, they are just our children.
> Interviewer: What words do you use to describe their biological family members, or do you?
> M8: We don't even talk about it.
> Interviewer: So, they don't ever address a biological mom or?

M8: I would imagine that if we ever do, I imagine that as they get into their later teens those questions might come about and I guess we would use 'biological.'
Interviewer: ....Do they ever ask questions then?
M8: No.

However, following is my conversation with her daughter who indicated she has

questions about her circumstances that she has not discussed with her parents:

Interviewer: Do you have any questions about your adoption?
C8: I'd personally like to know if my parents, birthparents, are still alive.…And, where exactly they lived and the exact age of when was I adopted, not just the general (age)….
Interviewer: Their exact age?
C8: Yeah, and I would also like to go to Korea. I'd like to see them. But, I'd probably have to learn the language.
Interviewer: Okay, when you do have questions, how do you get the answers?
C8: Um, well,
Interviewer: Do you ask your mom or your dad?
C8: I probably would ask my mom or my dad.
Interviewer: Do you ask them, or no?
C8: I used to but now there aren't very many questions to ask them so we've not talked about it. I've only brought it up once or twice but other than that it's pretty, you know.

Clearly, this young woman is curious about her adoption, has unanswered questions,

and is more inquisitive than she has communicated to her parents. For instance, she wants to

travel to her birth country to meet her birth parents but their family has never discussed her

birth parents. However, she believes she knows all the information her parents have so she

has not communicated these thoughts with them.

Lastly, here is C5's response to me indicating she has questions about her birth father:

C5: What did my birth dad look like?

However, her mother and father said she never asked about a biological father. I first

interviewed her mother who said this:

M5: But, (C5) has never asked about a biological father.

And, her father, whom I interviewed second, said:

F5: I can't ever remember her (C5) asking (about a biological, paternal figure)….So, at this point there's never been any authentic discussion about her biological parents.

Thus, according to M5 and F5, C5 had never asked about a biological, paternal figure. However, C5 told me she was curious about birth father. Therefore, it appears C5 had unanswered questions that arose for the first time during my interview with her.

In summary, three of the oldest females had questions they had not communicated to their parents. However, the oldest boy in this study said he does not have questions about his adoption. Here are our exchanges:

Interviewer: Do you have any questions about your adoption?
C2: No. I just go with it.
Interviewer: Is there anything you really like about being adopted?
C2: Not really. Like I don't think there is as much difference, so I don't know there's anything special about it.
Interviewer: Do you ever ask questions to your mom and dad about birth parents?
C2: Not really.

Finally, this mother said she hoped these interviews would instigate questions from her boys:

M3: My guess is this interview will cause some (questions).
Interviewer: I know (apologetically).
M3: But that's good. **I want them to ask questions.**

Hence, gender differences may exist in children's curiosities about their adoption circumstances. Also, this finding may be an opportunity for additional parent-child communications that are not pre-empted by children's questions.

In summary, parents are open, honest, and use various methods to communicate with their children about adoption. All parents told their children at very young ages they were adopted, but consider their children's cognitive abilities when disseminating additional

information. However, as these children get older, more information is only exchanged when children ask questions which, in some cases, leaves unanswered questions. Finally, this study replicated results found in previous research. However, one finding was not corroborated in this study—these children did not reveal obsessions or anxieties about their adoptions. Likewise, they did not articulate feelings of being confused, bad, inadequate, or abandoned such as those in results reported by Triseliotis (1973), Wieder (1977), Schechter (1960), and Peller (1961). However, it was difficult to ascertain if all children comprehended what they communicated or if they merely regurgitated words they had previously heard. Furthermore, I did not probe or follow-up with the children to better assess their understandings due to ethical considerations regarding the pre-set list of questions.

Theme 4: Children's Understanding

According to prior research findings (Brodzinsky et al.1981, 1984), adoption is a very complicated construct that is difficult to reduce to simple terms, especially when conveying information to children. Also, Brodzinsky et al. (1984) concluded that most preschool children did no fully comprehend adoption despite the fact they were labeled "adopted" by their parents. Thus, assessing children's understanding of adoption is extremely crucial in adoption research involving children.

First, all children in the present study were asked to define adoption to enable this researcher and readers to determine their communication abilities and possible understandings of this complex construct:

C1: Did not respond to any questions.

C2: Being raised by people that aren't your birth parents; you are born from different parents or they couldn't take care of you, so we took you in instead.

C3-A: When someone, your mom, loves you but she can't take care of you, she has to put you in a home that, in an adoption house, and people come in and look at you, and they try to adopt you, if they want to.

C3-B: Being taken in like, by, different parents.

C4: Adoption is when a birth mother can't take care of a child.

C5: You take your kid and you take it in your home and you tell the judge, "Hey, you know, I'd like to keep this kid at my home." And then you have to fill out lots of more papers and give them to the judge. Then another judge looks at the papers again and then well, you ask the judge what he thinks of it and then he says either yes or no you can adopt this person and if he says yes then you can go ahead and take the kids….Like a puppy, a cat, or a kid, or even an alligator or a zebra or a gecko.

C6: You were born from someone else, not your mom or your dad.

C7: Could not think of a definition.

C8: When a child's parent can't either take care of you or they died or something and another couple decides that they would like to have you as their child, a son or daughter, and then they go through the process and viola'.

Their definitions also served as a base for sub-themes that emerged among most all children's understandings and communications which include (a) children know what their parents tell them, (b) children believed birth mom was too young or could not care for a child; parents accurately assessed what their children know, (c) older children gained knowledge and understanding through social construction, (d) there is no difference between families who adopt children and those who have biologically related children, and (e) very few have ever asked about or talked about paternal figures but most all have talked about, asked about, or said they have questions about their birth mom.

Children know what their parents tell them. Almost every child reiterated comments their parents had told them regarding various aspects of adoption. In fact, many verbalized

they knew their answers based on what their parents told them. Following are a few of their

comments:

> Interviewer: How does a family go about adopting a child?
> C7: **My mom said** they got a call and then they go get the baby and then you go to
> court and tell them you want to take care of the baby.

> Interviewer: Why do you think an adoption plan was made for you?
> C8: I think that my birthparents couldn't take care of me and they wouldn't want me
> to go through that kind of life so they gave me up for adoption. And the rest is
> history.
> Interviewer: Now why do you think that, are these things you know, someone has told
> you or you just think?
> C8: Well, **I think my mom and dad now told me, maybe not.**

One boy referred directly to his mother a couple of times during the interview to

affirm his answers:

> Interviewer: Can you tell me what you know about your adoption?
> C3-B: That a lady brought me from Korea all the way to here. And, that's pretty
> much it. **There isn't much else you told me (to mom).**
> Interviewer: Do you know why an adoption plan was made for you?
> M3: She's asking you why your birth mom made an adoption plan for you.
> C3-B: Because she was really young, **wasn't she, when she had me? (asking mom
> who is present during interview)….My mom said** it was probably easier for my
> (birth) mom to put me in adoption.

Following are a couple of exchanges with another young boy. His answers revealed

his cognitive development—he is home-schooled so his answers are consistent with his

circumstances and most likely information his parents told him:

> Interviewer: How does a family go about adopting a child?
> C4: They take care of a child, they love them, they either send them to school or
> make them be home schooled.

> Interviewer: Let's suppose a child is going to be adopted. Where would that child
> come from?
> C4: Debbie (birth mom's proper name).

Also, this 9-year old continually repeated facts her parents had told her. Following are

some of our exchanges:

> Interviewer: Why do you think people adopt children?
> C5: To have children and to bring joy to their house.
> Interviewer: That's a good answer! How do you know that answer?
> C5: Well, because **my mother and dad told me**. **My mother and dad said** they
> wanted to have children of their own so they adopted (NP5) and then me to bring joy
> into their house.

> Interviewer: Do you remember how you found out (you were adopted)?
> C5: **My mom and my dad told me** that the social worker called them and said,
> "Would you like to adopt this kid named (C5)?" And they said, "Yes." And
> when I came to live with them for awhile I always cried…
> Interviewer: So, your parents said that a social worker called them and asked if they
> wanted a baby named (C5) to come live with them?
> C5: Exactly.
> Interviewer: Where do adopted babies come from?
> C5: Homeless shelters and social workers.

