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ADULT ADOPTEE COPING AND RESOLUTION OF ADOPTION RELATED AMBIGUOUS LOSSES

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Family Science in the
College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment at the University of Kentucky

By
Katherine Hahn Jury

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Ronald Werner-Wilson

Lexington, Kentucky

2015

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

ADULT ADOPTEE COPING AND RESOLUTION OF ADOPTION RELATED AMBIGUOUS LOSSES

Ambiguous loss refers to a loss that is unknown or undefined, making it difficult to cope with and resolve. Using a life course perspective that asserts that humans have agency to affect change in their own lives, this study focuses on an adoptee's perceived ability to enact change in the situation surrounding the ambiguous loss that they may have experienced as a result of their adoption. Life course perspective also incorporates the concept of life trajectories, which explain how an early life experience can affect an individual over the course of his or her life. This study describes the essence of coping with adoption-related ambiguous loss from the viewpoint of adult adoptees.

KEYWORDS: Adoption, Ambiguous Losses, Resolution of Losses

Katherine Hahn Jury

May 8, 2015

ADULT ADOPTEE COPING AND RESOLUTION OF ADOPTION RELATED AMBIGUOUS LOSSES

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Adoptees often experience losses as a result of the circumstances surrounding their adoption. Loss of birth parents, biological family, culture, and physical likeness are commonly experienced. Also common to the adoptees are ambiguous losses that are often less easily identified and addressed. Learning coping strategies and making conscious efforts to resolve those losses are necessary in order for adoptees to avoid detrimental effects such as increased risk for depression, decreased self-esteem, and attachment disorders.

Pauline Boss (1999) developed the *theory of ambiguous loss* to explain a particular type of loss that occurs without closure or understanding, which may leave a person searching for answers and may complicate and delay the process of grieving. Betz and Thorngren (2006) also described ambiguous loss as a loss of the unknown. For example, some adoptees consider being raised outside of the culture of their origin a loss, and being raised by individuals who do not share more similar genes or physical characteristics (Kaufman, 2013). Most adopted adults are able to cope with adoption-related loss that they experience during childhood and adolescence. However, there is also research that suggests that many adopted persons struggle with grief, loss, identity, and self-esteem (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2002).

Due to the increased awareness in recent years about the losses adoptees may experience, increased resources have been made available to help address the needs specific to coping with adoption related loss and grief, such as support groups, counselors who specialize in adoption-related concerns, and increased education for adoptive parents on ways they can support their adopted child through the coping

process (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Those resources might be enhanced by information generated by a qualitative investigation of ambiguous loss associated with adoption.

Literature Review

Ambiguous Loss

The *theory of ambiguous loss* was developed by Pauline Boss (1999) in order to explain a particular type of loss that occurs without closure or understanding, that may leave a person searching for answers, complicate and delay the process of grieving, and often results in unresolved grief. The theory was first developed to describe the feelings of family members who were serving in combat, or were missing in action. Participants' grief was ambiguous because family members were not sure if they would see them again. The family lives in a state of not knowing the status of their loved one, and therefore their own status as a result (Boss, 1999). Betz and Thorngren (2006) described ambiguous loss as a loss of the unknown. A child or spouse of a person who suffers from dementia may experience ambiguous loss as their loved one's personality and memory slowly slips away, while their body remains functional. This type of ambiguous loss is sometimes described as chronic, as it can occur over a period of time, and may last indefinitely as they continue to experience the gradual loss of the person they love (Betz & Thorngren, 2006).

Fineran (2012) illustrated how individuals involved in the adoption process may also experience ambiguous loss. Birth parents may feel the loss of the child they surrendered to be raised by another family. They may grieve the loss of the child, and the thoughts of what "might have been" had the child remained in their care. Adoptees may also experience ambiguous loss. They may lose what they think could have been their life, had they not been adopted. Other losses may include being raised outside of

the culture of their origin, or being raised by individuals that do not share more similar genes or physical characteristics (Kaufman, 2013). Secondary losses can also contribute to the ambiguity surrounding adoption in some cases, such as biological siblings and grandchildren, and knowledge of their biological family's medical records. For others, having the knowledge of their birth family only adds to their feelings of loss and abandonment, for reasons they may not know or be able to understand (Fineran, 2012).

When asked why separating ambiguous loss from ordinary loss was significant, Boss (2007) pointed to the differences in effects on the individual, explaining that ambiguous losses freeze the grief process and prevents closure, and paralyze functioning. By identifying the loss as ambiguous, a person may then begin to accept what they do not know about the situation, and move forward from there in the grieving process. Boss (2007, p. 44) also described the clinical implications for interacting with clients who have experienced ambiguous losses, "Ambiguous loss is a relational disorder and not an individual pathology. With ambiguous loss, the problem comes from the outside context and not from your psyche. It follows, then, that family- and community-based interventions—as opposed to individual therapy—may be less resisted and thus more effective. It should come as no surprise that when loved ones disappear, the remaining family members yearn to stay together. They resist therapy if it means more separation. Separating family members for individual therapy may only add to the trauma of ambiguous loss."

Coping with Ambiguous Loss

The first step to coping with ambiguous loss is recognizing that a loss occurred, and making a conscious decision to address the loss. Pauline Boss (1999) described the common path of individuals who experience ambiguous loss where they are not able to reach full closure regarding their losses; rather their challenge is to learn to live with the ambiguity by coping and resolving as many components of their ambiguity as possible. The way that individuals may cope with their loss are many, and often are associated with the different situations that surround their loss. Boss and Carnes (2012) describe some of the most common means of coping with ambiguous loss; including deriving meaning from their losses, re-defining their personal identity to include those losses, normalizing their experience, and determining to use positive thinking as a way to overcome the adversities they have faced. Boss and Carnes (2012) gave these stages of coping specific names: finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachment, and discovering hope.

This seems relevant to people who are adopted because, although most adopted adults are able to cope with adoption-related loss they experience during childhood and adolescence, some adopted persons struggle with issues such as grief, loss, identity development, and self-esteem (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Powell and Afifi (2005, p.129-151) address ambiguous loss specifically in the context of adoption: "The ambiguity of having lost something that is essentially 'still there' (i.e., biological parent) often produces stress and anxiety due to the difficulty of articulating and coping

with unresolved grief. Understanding the links between uncertainty and ambiguous loss may help those involved in adoption cope with unresolved grief."

Some individuals are better able to cope with loss and grief in the context of a support group, where they are able to talk about their feelings with others who have had a similar experience (Grotevant & Fravel, 1999). The structure of a support group may provide an outlet for adoptees to express held-in feelings related to their adopted status that they feel others outside of the adoption community may not be able to understand. Additionally, the camaraderie of a group may help individuals seek their status of adopted as more normative. Others may need more help than they find from family and friends or through a support group. In these instances, adoptees may seek professional counseling (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

For many adoptees, learning about the experiences of others through first-person accounts or through adoption research can be a helpful coping mechanism. There are also a wide array of books, articles, videos, and websites that focus on adoption-related topics and can aid adoptees in understanding the normalcy of their experience as well as valuable insight on effective coping strategies and methods to resolve adoption related ambiguous losses (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Grotevant & Fravel, 1999).