She was correct in that her birth mom had lived in a homeless shelter and social

workers helped with her adoption. Following are facts her dad shared:

> F5: And the social worker said it had long-term interaction with this family….And I
> think that the parents, (C5's) biological grandparents -- I think we were kind of told
> they had been homeless at times and drifted from home to home or lived in a van or
> lived either, perhaps, in a tent for a while.

This next interaction with her reveals she could have only obtained these answers

from her parents since she was less than 1 year of age when her adoption was finalized. Here

are our exchanges:

> Interviewer: How does someone become a parent?
> C5: They have to go to the judge.
> Interviewer: So to become a parent you have to go to a judge?
> C5: And, you have to fill out all these papers, and, um, when they're done the judge
> says, "Okay, you can be a parent now."
> Interviewer: Okay, so does everybody do that or are there other ways people become
> parents?
> C5: I think there are, just that I know of, just that I know of.

Here is another conversation with this 9-year old that exemplifies this sub-theme:

Interviewer: Can you tell me what you know about your adoption?
C5: Umm, well, I know that I was glad to have a family but I did cry a lot.
Interviewer: Okay, why did you cry a lot?
C5: Because my older mom didn't take care of me. Well, one day, I was in my older birth mom's house and I cried to get something but she never ever gave it to me….Except, I did cry a lot…. Because, same thing, because my birth mom didn't take care of me.

Not surprisingly, her father's comments were almost identical to her verbalizations:

F5: (C5's) (birth) mother did not respond to her crying and let her cry for long, long periods of time, an hour, hours in her crib and not pick her up and comfort her, not change her diapers at the right time and feed her appropriately. We were told repeatedly that somehow she had maybe left a bottle of milk out long enough that it was spoiled and that she tried to feed (C5) spoiled milk. Now, that bottle would have to be out a couple hours….

In fact, her dad said she mainly repeats information her parents have told her:

F5: The only time that she does ask is when you get the book out and it's right in front of her, but then she has a few details **that she just repeats over and over and over that we have told her.** And so, no, **I think beyond what real information we fed her, she just repeats it back.**

In summary, these narratives and this father's conclusions are consistent with research results reported by Brodzinsky et al. (1981)—children repeat what their parents tell them. However, as noted in the previous paragraphs, it was difficult to assess children's understandings of what they communicated because the researcher was not able to probe or ask further questions for clarifications due to ethical considerations.

Too young, could not care for them; parents accurately assess what their children know. Seven out of nine children said birth parents chose adoption because birth mom was too young or could not care for a child. Their remarks parallel findings from Brodzinsky et al. (1984) that children 4-13 years old focused primarily on negative reasons regarding why biological parents make adoption plans for their children.

Also, all parents accurately assessed what their children knew about their adoption circumstances. Here are children's comments about why birth parents choose adoption plans and what parents predicted their children would say:

> F1: (NP1) would probably say it's because when the biological parent or parents could no longer take care of the child. And that and somebody else has to come in and to raise the children…I'm not sure (C1) would understand the question.
> C1: No response
>
> F2: I don't think (C2's) really asked specifics about how old she was or what the situation was or anything like that. We haven't really told him the specifics.
> C2: Maybe they just couldn't take care of the child.
>
> M3: (C3-B) has never asked.
> C3-B: Because somebody has a baby but she can't take care of it.
>
> M3: (C3-A) would say that she was too young…We've also told them that being a single mom is not accepted and it would have hurt her more. And so it's part of their (culture)…
> C3-A: Because she was really young…
>
> F4: He (C4) knows there is a birth brother. He knows his birth mother could not take care of him. Any other details, we've kind of kept back for a little bit later.
> C4: Well, when I was born, my birth mother couldn't handle me. So she found somebody who could take care of me and love me. Adoption is when a birth mother can't take care of a child…
>
> M5: (C5) and (NP5) know the names of their biological moms and every once in awhile we'll talk about Laura (birth mom) and Helen (birth mom), if they come up....I just said, recently, because of the trauma, I have been more explicit about why… that Laura not only couldn't take care of (C5) but didn't take care of her and you weren't well-taken care of…
> F5: She would say that my (birth) mother -- you know, I can use a general (term) – my mother was too young to take care of me, or that my biological mother decided I would be better to stay with (M5) and (F5). Those would probably be the two things…. But what pictures she would have would be that she was a young teenage girl and she made a loving decision to give her up. And (NP5) would believe that his (birth) mother was unable to take care of him.
> C5: That they'll get better care and that they'll still be taken care of….Because my older mom didn't take care of me. Because when she had me, she was like 17 (years old).

Interviewer: What do you think (C6) would tell me as to why an adoption plan was made for her?

F6: I don't think she would have had an answer at all.

Interviewer: You're right!

C6 didn't have an answer.

M7: (C7) doesn't know much.…I guess we just always talked about it, and said that the birthparents weren't able to keep her and loved her enough to want to give her a good life.

F7: (We've) explained all the reason that her birth father and mother wanted her to have the best life for them in and figuring out they weren't probably able to provide that not and they provided that by giving them up for adoption. It wasn't that they didn't want them. They wanted a better life for them.

C7: They wanted me to be able to do everything and be a good person....Maybe they can't afford to have a child, or, maybe they're too young.

F8: I think she'd say that her (birth) mom and dad weren't able to take care of her, but I don't know.

C8: I think that my birthparents couldn't take care of me and they wouldn't want me to go through that kind of life so they gave me up for adoption.

Additional illustrations of how parents in this study accurately assessed what their

children would say include:

Interviewer: When I ask (C6) what she knows what do you think she'll say?

M6: She'll know who her birth mom is, she'll know she went to foster care, that she was there, and I don't know if she'll know that she was an infant, that she'll know exactly that she was 7 weeks old. I would say that's probably what she'll know.

Here's how her daughter answered these questions:

Interviewer: Okay, can you tell me what you know about your adoption?

C6: I don't know any of my, my birth mom is Lynn, and I don't know my something, my uh, my, um, adoption mom, or whatever her name is.

Interviewer: Oh, foster mom?

C6: Yeah.

Interviewer Is her name Lynn? Is that the one you said is named Lynn or is that your birth mom?

C6: Birth mom.

Interviewer: And you don't remember your foster mom's name?

C6: Uh huh.

Interviewer: What would (C6) say as to why an adoption plan was made for her?

M6: I suppose she knows that we, I, couldn't have we've said, have a baby.

This is what her daughter said:

Interviewer: And, why do you think people adopt children?
C6: 'Cause if they can't have babies.
Interviewer: Okay, anything else?
C6: No.

Her mother also thought she would know her adoption day:

M6: And she'll (C6) know her adoption date, the day she came home. I would hope she knows that because she gets a present every year on that day (laughing)…I think that's something that gets engrained in their minds pretty quickly.

Again, C6 responded with the same answer her mother predicted:

Interviewer: Do you celebrate an adoption day?
C6: May 13….May 13, last year was Mother's Day.

Not surprisingly, C6 answered the questions almost exactly the same as her mother predicted.

Children in this study mainly indicated the reason an adoption plan was made for them was related to their birth mother's age or inability to care for them. Also, parents accurately assessed what their children would communicate about their circumstances. These findings are also consistent with findings documented in the previous sub-theme—children reiterate what their parents tell them. Additional examples of parents accurately assessing what their children would say are documented throughout this paper but not duplicated in this sub-theme. Thus, children in this study replicated Brodzinsky et al.'s (1984) findings indicating children focus on less than favorable reasons as to why adoption plans are made for them. Both parents from the seventh family and their daughter communicated positive responses. However, their daughter also indicated that a birth mom may be too young which could be construed as an inability to care for a child.