Resolution of Ambiguous Loss

Powell and Afifi (2005) examined how some adoptees attempt to resolve ambiguity surrounding their adoption. They discovered that one way an adoptee seeks to resolve some of the ambiguity is by seeking information about or contact with their

birth families, with the desire to establish or reestablish a relationship, help further develop their own identity, or to obtain genetic or medical information. These instances can both provide closure for adoptees as well as raise additional questions that lead to more ambiguity. For adoptees that seek out contact and are refused, additional grief related to rejection and failure to establish a connection may be experienced.

Other adoptees choose to resolve their losses by accepting their adopted situation for what it is, rather than seeking additional information, and choosing to be content in their adopted family. According to Silverstein and Roszia (1999) some adoptees are able to resolve their loss in this way. In their seven core issues of adoption, they describe "mastery/control" of adoption related grief as within the individual's own locus of control. Adoptees must believe that they are in control of their internal resolution of their adoption related loss in order to exact changes in their life.

Loss and Adversity in Adoption

Grotevant and Fravel (1999) describe some of the adversities that adoptees may experience from an early age in their collection of adoption narratives. The narratives suggest that some adoptees have no recollection of their birth families, while others have vivid memories of life prior to adoption. Whether they have memory of the events that preceded their adoption or not, the life circumstances that necessitated placement in the care of adults other that their biological parents affect adoptees for the entirety of their lives.

An adopted person's experience with grief and loss can contribute to circumstances the adopted person may need to overcome, such as feelings of loss and

grief, questions about self-identity, and a lack of information about their background. The increased occurrence of open adoptions in the last two decades has changed the scope of common issues faced by adopted persons. Adopted persons in the past, when closed adoptions were more common, may have dealt with issues of secrecy and large gaps in information regarding their adoption such as birth parent's identification and even unknown birth date, ethnicity, or country of origin. Individuals adopted more recently may be faced with different issues related to the contact they have with their birth parents, such as determining the role their birth parents play in their lives, and how they negotiate relationships with both biological and adoptive parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, and Ayers-Lopez (2013) investigated variables that make each adoption story unique that also may contribute to the unique loss felt by adoptees. This may occur because many combinations of factors can evoke feelings of confusion and loss. For example, some adoptees may feel loss because they do not know their biological families while others may struggle because of knowledge about the circumstances associated with the decision by their biological parent(s) to place them for adoption. Child's age at removal from their biological family and placement with adoptive family may have negative effects on the individual, particularly if the child has memory of their birth parents, or events that precipitated the child being relinquished for adoption. Additional traumatic situations experienced prior to adoption compound commonly experienced adoption-related emotional distress (Grotevant et al., 2013). For example, adoptees that experience a reunion after a

significant gap of time with their biological family can feel both loss and gain in the reunion (Moran, 1994) and that can both eliminate and add ambiguity to their circumstances. Associated attachment disorders and the clinical stigma of adoptive status also plague some adoptees throughout the course of their lives (Passmore, 2007).

Life Course Perspective on Agency and Perceived Control

Life Course Perspective refers to an approach to understanding a person within their structural, social, and cultural contexts. There are five themes of the life course perspective, as developed by Elder (1998). They are: human development and aging as a life-long process, human agency in constrained situations, lives in time and place, timing in lives, and linked lives. The theme of human agency in constrained situations recognizes that an individual is limited in their ability to enact change based on his or her situation. It also recognizes that an individual can change his or her circumstances based on the way they respond only within the range of possibilities that they have. One way an individual can affect his or her range of possibilities in how they can respond to a situation is through their outlook on a situation. Shafer, Ferrar and Mustillo (2011) found the way an individual perceived childhood experiences affected his or her perception on their current situation. According to their study, individuals who experienced higher levels of childhood adversity were more likely to see their life since childhood in a more positive light, likening the perspective of those individuals as being able to see "the light at the end of the tunnel," retrospectively.

Leon (2002) suggested that an adoptee's perception of loss is based on how he perceives adoption. If the individual did not perceive losses within their adoption, he or

she was not likely to experience the negative effects associated with adoptive status, such as grief, depression, and attachment disorders. Penny, Borders and Portnoy (2007) found that adoptees that chose to engage in coping strategies related to loss associated with adoption were more likely to resolve the ambiguity they felt. Powell and Afifi (2005) conducted a longitudinal, qualitative study on 54 adoptees to examine the relationship among the identification of uncertainty and loss as a result of adoption, and how familial, perceptual, and situational factors contribute to the management responses of young adult adoptees. As a result of the study, Powell and Afifi (2005) found that adoptees who had a strong support systems and a positive perception of their current status were more flexible and had greater resiliency in adulthood. These studies suggest that an adoptee who feels as if they have the ability to enact change on the ambiguous loss they experience may be more likely to do so than an adoptee who does not perceive themselves as capable of doing so.

Life Course Perspective on Life Trajectories

Elder (1998) found that there is a strong correlation among the life events that an individual experiences, the age at which he experiences them, and the way his life course changes both at the time, and later in life as a result of those experiences. The life course perspective refers to this concept as life trajectories, where an event or chain of events in a person's life can alter subsequent events or the range of possibilities an individual may experience over a significant span of time. Previous research on this topic conducted by Crosnoe and Wildsmith (2011) showed evidence that events that occur early in an individual's childhood may affect the individual over the course of the

rest of their life. In their study on the long-term effects of adoption, Lieberman & Morris (2004) describe the wide array of life trajectories of adoptees. They found that the events proceeding, surrounding, and following adoption can have profound effects on adoptees, depending on the ways in which adoptees are able to process and cope with them.

Unresolved Loss Affects Life Trajectories

When adoptees are unable to cope effectively with the ambiguity surrounding their adoption, they are not able to express their loss in the form of grief, and progress through the process of recognizing, confronting, and moving on from the pain within their lives (Lieberman & Morris, 2004). When this process does not occur, adoptees are significantly more susceptible to experiencing the negative effects associated with extended disenfranchised grief and unresolved loss such as increased risk for depression, decreased self-esteem, and attachment disorders (Silverstein & Roszia, 1999). These negative effects can be detrimental to an adoptee's ability to grow and develop, and therefore have an effect on their life trajectories. Early adversities in life can be compounded by the adoptee's inability to cope with those losses and resolve the grief they feel as a result. When an individual cannot overcome those adversities, they are significantly more susceptible to decreased health, an inability to form stable relationships, and a decreased capacity to reach their full potential due to internal constraints associated with their unresolved ambiguous loss (Silverstein & Roszia, 1999).