Older children gain knowledge and understanding through social construction. Based

on these findings, all of the children in this study obtained adoption-related information from

their parents. However, comments from three of the older females demonstrated they also

gained knowledge or understanding through social construction. For example, the following

exchange illustrates an 11-year old using the word *real* when referencing her birth parents:

> Interviewer: Okay, and what do your friends know about being adopted?
> C7: That you don't belong to your real family.
> Interviewer: Who decided that you needed to be adopted, do you know?
> C7: My real parents?
> Interviewer: Is there anything you don't like about being adopted?
> C7: I have to wait 7 more years before I get to see my real parents.

Her mother was surprised at her use of the word *real* because their family never uses any

term other than birth parents. My exchange with her mother illustrates her bewilderment:

> Interviewer: I noticed that (C7) used the words *real parents*. Do you guys use that or
> is that what she (uses)?
> M7: You know, that was pretty interesting because I've always used birth
> parents….Yeah, I'm her real mom. So, that's why I was real surprised she said that.
> Interviewer: Do other people use that, I mean outside of your family?
> M7: No, not that I know of.
> Interviewer: You'll have to ask her.
> M7: I will be.

Likewise, this 13-year old girl used the word *real* when referring to her biological parents:

> Interviewer: …Is there anything you don't like about being adopted?
> C8: Umm, (pause) not really. I don't see what's not to like, except, I don't know who
> my *real* parents are, that question haunted me, but other than that, what's not to like?

However, her mother said they have never discussed C8's birth parents or biological parents

so they do not use any words to describe them. Additionally, her mother described her own

thoughts about people who use the term, *real* when referring to birth parents:

> Interviewer: Do you hear words like, "real parents," like in the media or?
> M8: Yeah.
> Interviewer: And what do you think about that?

(Pause)
M8: I kind of, am, jaded of what that means, I guess it's kind of that one second, I discount it, almost, and I think, "Do I really want to get into that conversation with myself because what is a real parent?" Personally, I think that's a person who doesn't have enough knowledge and their vocabulary is limited because that's where I leave it, their knowledge is limited and they don't exactly know what they're talking about.

Likewise, here is what C8's father said:

Interviewer: Do people ever use the words "real parents" with you or when they're asking questions, or in the media? If so, what do you think about those words?
F8: Well, if they've ever said it to me, I let it roll off. I consider it to be someone who doesn't know what other words to use.…They don't know how to differentiate. I've never taken that, from anybody, as being mean-spirited. Yeah, I've heard it, and of course, you hear it on the T.V. and in the media on a regular basis but again it's because they don't know what other term to use and they know that everyone will understand it.

It appears C8 learned this term through social acquisition since her parents indicated she did not learn it from them.

The last example of how older children learn through social construction is illustrated by my exchange with this 14-year old who talked about a current event that is flooding the media:

Interviewer: And, what are the reasons that you can think of, or all of the reasons that you can think of, for why an adoption plan is made for a child?
C2: Maybe they just couldn't take care of the child. Maybe they aren't allowed to take care of the child, like Britney Spears.

These older children's construction of knowledge is consistent with other research results. For instance, Brodzinsky et al. (1981) confirmed developmental trends in children's understanding of adoption and other abstract concepts. Clearly, children's narratives from the current study revealed cognitive, developmental advances in their answers congruent with their chronological ages. Additionally, many researchers (Chandler, 1977; Damon, 1977; Furth, 1980) have concluded children's acquisition of social knowledge, and thus adoption, is

constructed through qualitative changes in their understanding of adoption as their age increases. This was demonstrated in the current study by older children's statements which conveyed information they learned solely through their interactions with others such as using the word "real" when talking about their biological parents and references to parenting stories in the media.

No difference between families who adopt and those who have biologically related children. One salient theme emerged between parents and older children in this study-- adoption is "matter-of-fact" and they do not believe any differences exist between families who adopt children and those who have biologically related children. Interestingly, only children older than nine years of age articulated these sentiments:

> C2: Like, I don't think there is as much difference, so I don't know there's anything special about it (adoption).

> C3-B: Because it (adoption) really doesn't matter.

Following are the older children's answers to my question, "Do you think that families who have children who are adopted are different from families who don't have children who are adopted?"

> C7: It's (adoption) no different, you belong to your family and they love you the same…

> C8: You have parents, or a parent, I guess, you have children, and you hopefully have a happy life, that's all you need for a family. You don't need like (to say, you're adopted).…it's like saying, "Oh, well she has brown hair."

On the other hand, children younger than nine years of age provided more concrete answers:

> Interviewer: Do you think that families who think children who are adopted are different from other families?

C4: Yes….Because one family will have a child and the other family will not.

C6: No….Because they both have children…

Finally, the two 9-year olds in this study had comments similar to each other:

C5: No….Because they still have fun. They still go to school. They still do lots of other stuff.

C3-A: Yeah….They might have different traditions….They might use different silverware….(speak) different languages.

These responses are consistent with research findings wherein Brodzinsky et al. (1981) found cognitive developmental trends in children's understanding of adoption and other abstract concepts. Younger children in this study clearly exhibited cognitive developmental differences in their abilities to communicate about families when compared to children older than eleven years of age. Also, the two 9-year old children provided somewhat similar responses. Thus, developmental trends did exist in these children's understandings and abilities to communicate about adoption.

Additionally, these older children's statements revealed they do not believe there are differences between families who have adopted children and those who do not. This has not been cited in other literature.

In summary, children in this study verbalized almost exactly what their parents had told them. Furthermore, parents accurately assessed what their children knew and how they would respond while clear cognitive changes were evident when assessing differences in answers from children younger and older than nine years of age. Older children appeared to gain knowledge through social construction and were more curious than their parents realized. However, while many children asked about birth moms, few have ever questioned or talked about a biological, paternal figure. This finding will be further addressed in the next

theme since it overlaps with identity formation. Lastly, these children declared there are no differences between families who adopt children and those who do not adopt children but again, cognitive developmental differences were evident.

Theme 5: Identity

As previously indicated, children who are adopted are curious about their circumstances which is also related to their identity formations. Thus, the following sub-themes will illustrate (a) children's curiosities about their biological ties and heritage--few children have asked about paternal figures but most all have inquired about their birth mom, (b) parents' concerns for their children's identities, (c) parents' desires to facilitate feelings of stability, normalcy, and permanency, and (d) children's adoptive identities.

Children are curious. As noted in preceding paragraphs, children are curious, and in some cases they are more curious than their parents are aware of. Clearly, their curiosities elicit opportunities for increased parent-child communications and relate directly to their understandings and identities as adopted individuals. Furthermore, children's interest about their biological ties, birth parents, and heritage are also related to their identity formation so this theme will depict narratives to convey this important aspect of adoption.

Most parents and children indicated children have asked or still have questions regarding their circumstances. Here are their statements:

C1: has not asked any questions

M1: She (NP1) asked if she had more brothers and sisters that were not adopted. I had to be honest with her and say yes there were other siblings, but she hasn't asked anything beyond that. Kids are curious. If we don't know an answer, we say, "We don't know, (NP1)." And that type of information. For her, it's still somewhat of a mystery because we don't have any photos of her before the age of three. So that's been a little bit difficult for her from that standpoint. (NP1) does ask more questions.

She'll say, "Tell me again the story about…."And she likes to re-live it. It's probably two to three times per year that that will come up.

M2: As he (C2) got older… he just had that interest in meeting her (birth mom), more than anything.

Interviewer: Do you ever ask questions to your mom and dad about birth parents?
C2: Not really.
Interviewer: Have you ever? That you can remember?
C2: A few years ago, I guess, I think I asked who my birth parents were, but they didn't really know, so . . .
Interviewer: ….So did you ask in particular about your birth parents, or your birth mom, or birth father, or all of them?
C2: Birth parents in general.

F2: Once in awhile he'd (C2) ask questions….He always thought that his birth mother, he felt sad for her, because thought that she was maybe looking for him. At that time he really knew he couldn't look for her until he was 18 because that's what we've told him. He was certain that she was sad….It's probably been 5, 6, or 7 years since he's brought that up so….No, he never has (asked about a birth father)….Which is probably a good thing because we have absolutely no information on the (birth) father.

F3: He (C3-A) went from a (birth) mom, to a foster mom, to another foster mom, to us. I think that's where he questions it....(C3-A) never has questions….They've never really asked about who their (birth) dad was.