These adverse effects can surface as early as toddlerhood with bouts of unprovoked aggression and unexplained extreme emotion, and can continue into

childhood and beyond if not identified and addressed (Grotevant & Fravel, 1999). Fineran (2012) referenced a study on adolescents who experienced adoption-related loss that were not adequately supported or processed to the point of resolution were found to be more likely to exhibit angry and defiant behaviors than those who had developed coping mechanisms to manage and resolve their feelings associated with loss. Those adoptees were more likely to face additional adversities as a result of their maladjustment, leading to more negative outcomes in adulthood.

In contrast, in a study conducted by Borders, Black and Pasley (1998) when both parents and their young adult children report healthy coping and resolution of adoption related losses, based on nationally-based matched groups of adopted and biological children and their parents, there were no significant differences between the behaviors and characteristics of adopted young adults and those of the matched group of biological children. Parents saw their adopted children as equally capable in their social interactions and desirable responsible behaviors, and as having levels of problem behaviors and well-being similar to those reported by the biological parents for their children (Borders, Black & Pasley, 1998). It is not likely that well-adjusted young adult adoptees would regress in their coping and resolution of adoption related ambiguous loss if further adoption-related losses are not experienced (Boss & Carnes, 2012). These adoptees are more likely to experience positive life trajectories than adoptees that have not learned to live with the ambiguity surrounding their adoption, and have an even more positive outlook on their lives than their non-adopted peers (Crosnoe & Wildsmith, 2011).

The purpose of the present study is to describe the common experiences of adult adoptees who have encountered ambiguous loss as a result of their adoption, including the ways they have chosen to cope with and/or resolve those losses throughout their lives. In order to understand the lived experiences of adult adoptees, it is important to learn about the losses they may or may not have incurred as a result of their adoption, the resources available to them, the coping mechanisms and resolution strategies they may or may not have employed, and how they view their life trajectory as a result of their coping and resolution decisions. This study seeks to accurately represent the commonalities among adult adoptees regarding their experiences of ambiguous loss and their coping strategies though the use of open-ended interviews.

Methodology

Research Design

Phenomenological research refers to understanding the lived experiences of several individuals (Creswell, 2007). In the case of the present study, the phenomenon or "the object of human experience" is ambiguous loss, incurred as a direct result of being adopted. The focus for phenomenological research is to describe the commonalities that participants share as they experience a phenomenon and decrease individual experiences of the phenomenon into something that can generally relate to all involved (Creswell, 2007). While the present study does not follow all of the specificities and criteria of phenomenological study, ideals from this type of research were used in the research design. The present study gathered data from adult adoptees regarding their experiences with adoption-related ambiguous loss and the coping strategies they have employed.

In designing the study, I combined the guiding principles of ambiguous loss theory and life course perspective to form a hypothesis that the resources an adoptee has access to, the meanings they have associated with adoption, and the support they have found in their adoptive family and beyond affect their experience of ambiguous loss. Some adoptees carry that loss into adulthood and beyond, depending on the agencies in place to assist them in coping with or resolving their loss. This study was designed to help better understand the occurrence of ambiguous loss in adopted individuals and the on-going results of those losses. The central research question of

the present study is: what is it like to experience and cope with adoption-related ambiguous loss?

To facilitate the proposed research and to describe the common experiences of adult adoptee's coping and resolution of adoption-related ambiguous loss, one-on-one open- ended qualitative interviews were conducted with several open-ended questions with all informants. Interviews were audio-recorded, and I also kept a journal of field notes as a reference for data analysis. Field notes included hand-written notes about the informants' physical descriptions, body language, and environmental factors, as well as emerging themes. Participants were asked about specific adoption-related topics, such as personal perception of themselves as an adoptee, their view of gains and losses they have experienced as a result of their adoption, and how they perceive their adopted status has affected their growth, development, and life course, as well as ways they have internalized, navigated, and coped with those emotions and experiences. A list of preliminary interview questions is included in Appendix A. Due to the conversational nature of the interviews, not all questions were asked of all informants. Each informant participated in three to five interviews.

Informants

The adoption support group, Adoption Support Kentucky, was used to solicit adoptees in the age range of 20 to 30 years of age. In order to eliminate additional concerns associated with international adoption, and adoptions that occurred in latency, participation in the study was limited by set criteria: only adoptees born and adopted within the United States, adopted at birth, and have no other extreme trauma

in their past (victim of violent crime, death of parent at young age, ect.) were sought. Due to the high risk of informant drop-out over time, five to eight initial informants were sought, so that a significant number of participants would be likely to continue to participate throughout the course of the study. Snowball sampling was also utilized in order to recruit informants by asking recruited informants to contact other adoptees within the desired cohort, after initial efforts to solicit informants were not successful in recruiting enough informants. In-depth interviews were conducted with four informants. Pseudonyms were used in identifying informants in the study, in order to protect the anonymity of informants. Brief descriptions of each informant are listed below. Demographic information about each informant is also listed in Appendix B.

Sandra is a 24 year old black female. Her birth parents relinquished parental rights upon her birth, and she was placed with her adoptive family soon after. Her open adoption was finalized at age 4. She was told of her adoptive status from an early age; she doesn't remember a time when she didn't know she was adopted. She has on-going contact with her biological family.

Jenny is a 30 year old white female. Her birth parents relinquished parental rights upon her birth, and she was placed with her adoptive family and open adoption finalized soon after. She was told of her adoptive status from an early age; she doesn't remember a time when she didn't know she was adopted. She has very limited on-going contact with her biological family.

Louise is a 26 year old white female. Her birth parents relinquished parental rights upon her birth, and she was placed with her adoptive family and closed adoption

finalized 82 days afterwards. She learned of her adoptive status at age 6. She does not have any contact with her biological family.

Belle is a 23 year old white female. Her birth parents relinquished parental rights upon her birth, and she was placed with her adoptive family and closed adoption finalized soon after. She learned of her adoptive status at age 14. She has limited on-going contact with her biological family.

Researcher as an Instrument

Qualitative research aims to provide a description of the structure, order, and patterns found among a group of informants that share specific commonalities under the parameters of the study. Qualitative research uses observation as the data collection method through firsthand experience, truthful reporting, interviews, and casual conversation (Luttrell, 2010). This type of research is useful for generating in-depth descriptions of organizations, events or phenomena that require attention to interactions and human experience difficult to measure or capture by quantitative means. According to Luttrell (2010), a qualitative study is a way of conducting and conceiving research where the researcher is the primary instrument in designing the study, and collecting and analyzing data. Qualitative research examines and analyzes the subject at hand through the lens of the researcher.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument used in data collection. Due to the integral role of the researcher in interacting with informants and gathering data, it is important to include bracketing in the initial research proposal, to state explicitly the personal history, experience, and possible bias of the researcher that

could potentially influence the future results of the research. Researcher reflexivity is another important component of qualitative research. Creswell (2013, p. 216) defines reflexivity as "where the writer is conscious of the bias, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study." In order to "position" myself as a researcher, I will explain both my relationship to the phenomenon being studied as well as how that relationship shapes my interpretation on the phenomenon.

I grew up in a family that highly valued children and the joy and wonder that children provided in the family unit. I also value children, and believe they bring particular joy to family life and society as a whole. As an expression of valuing life and belief that all children deserve to be loved and cared for, multiple members of my family have had first-hand experience with adoption. I have witnessed firsthand both the hope and heartache that accompany adoption, for both parents and adoptees. Many of those heartaches were due to the ambiguous losses felt by adoptees, with varying success in coping with them. It is because of this that I have a vested interest in the life trajectories of adoptees, and the role that perceived agency may have in affecting them.

I recognize that as a result of the personal experiences I have had, I see adoption in a positive light, as a way for society to care for children who cannot be adequately cared by their birth family. I grew up in a family that has adopted, and know that my experiences as a part of an adoptive family may influence the way I understand or interpret informants' stories. I also have some understanding of the adoption process and struggles that adoptees in my family have expressed, that may make it easier for me to understand the adoption jargon of informants, and may help in the discussion of

informant's experiences. I understand that ultimately, I am not an adoptee, and cannot provide a truly emic perspective on the experiences adoptees have with ambiguous loss, only a representation of the experiences of the informants in the present study.

In researching outcomes of adoptees, I found significant amounts of research dedicated to the study and explanation of the many types of ambiguous loss experienced by adoptees. I found very little research, however, on the effect of the perceived agency that adoptees had on their ability to cope with and resolve those losses over time. Due to a lack of research in this specific area, I decided to conduct the present study in order to gain an understanding of the nature of the effects of perceived agency of adoptees over time.

Analysis

In order to ensure the results from this study are credible, several validation methods (Creswell, 2013) were employed. Bracketing was used to clarify any bias I may hold regarding the research topic, to bring to light and account for any researcher bias. Since the goal of the study is to describe the common experiences, or the "essence" of the phenomenon of adoption-related ambiguous loss, I used triangulation among informants in order to create a description that assimilates shared feelings and events experienced that was corroborated by multiple adoptees.

I employed the use of a peer reviewer in the process of coding each transcript, to aid in ensuring that the descriptions derived are accurate reflections of the information provided by informants. Creswell (2013, p. 251) defines peer review as "an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides opportunity for catharsis." A doctoral student from the Department of Family Sciences with a background in qualitative research served as peer reviewer for the present study.

Audio-recorded interview data were transcribed by the researcher and thematically coded based on significant statements that provided an understanding of how the informants experienced the phenomenon in question. Content regarding signs of ambiguous loss, perceived agency to cope with or resolve ambiguity, steps taken to resolve ambiguity, and adoptee's perceived outcome of resolution and significant life events were considered, as well as other information brought to light by adoptees as significant to the phenomenon. After developing themes common to multiple

informants that show both similarities and differences in their experiences, a textural description as well as structural description (Moustakas, 1994) of both what the informants experienced and how they experienced it was written. Finally, a collective description based on previous textual and structural descriptions was written of the phenomenon, which can be found in a following section of this manuscript.

Findings and Discussion

The following results were derived from the synthesis of personal experiences and insight gained from multiple interviews with multiple adult adoptees, over the period of five months. Adoptees told their stories in different ways; some through expressive reenactments of childhood memories, others through storytelling, still others described very factually their feelings about adoption. In every case, the informant's body language, facial expression, and tone told more than could have ever been gleaned from the transcription of their interviews alone. Informant's common experiences have been combined into six over-arching themes: insecurity of disclosure, adoption secrecy versus openness, adoption-related gratitude and insecurity, the search for information, adoptee "sense", and adoptee meaning-making.

Insecurity of Disclosure

Many of the adoptees I spoke with have experienced the ambiguous loss of free disclosure regarding the negative impacts of their adoption. In multiple cases, the adoptees required verbal reassurance that I wanted to hear about loss before being willing to discuss their experiences of adoption-related loss, and mentioned not feeling like they could talk about adoption-related loss with others in the past.

When I began considering the prospect of doing research on the topic of adoption-related loss, I found a plethora of research articles and books on the topic. Growing up in a house of adoptees, the concepts of the gains, losses, and trade-offs involved in the adoption process were discussed openly by my parents, my adopted siblings, and to outsiders. Therefore, it took me by surprise when time and time again

informants seemed surprised that I wanted them to talk about the losses they experienced as a part of their adoption story. Even after agreeing to take part in my study, informants were still hesitant to discuss the losses or grief incurred as a result of their adoption. The following snapshot of my interview with Jenny gives an example of this reaction:

> Jenny looked down and played with her rings, twisting them on her fingers. One ring was obviously an engagement ring- a large, at least two carat solitaire diamond on a thick gold band, while the other was a silver band with multi-colored sparking stones that gleamed in the sunlight coming through the window. I looked at her, and she immediately again averted her eyes, still silent. The silence had now thickened. She had been open and talkative up until now. I first told her about my connection to adoption, and why I was interested in learning other's stories, and she seemed willing and eager to tell me about her experiences. She talked about her idealistic childhood with her adoptive family, and how supportive her adoptive family had been throughout her life. But just now, when I mentioned loss, her free-flowing speech came to a halt. I had to decide how long to let the silence continue. After a few seconds, she began, "Ummmmmmmm..."
>
> My mind raced. Do I save the conversation now? Do I ask a different question, or make a light-hearted comment? No. I decided to wait her out, to make her say something. Surely she would eventually get uncomfortable enough to need to break the silence. Or she could leave, I thought. What would

I do then?! I prayed it wouldn't come to that. Thankfully, just then, she began, "As an adoptee, being adopted, I lost a sense of where I came from, and, for most of my life, a sense of who I really am." I smiled. She'd broken the silence! I nodded encouragingly.

"Is that what you wanted?" She leaned forward.

"I want to hear about your experience. Please be honest- there are no right answers, besides the truth!"

"Oh good- I just didn't want to be too negative, you know."

"I want to hear about your adoption story. Whatever that entails. Honestly, I know adoption isn't all flowers and rainbows. But I want to hear how you view your adoption- how you explain and describe all aspect of it."

She seemed to relax, scooting back in the plush armchair, and letting her arms fall into her lap, she continued. "You... I... don't share a physical bond to your adopted family and, for some of us, including me, that is difficult to overcome."

Brodzinski, Schechter, and Henig (1993) discuss adoption-related loss in their book, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*. As a part of the experiences common to adoptee's, they described the impact of loss, as well as why adoptees may feel less inclined to disclose their grief to others.

The pervasive sense of grief appeared evident in the way another adoptee described her experience. When asked why she didn't talk about her feelings of loss and grief related to being adopted, Louise explained, "None of my friends were

adopted, or maybe they just weren't talking about it. Adoption was a big secret but I thought about it often ...As an adoptee gets older, if no one is talking about adoption, we get the sense that our feelings won't be understood or validated."