C3-B: When I was born, who was my birthparents, and that stuff.

C3-A: Yeah, what she's (birth mom) like.

M3: He'll (C3-B) ask about where he was born.

M4: Every once in awhile he'll (C4) ask something about his birth mom.

C4: What is Debbie (birth mom) like?...I will never get to see my brother (half brother who was not adopted with him).

F4: Since the birth father in both cases are really unknowns, we don't really refer to it a whole lot. And, he (C4) has never asked about that, yet, either.

M5: (NP5) has (asked about a paternal figure) and we don't know much about him. He was not married to his (NP5) biological mom so we have said what we know but it's not a lot. And, he seems to be fine (with that). But, (C5) has never asked about a biological father.

F5: Neither of them had really had (asked about their biological families)-- outside of curiosity so far, they have had almost no desire to talk about them or see them.

Interviewer: …Does (NP5) ask about a biological father or has he ever?
F5: Very, very rarely. I think sometimes it's been more because we volunteered the information….Well, mostly been, like, "Well, was my dad tall?"…. And (NP5) has asked about his (birth) father to me anyway, mostly based upon concern about how tall he will be. But he's never asked, "Why did my father not want me? Why didn't I ever stay with my father?" He has never asked me any of that. He has never asked what he looks like…. I can't ever remember her (C5) asking. I know that we have shared -- we have some pictures of him (C5's biological father). We have pictures of (NP5's) biological father… .I never remember her (C5) asking (about a paternal figure) and she doesn't even ask about her biological mother. It's usually because -- well, she asked -- it's almost like (NP5) brings it up….The only time that she does ask is when you get the book out and it's right in front of her… at this point there's never been any authentic discussion about her biological parents. Whereas with (NP5), we're just beginning to have that discussion, but he's quiet. He is intellectually verbalizing his thoughts. It's quite obvious he's listening and thinking and pondering it the best he can.

Interviewer: Do you have any questions about your adoption?
C5: What did my birth dad look like?

M6: (C6) wanted to know if she could see her, or was talking about her birthmother. If she saw her, where she could see her (birth mother)…upon further questioning, because she had never seen her, she meant her foster mom. I don't think she really has asked any questions. Nothing, you know, she asks about her foster mom, I think sometimes she gets them confused, about the difference, I don't think she personalizes a lot of it, the adoption stuff, yet. I write letters and we send pictures to birth mom and she's aware of that….So, she's aware there's somebody but I don't think that she really personalizes that it's a real person….That was one question she did ask me was did she have a different name when she was born so we told her what her birth name was and we explained that…

C6: said she did not have any questions

F6: did not have a response

C7: I have to wait seven more years before I get to see my real parents.

M8: Neither child has ever asked about a paternal or maternal figure.

F8: There haven't been a lot of them. I think (NP8) has asked about his (birth) dad because every once in awhile he'll talk about that he is big for an Asian boy, as far as

his height and his girth, a very solid young man, so he, I think, at one time, asked about his (birth) dad. They ask about Korea, not about their families, just about Korea, once in awhile, again, their questions themselves haven't been real in depth.

C8: I'd personally like to know if my parents, birthparents, are still alive....Where exactly they lived and the exact age (they were) when was I adopted…. I don't know who my real parents are, that question haunted me….I would also like to go to Korea I'd like to see them….Oh, if I wasn't adopted, my parents really were able to take care of me or whatever, I would always think of living in a hut, with scraps of clothes in a small village. It's a lot different!...I think about that a lot, actually. Not a lot, but, like I said, it haunts me….When I go out with friends and family too, with my friends, I'm different, like in appearance, you know, like, my brother (NP8)…

Based on these narratives, children are curious about their heritage, genetics, and mainly their birth moms. Some mentioned questions about their birth parents in general. However, only five out of fifteen children (C5, C7, NP5, NP1, NP8) from these families have ever specifically asked about a biological, paternal figure—according to both M5 and F5, C5 expressed curiosity for the first time in this study; According to F8, NP8 talked about a birth father once; both M5 and F5 reported NP5 asked recently for the first time; the other two children asked regarding their birth fathers' height and body type. All of their questions about paternal figures appear to be related to their origins or genetic transmissions of features or characteristics. On the other hand, their questions about birth parents or a birth mom are varied. I was unable to find similar findings or research regarding this particular finding.

Stability, permanency, and "normalcy" while preserving origin. A few parents, mainly those who adopted children from foster care, indicated the need for children to feel stability and permanency in their environments. Many parents also said they promote normalcy while respecting their children's heritage to aid in their identity formations.

This mother clearly stated their concern for their children's sense of permanency and heritage:

M5: Children need to know where they belong and to whom they belong… it has always been perfectly clear that you are ours.…We had photos of their biological family, photos of the adoption…we created a story for them…

This father talked about the book he created to showcase their biological family

members and the creation of their new family:

F5: I wrote a book that was their story. So I took all of the pictures that we had (of their biological family members) and scanned them in and created -- created a story of, well, you know…(NP5) was born when this happened and (C5) was born when this happened, and their (birth) parents thought it was best for them to be adopted by us.

Additionally, these next two parents made sure their children knew this was their

"forever" family:

M1: Those ten months we had them before they were adopted they were just as much adopted, at that point. They were younger and they needed to feel that sense, right away.

F1: So I guess we basically had to explain to her that when the adoption happened that she and (NP1) were going to be part of our family forever and ever.

This father explained how they preserve their boys' cultural heritage and that their

biologically related son feels left out because he is not Korean:

F3: They know, it's kind of been a little joke about where they're from. We always had a map in the boys' room, a quilted map, with the whole world on it. The boys always knew they were from Korea. That's one thing that (biologically related child) says, "I'm not from Korea that's not fair." So, those are some of the things he's dealt with….

Additionally, one boy and his mom shared a situation about another child trying to

make him and his brother upset by asking if they are Chinese.

C3-B: He (this other child) was like, "Are you Chinese? Are you Chinese? Are you Chinese?" And we're like, "No!" And then he was like, "What are you, what are you, what are you?" And then we were like, "Korean." And he said, "You look like Chinese."
M3: Troy (biologically related child and their brother) started laughing because that kid thought you were Chinese.

> C3-B: And the kid got really mad.
> M3: Instead of getting upset that he asked they just laughed. The other kid didn't know what to think because he thought he was insulting them. The boys thought he was the one, because they caught him off guard.

Both parents proudly shared the above example of their boys' strong senses of identity and pride in their heritage. Their parents also summarized their family's situation by saying:

> M3: Every night we'd go find Korea. I think it's important they know that, and we'd kind of show them the area (on the map they had hanging in their rooms).

> F3: That just talks about how you bring the kids up….It's not an issue, yes, they know they're Korean, but it's never, it's not an issue of topic.

This father explained they made an adoption story book to respect their son's heritage while helping him feel as "normal" as every other child:

> F4: We wanted him to understand it, know it, make it as normal as any other child's… .This is his story… you never want them to feel neglected, left out, or anything. Just so that he's at peace and understands where he came from.

Finally, this mother shared how her daughter does not want to be viewed any differently from children who are not adopted:

> M6: I guess that we don't see our children any different than our children; I think most children don't want to be seen any different than just being a normal child.

Parents in this study deemed it important for their adopted children to know about their origins while helping them feel no differently from children who are not adopted, especially feeling a sense of permanency in their families. However, some of these children considered being adopted a part of their identity. Their adoptive identities will be illustrated through narratives in the next sub-theme.

Adoptive identity. Some children view themselves as adopted and make it a part of their identities. This concept, adoptive identity, is the sense of who one is as an adopted person (Grotevant et al., 2000). Additionally, identity refers to the set of characteristics by

which an individual identifies as oneself as well as by which individuals are recognized by

others within a particular social and historical context. Also, it is one's subjective sense of

self and his or her continuity over time (Grotevant, 1997). Thus, this section will illustrate

examples of these children's adoptive identities. Interestingly, some children attempt to seek

attention because they are adopted:

> M1: (NP1) is very free about it….She shares a lot of information. Almost too much at times, about it. That's kind of one of her pitfalls. You don't want it to sound like she is bragging about it because people don't like that either. That can come back to haunt you as well….I do think it (being adopted) is a part of her(NP1) identity. And, I also see her, sometimes using it as setting her apart or to elevate attention toward herself, sometimes. Of, well, "I'm adopted." And kids will…it's a conversation starter for her, which I found interesting at kindergarten, first, second, and third grade levels. Very open and wants to talk about it with people-that she's adopted. Yeah, I think, sometimes I think you can tell she's doing it a little to get attention. "Yes, (NP1), you're adopted. Okay. You don't have to make this a big deal with kids on the playground." It lasts for a short time usually, and then it fades, like most things with kids…

> F3: (C3-A) has made comments about his foster mom and, "I wish I was back in Korea." I think part of that is part of the middle child syndrome. Where, they need attention, he's not the oldest and he's not the youngest, so, that's how he gets attention. I think he questions it more because it might have been the process he went through. He was at a couple… (C3-A) was with two different (foster) parents or situations and not knowing the psychological effects, but I do think that was part of it. He went from a (birth) mom, to a foster mom, to another foster mom, to us. I think that's where he questions it. It's going to be interesting, to be honest with you, to see what (C3-A) says. I think (C3-A) struggles with that--he's still trying to fit in. It will be very interesting to hear.

> Additionally, C4 told another child he was adopted the very first time he met him.

This narrative illustrates how he views adoption as part of his identity:

> Interviewer: Do you have friends who know you are adopted?
> C4: I think just Duane knows that.
> Interviewer: Has Duane ever asked you any questions about adoption?
> C4: No, but I told him.
> Interviewer: What did you tell him?

C4: That adoption is when somebody adopts a child, but they can't take care of a child, so they need somebody else who can take care of them and show them love until they're all grown up.
Interviewer: Did Duane understand that?
C4: Shakes head.
Interviewer: Yeah? And did he ask you questions about that?
C4: A few, but I didn't know the answer.
Interviewer: Do you remember what his questions were?
C4: No, because it was the first time we ever met.

Similarly, upon meeting neighbors for the first time, this child told them she was

adopted. Her mother described the situation:

M6: We have some new neighbors. A lot of people of comment to me that (C6) looks a lot like I do. So, right, within the first minute they said, "Wow! She looks a lot like you." I just said, "Thank you." Then, about two minutes later she (C6) told them (she was adopted)…

On the other hand, C6 said she does not want to be "pointed out" for being adopted.

However, she tells people she is adopted and brings items from her birth mom for show-and-

tell at school. Here are her exclamations:

C6: I don't like to be pointed out (for being adopted)….all my teachers know, that I was adopted, so it's like pointed out, I'm always pointed out if I'm in a different class room. Like we were talking about different people having different babies, like reproducers, and my teacher's like, "(C6's) reproduced, she was not born by her mom."…I don't like to be pointed out….Whenever I was pointed out, like everyone would look at me, and then like, (someone) and Graacie would come up, "Like, hey, hey, you were adopted?"

This is what her mother thinks about her comments:

M6: I would say she (C6) doesn't want to see herself as adopted. She wants to see herself a normal kid because you know she said on the way home we were talking about the questions and she talked about feeling weird or something because she's adopted like she just wanted to be a normal kid because she doesn't know other people who are adopted and no one else in her class is adopted then I said you just tell her how you feel that you're embarrassed that you're adopted. I didn't tell her what to say but if people come up to her she'll get like really disgusted with them (when they broach the issue of adoption) but she's taken things for show-and-tell from her birth mom, so it's not like she's really trying to hide it. And then if she doesn't know how to answer their questions or, I know even her teacher

said something, I didn't talk to her about it but it kind of….At the beginning of the school year she pointed out that (C6) was adopted and that maybe (C6) looks more like her (birth) mom or something….The only thing she did say on the way home today is that she feels a little bit weird because she's the only one (whom she knows who's adopted)….and you know, I tried to explain to her I try to always say, "You know Anne and Chuck are adopted." And, I'm glad we're friends with them and I really want to keep those connections. We used to go to a, this parenting class….(for) everybody that'd been touched by adoption. It was such a good network but it's dissolved and that's too bad I think that it's good for them (children who are adopted) to see that there are other children who are (adopted), they're normal, everyday kids just like she is.…you don't have to look different, feel different, you don't have to all that ….

More importantly, her mother explained they do not want the fact that she is adopted

to be the way she is defined:

M6: We are not keeping it (adoption) a secret **but I don't want it to be the way she is defined!**

Obviously, this mother strives to promote her daughter's positive identity while helping her

feel like a "normal child." Furthermore, her daughter's comments are consistent with

research findings that adoptees' perceptions of others' reactions, such as social differences,

can create a sense of social discrimination or stigma (Grotevant et al., 2000; March, 1995). It

appears this young girl does not want to be singled out or "pointed out" for being adopted

because it makes her feel different. However, she tells people she is adopted which is also

consistent with her adoptive identity formation (Grotevant et al.). Certainly, much remains to

be understood about the formation of "adoptive identity" and the role social contexts play in

its formation. Additionally, this eight-year-old's comments about not wanting to be pointed

out are congruent with Link's (2001) assertions that researchers and society should attempt to

reduce stigmas about adoption because they lead to attitudes and beliefs resulting in labeling,

stereotyping, setting apart, devaluing and discriminating. In fact, this young girl's teacher's

comments caused her to feel "different." Lastly, according to Brodzinsky (1993), an

insistence of differences may be problematic for an adoptee's sense of identity.

These next mothers also shared their older children's adoptive identity comments:

M7: She (NP7) gets a little more angst about being adopted. You know, sometimes I'll get, "My life is tough because I'm adopted." Every once in awhile. Oh well, that's part of being sixteen.

M8: There have been times where there's the difficulty of dealing with adoption issues like, "Do you love me as much because I'm not biologically yours?" There's sometimes the embarrassment because we are the different race than our adopted children. While our daughter has never acknowledged that, our son (NP8) sometimes does because he has really related to his Korean heritage more. We're kind of an embarrassment when his friends say, "Gosh, your mom and dad are white, did you know that?" And at the same time, we've just raised them as if they're our own children, we've never made that be an issue.

Many children in this study appear to have adoptive identities and are curious about

their birth families, but mainly birth moms. Additionally, parents respect and preserve

their children's origins while acknowledging their needs to feel "normal" and in a stable,

permanent environment. In summary, findings from this study are similar to others'

reports that much remains to be understood about adoptive identity. In fact, there is only

one measure designed to assess adoptive identity and there are many confounding

variables that affect this concept such as gender, age, heritage, family structure, and so

forth (Grotevant et al., 2000; Javier et al., 2007).

Thus, these results have significant implications for future counseling, education, and

intervention strategies concerning individuals involved in the adoption process. The

findings suggest that while societal views of adoption are becoming more positive,

additional public education campaigns may encourage more individuals to choose

adoption and to use positive adoption language to reduce adoption stigmatizations or

misperceptions. Certainly, it is important for professionals, society, families, and the

media to better understand the complexities of this societal construct since more than

125,000 adoptions occur each year in the United States (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human

Services, 2004) which translates to at least 1.7 million adopted children (U.S. Census

Bureau, 2006). Limitations, policy implications and other implications, future research,

and conclusions will be discussed next.

CHAPTER 5

Limitations, Policy Implications and Other Implications, Future Research, and Conclusions

Limitations

These results should be considered in light of several limitations. For instance, this study was comprised of a small sample of minor participants--it did not contain much variation in children's age groups and data saturation was not achieved with the minor participants. Also, all parents were Caucasian, all participants were from the Midwest and all but one family was comprised of two married parents. Additionally, all children in this study were adopted before eighteen months of age and no kin adoptions were included in this study. Additionally, only parents and children who experienced adoption before eighteen months of age were interviewed. Certainly, other results may have emerged with a larger or more diverse sample. Thus, these factors may reduce this study's transferability to different family structures with varying ethnicities, ages, and so forth. All data were obtained from self-reports which may have resulted in mainly positive portrayals of adoption-related experiences or self-report biases, especially since all participants were apprised that the researcher was adopted and had an adopted daughter. Finally, due to ethical obligations, the researcher was unable to probe deeper with the children's interviews to determine what they fully understood versus what they had been told; such probing could have proven extremely helpful.