In an online forum on directed at adoptive parents (www.adoptionsupport.org), the Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc. posted: "Why don't adoptees talk about their grief? They are petrified of rejection. They worry that if someone knew how needy or hurting they were inside they may be rejected all over again. This is true even in the best adoptive homes and families. Add the fear of rejection with the fear of hurting their adoptive parents' feelings and often this grief goes underground."

When I asked Belle about sources of support she had found, she explained, "Adoption has made me feel incredibly isolated and alone, not just right now but throughout my life... Not just everyone wants to hear the story of an adoptee not adapting perfectly to their new family... I have always been very independent and always made sure I never needed to rely on anyone. Well, maybe I need to just give it up. Let someone in. Lean on someone else for awhile or at least have someone to talk to- other than a therapist."

The hesitation surrounding discussing the adoption-related losses that Jenny, Louise and Belle each shared revealed the underlying theme of the importance adoptees place on not casting a negative light on adoption. All three expressed multiple times the gratitude they feel toward their adoptive families, and readily discussed the gains they feel they received as a result of being adopted. They all recognize the need for adoptions to continue, and Belle has even adopted a child herself. Whether told

outright as children, or given as an unspoken rule, all felt the need to preserve the sunny and "all-is-well" outward appearance of adoption by not disclosing, even when directly asked, the negative impacts and losses incurred as a result of their adoptive status. While each eventually discussed her feelings of adoption-related losses, it took repeated asking, and in some cases, asking in several different ways before they felt comfortable describing the less desirable effects of their adoption.

Riley, Meeks, and Center for Adoption Support & Education (2005) describe the understanding of adoptees who have been able to disclose fully their adoption experience as a part of coping with and resolving their adoption-related ambiguous losses:

> To acknowledge this (loss) is not focusing on the negative. Rather, it is acknowledging the *whole* reality, the *whole* truth about my adoption and the loss that had to take place in order for my adoption to happen. I acknowledge these losses no more and no less than I acknowledge the family and the life that I gained...To know what one has gained, one must also know what has been lost. The converse is also true--to know what one has lost, one must also know what has been gained. These are not mutually exclusive experiences. They function together.

Adoption-related Gratitude and Insecurity

In discussing the ambiguous losses adoptees have experienced as a result of their adoptive status, many adoptees described feelings of insecurity and failure, despite the blessing and gratitude they feel toward their adoptive families. They feel as

though they lost the security of being successful based on their own merit, and as though their birth parent's inability to raise them is a reflection on their own sufficiency and capabilities. Adoptees have gratitude for their adoptive family's willingness to adopt them, but those feelings may not overcome their feelings of insecurity or abandonment; rather, adoptees discussed those feelings in combination, not dichotomously.

Jenny described her experience with the paradox of gratitude and insecurity: "I am...really, infinitely grateful to the parents who raised me because, well, they gave me a much, much better life than I would have had otherwise. While there are, um, I guess extra barriers I've had to overcome, I know I'm very blessed to have had the family that I got to have...However, that, that gratitude that I have for them has never been able to overcome my insecurities of being adopted."

When I asked her what she felt to be the root of her insecurities she explained, "It has been challenging for me to know and to, accept that my biological parents were ill-equipped, unstable, people that could not have raised me the way my adopted parents were able to...they did. It is a sense of failure both on my biological parents' side and on my side, as a child...I couldn't be raised by them...I wasn't enough...It was never clear to me how I was a failure, and my adoptive parents tried to explain otherwise, but I always believed I was somehow."

Louise explained how knowing she was adopted affected her as a child, despite the affirmative love and care provided by her adoptive family. "I went to therapy for the first time when I was 6 years old because I had begun to suffer from sleep issues and

crippling separation anxiety from my mom. I'd begin each day worrying that my mom might forget to pick me up at school. Although she was always there, part of me knew I had been abandoned before and my child self believed it could happen again."

Despite reassurance of her adoptive family's love, and the permanence of her placement with them, Louise still, "wondered what was so wrong with me that my birth mom gave me away, and was she going to come back...I loved my [adoptive] family, so this idea caused great anxiety."

Sandra also described childhood insecurities and fears associated with fear of a second abandonment, but described a change of perspective after learning about the situation surrounding her adoption: "I grew up feeling extremely loved and knowing that I was wanted in every which way."

She discussed the implications of her changed perspective, and how her insecurities were eventually dissolved. "I get another person who cares about my birthday, another person who cares about my wedding anniversary and my children. And so at the end of the day there are a lot of people who want to share love with me, and it makes me feel like even more special than I did when I was a kid. And that's the story of my adoption."

Similarly, Pace and Zavattni (2011) studied attachment patterns of 12 genetically related mothers and their children, with 20 adoptive mothers and their adopted children, each at two different times in order to examine the relationship between insecurity and secure attachment in adolescent adoptees. The study found a significant enhancement of the adopted children's attachment security across the time frame

selected, and that the adopted children who showed a change from insecurity to security had adoptive mothers with secure adoptive models. Findings from the study suggest that adoptive parents' attachment helps to increase teenage adoptee's security and long-term attachment, such as in the case of Sandra, whose increased security and attachment helped her to rectify her contradictory feelings of both gratitude and insecurity.

Informants in the present study describe a desire for openness to discuss adoption with their adoptive families. They felt as though openness to discuss their experience as an adoptee was a missing link in their search for security and identity. They described the inability to talk about their adoption with their adoptive families as barriers to identify and cope with other sources of ambiguity in their past.

Adoption Secrecy versus Openness

Adoptees expressed that the secrecy or openness surrounding an adoptee's history impacted the way they view adoption because it set the tone for adoptees regarding how they could approach learning about their biological family and past. The secrecy surrounding the adoptions of informants in the present study had a significant impact on the way in which they viewed themselves as adoptees, and the voids they felt as a result of not knowing about their biological family, and the situation surrounding their adoption.

One informant explained, "My adoptive parents, they felt they were being 'open' when they told me I was adopted, but no one helped me understand what adoption was." She went on, "Adoption was a big secret but I thought about it often." She had

questions about her past, but didn't feel like she could ask them; she wondered many things, but didn't feel like her curiosity would be met openly.

Similarly, when I met with Louise to discuss her adoption story, she explained that while she was eventually able to find out information about her adoption as an adult, after tracking down her birth mother, she wasn't aware that there had ever been written record of her story. I asked her what she knew about her adoption, "Well, I was adopted as an infant, during a time when, when adoption was still shrouded in secrecy." She stopped, but I nodded her on. "My birthmother kept her pregnancy hidden from her family for nearly seven months. Her parents and my biological father's parents agreed she would be sent away to have me. She birthed me in a sterile room, frightened, with no familiar faces and no compassion for her situation. I was taken from her before she even had a chance to see me. Back then, back then, this was considered acceptable."