Policy Implications and Other Implications

This study examined adults' and children's experiences with adoption and children's understandings of adoption. Their narratives provided considerable rich, thick descriptions of the lived experiences of being a child who was adopted before eighteen months of age and

being a parent of an adopted child. This analysis explored societal beliefs about adoption; children's development of their adoptive identity; how, when, and what each family's "telling process" entailed; children's understandings of adoption based on cognitive developmental changes; and the use of language and reframing to explain adoption-- to possibly derive theories related to these adoption issues. The findings from this research will have enormous value to practitioners, policymakers, educators, parents, children, researchers, and society as a whole.

Findings from the current study suggest that nation-wide public education campaigns ought to be implemented to encourage more individuals to choose adoption, use positive adoption language, and view adoption more favorably. Thus, policymakers should facilitate aggressive, ongoing national adoption campaigns and training initiatives to ensure the welfare of children and families. These policies must support positive portrayals of adoption and positive adoption terminology, educate the public about the adoption process, and facilitate training for pregnancy counselors and health care physicians to present adoption as an option to women with unplanned pregnancies. These responsive approaches will most likely increase the number of adoptions and reduce the stigmatizations of adoption that can and do affect our nation's children, families, and society.

Additionally, policymakers and child advocates should continually evaluate the long-term effects of reunifying children with biological family members and compare the outcomes to infants who are adopted. Assessments of family reunification goals and the foster care system will serve as tests for the strict biological entitlement to be parents and should reveal what is in the best interests of children. National, mutual consent adoption databases to facilitate the exchange of medical information between biological parents and

their adopted children must also be implemented to alleviate the lack of medical information for adopted children. Finally, academic institutions should offer ample adoption education and training to adequately prepare counselors, educators, and those who work with adoptive families for the complexities associated with it.

These findings may also help researchers, educators, and counselors determine how to prepare adoptive families to effectively deal with society's beliefs, stigmatizations, and misperceptions of adoption. The results can be used to educate policymakers, the media, and others about adoption to promote positive portrayals of adoption and its process to ultimately increase the number of individuals who experience this rewarding phenomenon. Parents, educators, researchers, counselors, and society can use this information to reframe their communications and interactions with adopted children to help them achieve positive identity formations within society and their families. Adoption agencies and those who work with adoptive families may be able to them in communicating with their adopted children in developmentally and cognitively appropriate ways that enable them to understand this complex construct. Also, everyone associated with families should be educated about and encouraged to use positive adoption language. Researchers, educators, and agencies may be able to develop more comprehensive and ongoing training materials for all members of the adoption triad. Finally, researchers should continually explore all facets of adoption.

Future Research

Future research opportunities exist to explore the multifaceted construct of adoption. In fact, findings from this study have elucidated research that should be conducted such as (a) determining the impact of adopted individuals' gender differences related to their experiences, beliefs, understandings, identities, curiosities, and so forth, (b) exploring issues

that may affect children whose adoptive parents divorced, (c) identifying children's actual comprehensions of adoption, (d) determining age and cognitive differences between children's understandings, (e) discovering methods for stimulating ongoing parent-child communications, (f) understanding the relevance or non-relevance of biological, paternal figures, (g) examining and changing the overall child welfare system, (h) measuring societal effects of adoption education in the media, (i) designing a quantitative measure to explore the generalizability from these findings to other families such as faith-based responses, lack of questions about biological father figures, "horror stories," positive experiences, adoption day celebrations, beliefs and experiences of misperceptions, stigmatizations, no differences between families without adopted children, process questions, child-directed questions, and so forth, (j) probing deeper with children to gain a more accurate assessment of what they really comprehend about adoption, (k) evaluating how, when, and to what magnitude of ongoing communications is needed within families, (l) determining why differences exist between children's adoptive identities and how this affects them and changes throughout their lives, (m) discovering alternative methods for disseminating adoption information to children across their lifespan, (n) determining how word choices affect children's understandings and identities, (o) examining how the words, "birth mother," "foster mother," and "mother" are understood by children and if it is confusing for them to understand these different "mothers," (p) teaching society about redefining "family," (q) discovering clearly-defined developmental trends in children's understanding of adoption to aid in the dissemination of additional information, (r) exploring the effects of how and what is told to children about why an adoption plan was made for them, and (s) making longitudinal studies

to determine changes. Lastly, this researcher's longitudinal study with the same children may glean some useful findings for future implications, research, and education.

Conclusions

This research makes important contributions to the understanding of lives of parents who adopt children and children who are adopted before 18 months of age. The study replicated results from other researchers and elicited new results. However, consistent with many practitioners' findings, much remains to be understood about the complexities of adoption; but with the increasing number of people who are adopting children, it is imperative that future researchers continue and build upon the current findings. According to Pertman (2002), the United States is experiencing an adoption revolution. Thus, continual research must be conducted to best serve all parties involved in this revolution.

In conclusion, a majority of parents expressed their appreciation for this research as a way for others to learn about adoption. Here are a few of their comments:

> <u>M7</u>: Every child is so different it's been an adventure with both girls because they are so different. Just having someone like you come and talk with (C7), it has been eye-opening, I've enjoyed that. And, it will give us something to talk about.

> <u>M1</u>: I think research like this helps people become more understanding of the whole process and how beautiful the process is. Wherever it ends up going, every professor who reads it, and everybody else… I think we will all learn something and have a new Christian view on it which we don't fully have. I think we've been so lost in the foreign adoptions here in the last 10 years or so in our country which is fine, I'm all for it, I'm glad Aadele is here from Guatemala. Those kids needed to get out of there-just pictures of her orphanage, the conditions down there, they needed that, but, there are so many kids here that need love and attention and the kind hearts.

> <u>F6</u>: I would just encourage it (adoption). It's a wonderful way to grow your family. There's a need (for more adoptions and research).

It is obvious that all children and parents in this study contend adoption is just one of many different ways to create a family and is a "rewarding" phenomenon they hope others will

experience. Clearly, participants from this study and current literature support the need for additional, ongoing, empirical research to adequately address adoption. Thus, the researcher will use these findings to develop future research to better understand this phenomenon, implement policy implications, measure this study's generalizability to other families, and educate the public about adoption.

APPENDIX A
Parents' Consent for Minors' Interview Questions

PARTICIPANT STATEMENT

I have read (or had read to me) this consent form. I have discussed with Diana Baltimore, principal investigator, the information in this consent form. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions were answered to my satisfaction. I have read all potential interview questions to be asked of my child and agree to allow my child to participate in this study with these changes
_____.

APPENDIX B
Questions for Minor Participants

Introduction: Now, do you understand that a lot of these questions will involve questions about adoption? I will provide brief information about me (and the fact I am adopted) and my daughter (also adopted) to help them feel comfortable.

Questions will not necessarily be asked in this order. They will be used at appropriate times depending on how the conversation flows.

1. Tell me about your family-(the names of family members, their ages and relationship to you)
2. How old were you when you were adopted?
3. How old were you when you first found out you were adopted?
4. Tell me what you know about your adoption?
5. Can you share your adoption story with me?
6. What is a parent?
7. How does someone become a parent?
8. What does "adopted" mean to you? OR, Can you explain adoption to me?
9. How does a family go about adopting a child?
10. Let's suppose a child is being adopted. Where would he or she come from?
11. Why do you think people adopt children?
12. What are the reasons an adoption plan is made for a child?
13. List all reasons you can think of as to why someone chooses adoption for his or her child?
14. Who made an adoption plan for you? (Note word choices and follow-up to be sure I understand who they are talking about)
15. Why do you think an adoption plan was made for you?
16. Why do you think this?
17. Do you think adoptive families are different from other families? Why or why not?
18. Do people or your friends ever ask you questions about being adopted?
19. What questions do they ask you?
20. What do you say to them (for each question they verbalize)?
21. What do you think about this question?
22. Why do you think they ask questions?
23. What do your friends know or think about adoption? How do you know this?
24. Do you have any questions about your adoption? What are they?
25. Why is that a question for you?
26. Is there anything you really like about being adopted? Why?
27. Is there anything you don't like about being adopted? Why?
28. Do you know other people who are adopted? Who? Names-ages-relationships/how do you know them?
29. Tell me what you know about _____'s adoption (for each person).
30. Why do you think an adoption plan was made for _____ (each person they listed)?

30. Do you think you will ever adopt a child? Why?
31. Are there any other things you would like to share with me that we haven't talked about?

FOR MINORS OVER 11 YEARS OF AGE:
31. If you did adopt a child, how would you explain adoption to your child?
32. What would you tell your child about WHY an adoption plan was made for him/her?
33. Would you ever choose an adoption plan for your child? Why?
34. Do you think being adopted has influenced your life in any way? If so, please explain.
35. Are there any other things you would like to share with me that we haven't talked about?

APPENDIX C
Demographic Forms

Minor Demographic Questionnaire

Please read and respond to each question as it relates to your child who will be interviewed. The information you provide will be used to develop a general overview of the individuals interviewed for this research project. If you do not understand a question, please ask the researcher for clarification. Thank you!

Your Child's Name:_____

Your Child's Address:_____

_____

Phone #: _____ E-mail address: _____

Child's Age (in years): _____ Gender: _____ Ethnic background: _____

What is the highest level of education your child has completed?_____

Please list all individuals in your immediate family and their relationship to your child:

Name   Age   Relationship
                                              (biological, step, foster, adopted, other-please explain)

How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status (lower, middle, upper-middle,

upper):_____

Please list any thoughts, questions, experiences, or opinions your child has regarding

adoption or others' experiences with adoption:

What does your child believe society thinks about adoption?

Thank you very much for participating in this research project. A copy of your

transcribed interview will be e-mailed or mailed to you for your overview to ensure that

my interpretation of your responses is what you meant to convey to me.

Adult Demographic Questionnaire

Please read and respond to each question. The information you provide will be used to develop a general overview of the individuals interviewed for this research project. If you do not understand a question, please ask the researcher for clarification. Thank you!

Your Name: _____

Your Address: _____

_____

Phone #: _____ E-mail address: _____

Your Age (in years): _____ Gender: _____ Ethnic background: _____

What is the highest level of education you have completed? _____

Please list all individuals in your immediate family and their relationship to you:

Name   Age   Relationship
                                            (biological, step, foster, adopted, other-please explain)

How would you describe your family's social socioeconomic status (lower, middle, upper-middle, upper):_____

Please list any thoughts, questions, experiences, or opinions you have regarding adoption or others' experiences with adoption:

What do you believe society thinks about adoption?

Thank you very much for participating in this research project. A copy of your transcribed interview will be e-mailed or mailed to you for your overview to ensure that my interpretation of your responses is what you meant to convey to me.

APPENDIX D

IRB Form

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research Assurances
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
515 294-4566
FAX 515 294-4267

DATE: 11 September 2007

TO: Diana Baltimore
522 S. Delaware St., Boone, IA 50036

CC: Dr. Sedahlia Jasper Crase
4380 Palmer Suite 2361

FROM: Jan Canny, IRB Administrator
Office of Research Assurances

IRB ID: 07-352

Approval Date: 11 September 2007
Date for Continuing Review: 10 September 2008 _____

The Chair of the Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University has reviewed and approved the protocol entitled: "Understanding the concept of adoption: A qualitative analysis with adoptees and their parents." The protocol has been assigned the following ID Number: **07-352.** Please refer to this number in all correspondence regarding the protocol.

Your study has been approved from **11 September 2007** to **10 September 2008.** The **continuing review date** for this study is no later than **10 September 2008.** Federal regulations require continuing review of ongoing projects. Please submit the form with sufficient time (i.e. three to four weeks) for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study, prior to the continuing review date.

Failure to complete and submit the continuing review form will result in expiration of IRB approval on the continuing review date and the file will be administratively closed. All research related activities involving the participants **must stop** on the continuing review date, until approval can be re-established, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard to research participants. As a courtesy to you, we will send a reminder of the approaching review prior to this date.

Please remember that any **changes in the protocol or consent form** may not be implemented without prior IRB review and approval, using the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form. Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office of Research Assurances website or available by calling (515) 294-4566, www.compliance.iastate.edu.

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) **all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office of Research Assurances, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

APPENDIX E
Consent and Assent Forms

Consents, Assents, and Adults' Grand Tour Questions

Consent for Minor Children to Participate in Research

INTRODUCTION

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study regarding, "Understanding the concept of adoption: A qualitative analysis with adoptees and their parents." Please understand that all participants are free to stop at any point in time during the discussion; participants are free to refrain from answering any/all questions; and, you will review and approve of all interview questions before they are asked of your child.

Please read the following information carefully. You should ask Diana Baltimore to explain any sections that are unclear to you and to answer any questions that you have. You should not sign this form unless you understand what is written in this form and have had your questions answered to your satisfaction. You are encouraged to discuss the information with family and friends. If, after deciding to allow your child to participate in this study, you find you have more questions, you should contact Diana Baltimore at dianab1@iastate.edu or at 515-432-2732.

If you decide to allow your child to participate in this study, please keep a copy of this consent form for your records as it contains important information, including names and telephone numbers that you may wish to have in the future.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purposes of this study include:

1. To examine adoptees' and their parents' attitudes, opinions, and definitions of adoption.
2. To determine differences in attitudes and opinions of adoption among adoptees and their parents'.
3. To gain a greater understanding of societal beliefs surrounding the concept of adoption.
4. To possibly discover implications for communicating with, raising, and counseling adoptees and their families.
5. To understand the cognitive levels of understanding for the concept of adoption across the lifespan.

PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED

The principal investigator, Diana Baltimore, will use a snowball method for selecting individuals, ages 5 years through 14 years of age, who were adopted before the age of 18

months, and their parents. The principal investigator will interview each child and parent(s) for 30-60 minutes, one time only. If you agree to be re-contacted for this principal investigator's follow-up research, you may be interviewed more than one time over the course of six years. No more than 15 male minors and 15 female minors and their parents will be interviewed. All interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes by the principal investigator and at least one faculty member. All data will be kept confidential and all participants will be assigned numbers to ensure confidentiality. Each participant or his/her parent will receive a copy of the transcribed interview to ensure accuracy of interpretations and transcription. A demographic questionnaire and assent/consent forms will be completed at the onset of each interview.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION

There should not be any risks to any participant in this study.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

No direct benefits are reasonably expected for any person participating in this study. Possible societal benefits may include implications for counseling, education, and intervention concerning the concept of adoption. The results of the study may be published.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

Any individual may, at any time, withdraw from this study; all participants are free to refrain from answering any/all questions; and, a parent or guardian will review and approve of all interview questions before they are asked of any minor child.

COSTS

There are no costs to any participant in this study.

STIPEND/REMUNERATION

There will not be any payment or reimbursement for participating in this study.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to be sure that your child's participation in this study, and all records about your child's participation, will remain confidential. However, confidentiality cannot be absolutely guaranteed because some funding and regulatory agencies may have the right to review the records from this study to be sure that certain rules are followed correctly.

CONTACT NUMBERS

<u>For problems or questions regarding the conduct of the study</u>: Diana Baltimore, dianab1@iastate.edu or 515-432-2732 or Dr. Sedahlia Jasper Crase at sedahlia@iastate.edu or at 515-294-6135.

PARTICIPANT STATEMENT

I have read (or had read to me) this consent form. I have discussed with Diana Baltimore, principal investigator, the information in this consent form. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions were answered to my satisfaction. I have read all potential interview questions to be asked of my child and agree to allow my child to participate in this study with these changes_____.

I understand that my child may refuse to participate in this study at any time and may refrain from answering any/or all questions. I also understand that if, for any reason, my child wishes to stop participating, he/she will be free to do so, and this will have no effect on his/her future. I have been given a copy of this consent form for my records.