Belle wasn't told she was adopted until she was fourteen years old, although she claimed that, "Since I was a little girl, long before I knew I was adopted, I had this connection with someone that I didn't even know existed." After learning of her adoption though, and reading through the files she found from the adoption agency, she found discrepancies in what she knew of her story. She explained, "The choice of words the social worker chose to use on my non-id info "healthy, attractive female child" were rather inaccurate, along with 90% of the information provided in those three pages."

What Belle knows about her past is that there are still gaping holes that she may never be able to fill with accurate information. After recovering her own medical files

from hospitals and physicians as an adult, she concluded, "I am assuming I will never know the truth about my birth-mom's drug use while she was pregnant with me. I do have clues that when I piece them all together does tell a tale of whether or not she is telling the truth."

Unfortunately, the stories of Belle, Louise, and other informants are not unique. Closed adoptions have become less common in recent years. Studies have continued to show more positive outcomes from adoptees who were told of their adoption openly, from a young age, and with as much accurate information about their biological family and the situation surrounding their adoption as possible. Baltimore and Crase (2009) explored the children's understanding of their adoptive status, and found that key components of children's understanding of adoption were parental communication and openness, with age a lesser factor.

Conversely, Sandra began her adoption story with the following explanation: "I found out I was adopted from before I can even remember. It's a common question I get. When did they tell you? When did you know? Because in the era I was adopted, adoption was a very quiet thing. It wasn't something people talked about. It was thought to be something that should be kept quiet as a secret—no one should know." Unlike Louise and Belle, Sandra's adoptive family was open about her adoption, but there still wasn't much information about her biological family available. Sandra is grateful that her adoptive family was open about what they knew of the situations surrounding her adoption, and feels like her family's openness helped her to feel more comfortable in asking for help in searching for information about her biological family.

Despite her adoptive family's openness though, she still had questions. "I might have some blanks in my landscape of who I thought I was. I didn't have any further questions until I became a little older and thought, *You know, it might be interesting to know a little more about my genetics, some health background, some history, some knowledge*. And maybe there's more to know, and I didn't really know."

The level of secrecy or openness that surrounds an adoptee's story has a profound impact on the way they perceive they could approach searching for information as a means of coping with and resolving ambiguous losses. As one informant summed up, "As an adoptee gets older, if no one is talking about adoption, we get the sense that our feelings won't be understood or validated."

The Search for Information

Adoptees who experience ambiguous loss as a result of their adoption may attempt to enact change in their lives by searching for information about their biological family to eliminate some of the ambiguity surrounding their adoption. All of the adoptees I spoke with engaged actively in searching for information about their birth family as a means of coping with and resolving ambiguous losses they experienced as a result of their adoption.

Belle discussed with me why she felt it was important to learn more information about her biological family. She felt a loss of the life she could have had, if she hadn't been adopted, if she had been raised by her birth family: "I'll probably never know the real me; the person who I was supposed to be or should have been. Adoption plays a big role in this. I believe my personality would ultimately be the same. The things that make

me, me would not be different. But, I will never know what I could have been or how I could have ended up."

Sandra also sought out information about her biological family, in order to increase her self-concept. She explained, "I didn't really know who I looked like. And for me that was the missing link. It was just, *"Who did I look like?" "What would siblings look like who might look like me?"* I didn't have that advantage growing up of having that sense of visual commonality with my surroundings." Sandra thought, "It would be interesting to know who my birth mother was. And the first set of information I was able to receive from The Cradle was when my sister and I turned 18. The Cradle offers families information about birth families to an adopted child. It gives them some information that's just general: what they look like, their hair color, and their professions that their families might have been involved in. And I learned very quickly that I look probably a lot like my birth mom."

As I spoke more with Sandra about how she felt that information affected her, she explained that she felt it helped her to resolve the ambiguity she felt surrounding her adoptive status. After learning about her birth mother, she described a weight being lifted off her shoulders. She didn't feel as compelled to continue to search for and learn about her biological family. She felt content with her adoptive family and with who she was as a person, and as an adoptee.

In discussing why she searched for her birth mother, one informant divulged, "I want to get to know her. I want her to be a part of my life. I don't want her to leave this world with unanswered questions and a doubt that her daughters love her and forgive

her. I know she struggles immensely with guilt and shame in regards to placing me and giving custody of my younger sister to her dad. It is painfully evident from the first moment we talked on the phone over four years ago." More than an explanation of her past, or even a relationship with her birthmother, Belle said, "I just hope that wherever she is she knows she is loved."

Jenny discussed in detail the importance to her that her adoptive family was supportive of her search to find her biological parents, "When I turned 18, I asked my adopted parents to help me find my biological parents. In a, really, well, surreal turn of events, my biological mother was looking for me at the same time. She was able to find my adopted parents' address and then, subsequently asked their permission to write me a letter directly. So I was able to learn some about them through that."

Louise's search took over a decade, and required considerable investigation, because of the lack of information that her birth mother provided at the time when Louise's adoption file was closed. Due to her perseverance, Louise eventually had some success: "After eleven years of searching and little rendered evidence, I began to connect the dots of my story and find answers to my questions. It was then that I met my birthmother and then her family, and two years ago, I searched for and found my birth father's family. He's no longer alive, but I have pictures of him. For the first time in my life, I got to see someone I resemble." She too described a sense of closure she felt after receiving photographic proof that she too, "looked like someone I loved."

When the search for information yields positive results, adoptees expressed resolution of adoption-related ambiguous loss. However, not all adoptees' searches are

able to answer their questions. Belle was able to locate her birth mother, and obtain information about the situation surrounding her adoption. Yet without an on-going relationship with her biological mother, Belle still feels a void, and has many unanswered questions, that she easily rattled off when I asked about unresolved aspects of her adoption story. She responded, "Will the day ever come that she calls me just to talk? Will she ever let go of her demons and let her daughters love her? If she knew I was graduating in June would she even care? She knows about Asa [her son] but does she ever wish she could see pictures? Does she ever dream about having her three kids all-together at once? Does she think of us? Does she wonder what she could have done differently? If she was offered the chance to get sober would she take it?"

Belle knows that she may never have the answers to those questions, and that eventually, the only source of those answers may become unavailable to her. While she remains hopeful that she may one day have the on-going relationship with her biological mother that she yearns for, she knows that it is not likely. When I asked how she copes with that reality, Belle responded, "I think as a self preservation tool my mind has put adoption into the denial box."