I do/do not give consent to be contacted for follow-up research concerning this same topic conducted by this principal investigator, Diana Baltimore. _____
                                                        Initials

_____   _____

Date   Participant

I have fully explained to _____ the purpose, procedures and risks that are

involved in the above-described study. I have answered all questions to the best of my

ability.

_____   _____

Date   Principal Investigator

Children's Assent Form

I am asking if you are willing to talk with me to discuss what you know about families and adoption. I need to talk to a few kids your age to find out what you and they know so I can use it in a study I am doing. I know your mom/dad so I asked (him/her) if you would be willing to tell me answers to some of my questions.

If you agree to tell me what you know about families and adoption, I will ask you some questions and you can answer them, tell me you don't know, or tell me you do not want to answer that question. No answer is right or wrong. I just want your opinions and thoughts.

You can ask any questions that you have about this study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can ask me later or have your parent contact me.

Signing here means that you have read this paper or you had it read to you and that you are willing to answer some of my questions. If you don't want to be in this study, don't sign this. Remember, being in this study is up to you, and no one will be mad at you if you don't sign this or even if you change your mind later.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____

Adult Consent to Participate in Research

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study regarding "Understanding the concept of adoption: A qualitative analysis with adoptees and their parents."

Please read the following information carefully. You should ask Diana Baltimore to explain any sections that are unclear to you and to answer any questions that you have. You should not sign this form unless you understand what is written in this form and have had your questions answered to your satisfaction. You are encouraged to discuss the information with family and friends. If, after deciding to participate in this study, you find you have more questions, you should contact Diana Baltimore at dianab1@iastate.edu or at 515-432-2732.

If you decide to participate in this study, please keep a copy of this consent form for your records as it contains important information, including names and telephone numbers that you may wish to have in the future.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purposes of this study include:
1. To examine adoptees' and their parents' attitudes, opinions, and definitions of adoption.
2. To determine differences in attitudes and opinions of adoption among adoptees and their parents.
3. To gain a greater understanding of societal beliefs surrounding the concept of adoption.
4. To possibly discover implications for communicating with, raising, and counseling adoptees and their families.
5. To understand the cognitive levels of understanding for the concept of adoption across the lifespan.

PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED

The principal investigator, Diana Baltimore, will use a snowball method for selecting individuals, ages 5 years through 14 years of age, who were adopted before the age of 18 months, and their parents. The principal investigator will interview each child and parent(s) for 30-60 minutes, one time only. If you agree to be re-contacted for this principal investigator's follow-up research, you may be interviewed more than one time over the course of six years. No more than 15 male minors and 15 female minors and their parents will be interviewed. All interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes by the principal investigator and at least one faculty member. All data will be kept confidential and all participants will be assigned numbers to ensure confidentiality. Each participant or his/her parent will receive a copy of the transcribed interview to ensure accuracy of interpretations and transcription. A demographic questionnaire and assent/consent forms will be completed at the onset of each interview.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION

There should not be any risks to any participant in this study.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

No direct benefits are reasonably expected for any person participating in this study. Possible societal benefits may include implications for counseling, education, and intervention concerning the concept of adoption. The general results of the study may be published but data would be presented as group data and not individual data.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

Any individual may, at any time, withdraw from this study and all participants are free to refrain from answering any/all questions.

COSTS

There are no costs to any participant in this study.

STIPEND/REMUNERATION

There will not be any payment or reimbursement for participating in this study.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to be sure that your participation in this study, and all records about your participation, will remain confidential. However, confidentiality cannot be absolutely guaranteed because some funding and regulatory agencies may have the right to review the records from this study to be sure that certain rules are followed correctly.

CONTACT NUMBERS

1. For problems or questions regarding the conduct of the study: Diana Baltimore, dianab1@iastate.edu or 515-432-2732 or Dr. Sedahlia Jasper Crase at sedahlia@iastate.edu or at 515-294-6135.

PARTICIPANT STATEMENT

I have read (or had read to me) this consent form. I have discussed with Diana Baltimore, principal investigator, the information in this consent form. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I may refuse to participate in this study at any time. I agree to participate in this study. I also understand that if, for any reason, I wish to stop participating, I will be free to do so, and this will have no effect on my future. I have been given a copy of this consent form for my records.

_____   _____
Date   Participant

I do/do not give consent to be contacted for follow-up research concerning this same topic conducted by this principal investigator, Diana Baltimore. _____
                                                                                  Initials

I have fully explained to _____ the purpose, procedures and risks that are involved in the above-described study. I have answered all questions to the best of my ability.

_____   _____

Date   Principal Investigator

Adults' Grand Tour Questions

First, I want to thank you for taking time to talk with me. As we discussed, the purpose of this interview is to explore various individuals' perceptions, ideas, thoughts, and experiences with adoption. My interest in this topic stems from the fact that I am adopted and so are my daughter and my biological father. So, I am very interested in understanding how people outside my family experience adoption.

Before we begin, I want to remind you that any information you share with me will be kept completely confidential and identifying information will <u>not</u> be used or disclosed.

If there are any questions you have for me, please feel free to ask them at any time. Also, if there's a question you do not wish to respond to, please feel comfortable in telling me so.

I want you to be as comfortable as possible. As we discussed, a copy of the transcribed interview will be given to you so you can make any changes you would like to your answers and return them to me.

Do you have any questions? Okay, if it's okay with you, we will begin.

SILENCE IS OKAY!!!

1. Tell me about your family-(the names of family members, their ages and relationship to you).

2. What is your definition of "adoption"/ mother/ parent/ father?

3. How do/did you explain adoption to _____?

4. How is adoption discussed in your family? (how do you tell people, or do you?)

What words do you use to define individuals-biological……
What **_word_** does _____ use to describe biological …

5. Can you share with me what _____ knows about his/her adoption story?

6. What does _____ know about why an adoption plan was made for him?

7. Do people ever ask you questions about being a parent who has adopted a child?
Can you share some of those questions with me?
How do you answer that…….?
Why do you think they asked that?

8. Has anyone ever asked you a question or made a comment about adoption that made you think he or she does not fully understand "adoption"? For instance, my grandmother told me that she knows where "people like that come from…people who don't have a father".

PLEASE EXPLAIN. Why do you think they asked that? How did you respond?

Has _____ ever experienced any questions about being adopted? How does he/she respond?

Has _____ ever experienced any positive or negative situations about being adopted? Please explain.

9. Can you share with me particular experiences you have encountered, positive or negative, that are solely related to being an adoptive parent?

Has anyone ever asked you about the circumstances of the adoption plan that was made for your child? If so, what do you tell them? What words do they use to ask about it?

Do they use:
given up
real parents
natural parents

What do you think about the word choices?

10. Do you think adoptive families are different from other families? Why or why not?

11. What do you think society, in general, thinks about adoption? Why do you think that?

12. Do you think there are any misperceptions people have about "adoption", in general? If so, what? How could this be changed?

13. What would you like others to know about adoption?

PROBES:
Can you tell me more about that?
Can you clarify what you mean by?
Tell me what you think about….

14. Are there any other things you would like to share with me that we haven't talked about?

15. Do you know other individuals who may be interested in participating in this study?

APPENDIX F
Emergent Questions

Emergent themes: a majority of the children had never asked about or referred to a biological, paternal figure; one mother said she thought parents who adopt children are more appreciative of their children; every parent indicated the need to educate others and/or correct others' words choices when discussing adoption-related issues and terminology; the majority of fathers indicated their perceived reason for the increase in transnational adoptions is related to domestic adoption horror stories that depict birth parents reclaiming their biological children.

Therefore, the following are examples of new questions developed for the purposes of triangulation and member checks:

1. Has your child ever had questions about a biological, paternal figure? Have you asked questions about a biological figure?
2. Do you think parents who have adopted children are sometimes more appreciative of their children compared to some other parents? A follow-up to the question, "Do you think there are any differences between families who have children who are adopted and those who do not."
3. Have you ever corrected others' word choices?
4. Why do you think the number of transnational adoptions is higher than domestic adoptions?
5. Have you ever experienced situations where you either did or would have liked to correct others' word choices related to adoption? If so, tell me about that."

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