Previous research in the field of adoption-related loss has acknowledged the relative prevalence of the desire for adoptees to find information regarding their biological parents. As evidenced by interactions with adoptees in the present study, a variety of results from that desire can be experienced. Powell and Afifi (2005) studied the loss felt by adoptees as they reach adulthood, and ways in which adult adoptees sought out coping strategies, including searching for information regarding their

biological mother. Fifty-four adult adoptees were followed in the study, to examine the correlation of uncertainty management and ambiguous loss in the context of adoption. The study concluded that there were positive correlations among the identification of uncertainty and loss as a result of adoption, and how familial, perceptual, and situational factors contribute to the management responses of young adult adoptees. Participants with stronger support systems, and positive perception of their current status were more flexible and had greater resiliency in adulthood according to the study, regardless of the fruitfulness of their search for information. Likewise, the adoptees in the present study were better able to cope and make meaning from their search results when supported by adoptive family.

Adoptee Meaning-Making

Adoptees consciously determine that there is a purpose and/or reason for their experiences as a way of coping with and resolving the loss and grief they encountered; many adoptees discussed the meaning they derived from their adoption story. Meaning-making is a common way to cope with and resolve losses; adoptees interpret their experiences differently, and thus derive different meanings of their emotions. In a study published by Dunne (2004) sixty participants took part in a grief experience inventory, in which specific attention was given to the antecedent of grief, loss, and the cyclical nature of significant loss in a person's life. Findings of the study indicated that those individuals who have been able to cope with losses they experience either independently or under the care of counseling professionals, have more positive outcomes with the way their grief is manifested and their ability to cope with it.

Informants in the present study explained their meaning-making process, and how their interpretation has affected the choices and decisions they have made as adults.

For Louise, she made meaning of her own experiences by using her understanding of the feelings associated with adoption as motivation to further propel positive, proactive counseling for adoptees and their families. Louise discussed in depth about how her adoption experience impacted her decision to become a therapist, working with adoptees and their families. "I'm now a therapist myself and have worked extensively with adoptive families. In my work I strive to help this generation of adoptees, adoptive families and birth parents to have a different experience than I did."

Jenny referred multiple times to her faith in Christ during her interview, when discussing several different aspects of her adoption experience She described her adoptive parent's faith as a positive attribute when discussing the gains she experienced as an adoptee: "Well, my parents, my, um adopted parents provided a life for me that would never, ever have been possible otherwise. My adopted parents are, um, intelligent, strong, um, steady, Christian people. I gained a completely different...better... lease on life when I was adopted...That was, while I didn't always see it in the moment as a child, um, such an incredible blessing."

Jenny spoke of her faith and spirituality as influential in the meaning she made of her adoption experience, and how the meaning she derived from her spirituality impacted her life: "Ultimately though, my faith in Christ has been the ultimate coping mechanism... although I took a long time to really understand that Christ, He really loves

me regardless of my earthly circumstances...that was where a lot of my healing came from....acceptance in Christ."

Grotevant & Fravel (1999) published a mixed methods review of data taken from the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project to analyze the levels of satisfaction, grief, and acceptance, among other factors that affect adoptive families regarding how individuals and couples construct meanings about parenting and adoption, through studying levels of openness in adoption, and the subsequent effects on adoptee's view of their adoption experience. The study indicated that adoptive family's positive and open attitudes toward adoption positively affected adoptee's ability to make meaning from their experiences.

Similarly, Sandra's adoptive family held a positive view of her biological family, despite having never met them, and having relatively no information about the situation surrounding her adoption. Growing up, Sandra was told by her adoptive family that she was wanted and loved, and that adoption was the best situation for her to grow up in a family that was able to meet her needs. From this, Sandra decided that her biological mother loved her, and gave her up for adoption because she wanted the best for Sandra. As an adult, when Sandra had the opportunity to meet her biological mother, the meaning she had made of her adoption was tested. "And that's when I had the opportunity to show her that I always had deep, ingrained respect for the thing I assumed to be true which was, she must have made a very hard choice. Come to learn that was true, she had always wanted to parent me but couldn't."

Having the reassurance that Sandra had correctly understood her adoption reaffirmed that she "was loved in every which way." Sandra's meaning-making of her adoption is what continues to compel her to advocate for adoption as an alternative for children to receive love and care when their biological parents cannot provide it.

The experiences that informants in this study described align with previous research on the subject of adoption-related loss. Leon (2002) suggested that an adoptee's perception of loss is based on how he perceives adoption. Particularly, a common association with loss is a negative connotation, where neither Leon (2002) nor the informants in the present study found that to necessarily be the case. While some experienced negative repercussions such as feelings of loss and abandonment, they chose to see the purpose or reason behind their adoptions, and the associated losses as well in a positive light. Louise recognized that she would not have the drive or passion for counseling if she had not had personal experiences with grief. Jenny described her faith as "stronger" as a result of her experiences as an adoptee.

Adoptee "Sense"

As difficult as experiencing, coping with, and resolving the mixed emotions that many adoptees are immersed in can be, adoptees can often have a difficult time expressing their feelings and emotions in a way they find accurate and adequate.

Adding to this difficulty, many adoptees feel a stigma from not being able to explain their emotions to family, friends, and acquaintances (March, 1995). As Belle explained, regarding her feeling toward her adoptive status: "There has been a heaviness in my heart I can't explain."

Louise too, struggled as a child to understand the events that occurred to precipitate her adoption: "I desperately needed someone to help me understand my feelings. Unfortunately, my child therapist was not that person. I went twice. I drew pictures of pumpkins...Adoption was never mentioned."

Adoptees often used the word "sense" to convey a lack of exact knowing how to describe their feelings; "A sense of (insert description word here)" to describe their feelings, instead of just using the descriptive word, to connote their experience as an adoptee. Jenny used the word "sense" a lot in her description of her experience as an adoptee. In describing how she viewed herself as an adoptee, Jenny said, "I see myself...I have...I've struggled all of my life with a sense of, um, not being good enough to keep and having, really, having deep insecurities, I guess, surrounding being an adoptee."

Later, when she was discussing areas of her life that took time to find closure, Jenny described how being disconnected from her biological family contributed to the lengthy amount of time it took to feel closure about her adoptive status: "Of course, of course...um, as an adoptee, I have struggled with this, this pervasive sense of loss, even though I did not know my biological family until I was 18.... I always felt like I missed out on something...something. Maybe that I missed out on growing up with people who looked like me and acted like me. Also, I have struggled with a sense of somehow being a failure, from, well, the beginning of my life. It was never clear to me how I was a failure, but I always believed I was somehow."

At other times in the interview, when describing feelings about events other than her adoption, she didn't use the phrase "a sense of...", but only used the emotion. For example, in discussing how now having a family of her own impacts the way she views herself, she described the turmoil leading up to having her own biological child: "I was told at age 15 that my chances of having biological children were 5 percent, um, or less due to some pre-existing, um, health conditions. For many years, I really, believed this to be true. For awhile, I was angry that the doctor for demolishing the dreams I had of raising my own children some day, and grieved the loss of children I would never have...."

In discussing her ability to have children, and the situation surrounding that process, she clearly labeled and described the feelings she had and whom she felt them toward and about, unlike her descriptions associated with being adopted. Commonly people use the word sense to talk about perceptions they hold or general feelings toward something, but in her case, I got the distinct impression that she used the word to attempt to indicate feelings that she couldn't really specifically describe. She used the phrase "a sense of _____" to get as close as she could to naming her feelings, but she wasn't totally satisfied with using that term alone. This indicated to me that she still experiences ambiguity in knowing how she feels about her adoption and how she places herself as an adoptee. Her descriptions of resolution indicate that she has dealt with the loss and confusion she experienced as a result of her adoptive status, but this phrase "sense of" provides an insight into what may be a piece of remaining unresolved ambiguity.

Scope of Study

In interpreting and applying the results of the present study, it is important to recognize the scope of the study, as well as potential variable factors that limit the ability of researchers and practitioners to widely apply the results of the present study. The present study utilized a small sample of adoptees; there were four informants involved. Due to the sample size, there is a limit to the variable differences possible to encounter among informants. This factor should be a consideration in understanding and interpreting the results from the study.

Informants self-selected to participate in the study, and were vetted using only the criteria listed in the Methodology section: domestic adoptees, relinquished from birth family at birth, adopted within the United States, after the year 1984. Therefore, the variable differences or similarities of informants were not controlled for in the study design. It is important though to recognize those variables for the purpose of applying study results in future academic or practical circumstances. All informants were recruited through the same gate-keeping agency, and lived with-in relative proximity to Lexington, KY. All informants identify themselves as female, and were adopted by families who share the same race as the adoptee (3 informants identify as Caucasian; 1 identifies as African American). All informants desired for and engaged in a search for information or relationship with their birth family. Not all adoptees desire to or engage in such a search; had informants in the present study not engaged in such a search, the results from the study would have yielded different results.

Conclusion

Many adoptees experience ambiguous losses as a result of their adoption- losses that are often unknown or not easily defined, making them difficult to cope with and resolve. This study utilized a life course perspective that asserts that humans have agency to affect change in their own lives, to describe the common experiences of adult adoptees who have encountered ambiguous loss as a result of their adoption. The goal of the study is to represent accurately the commonalities among adult adoptees regarding their experiences of ambiguous loss, perceived agency in coping with and resolving said loss, and their life trajectory as a result. Six over-arching themes were developed that best describe the common experiences of adult adoptees in this study: insecurity of disclosure, adoption-related gratitude and insecurity, adoption secrecy versus openness, the search for information, adoptee meaning-making, and adoptee "sense".

Adoptees who experienced a perceived inability to disclose their adoption loss decreased their ability to enact change in their situation. An inability to discuss adoption-related loss decreased adoptee's perceived ability to resolve ambiguous losses and/or change their life trajectory. Adoption related insecurities not overcame by gratuity towards adoptive families also negatively impacted adoptee's perceived abilities to enact change regarding their ambiguous loss.

Similarly, adoptees who experience secrecy associated with adoption-related information perceived less ability to search for information relating to their biological family, which limited their perceived ability to enact change on their situation by

searching for information as a means of resolving ambiguous loss. Conversely, adoptees who either did not experience as much secrecy surrounding their adoption, or saw said secrecy as additional motivation, chose to enact change regarding their ambiguous losses by attempting to find information about their biological family and/or adoption circumstances. Those informants recognized that their search for information was a choice in attempting to resolve adoption-related ambiguity. In explaining the results of their searches, adoptees were cognizant of the ways in which their findings affected their life trajectories. For example, Sandra's positive search results resulted in her contentment with adoptive status and resolution of adoption-related ambiguity. In contrast, Belle's lack of search results led her to more questions and with additional determination to resolve her ambiguity in the future.

The meanings informants derived from their adoption experiences affected their perceived ability to enact change to resolve ambiguous losses. Adoptee's positive meaning-making of their adoption led to more positive life trajectories, from a passion and meaningful career, to deeper spirituality. However, as life course perspective notes, there is a limited range of possibilities that an individual has is their ability to change their life trajectories based on perceived agency (Elder, 1998). As evidenced by the "sense" many informants expressed, even when adoptees perceive the ability to enact positive change in resolving ambiguity in their lives, there is a limit to their ability- in many cases, some ambiguity remains. In those instances, adoptees must cope with the unknowns rather than actively work to resolve them.

As a result of this study, I have found areas of study related to the relationship between perceived agency and life trajectories in adoptees that need further research. Further corroboration of Leon's (2002) work regarding the relationship between an adoptee's perception of loss and their perception of adoption (Leon, 2002) will help guide both practitioners and adoptees on how to use framing as a means of increasing adoptee's perceived agency. Also, continued study of the effect of the perceived agency that adoptees had on their ability to cope with and resolve adoption-related losses is needed on a broader scale with additional variables, such as family composition and cultural background considered.

Potential barriers of research in this field include researchers themselves not wanting to cast a negative light on the process of adoption, or a difficulty finding participants for research endeavors. Despite these potential barriers, additional research and publication on ways both professionals and the adoption community can support adoptees who experience adoption-related ambiguous losses is needed in order for headway to be made in the resources available to both adoptees and their families coping with such losses.

As the present study revealed, adoptees who were able to cope effectively with adoption-related ambiguous losses articulated a more positive perception of their experience as an adoptee, and showed greater positivity regarding their life trajectory. Greater awareness of potential adoption-related ambiguous losses is needed in the adoption community, to better equip adoptees, adoptive families, and professionals in

the field to help adoptees cope with adoption-related ambiguous losses. Adoptees in this study described processes of self-identifying their own struggle with adoption-related ambiguous losses. Each described feelings isolation, or bewilderment at having to face their emotions and questions on their own, despite having support networks in their lives. Had their adoptive families had greater awareness of the possibility that their adopted child may experience ambiguous grief as a result of adoption-related losses, they may have been better able to provide support for their adopted children.

Appendix A

Open-Ended Potential Interview Questions

1. What do you know about the circumstances surrounding your adoption?
2. How do you view yourself as an adoptee?
3. In what ways do you feel a sense of gain as an adoptee?
4. In what ways might you feel a sense of loss as an adoptee?
5. Do you believe you have experienced feelings of not being able fully explain what you've lost?
    a. If so, describe that sense of loss.
    b. If not, why might some adoptees feel this way and not others?
6. Do you or did you at one time feel a need to take action to better understand the circumstances surrounding your adoption?
    a. If so, what type of efforts did you make?
    b. What was the outcome of those efforts?
7. What sources of support have you found to help you overcome the effects of being adopted?
8. What do you consider to be your biggest successes in life thus far?
9. What do you consider to be your biggest challenges?
10. Have you experienced positive outcomes in your life that you associate with your adopted status?
11. Have you experienced negative outcomes in your life that you associate with your adopted status?

Appendix B

Informant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Open/Closed Adoption	Contact with Biological Family	Age at Adoption	Age at Learning of Adoptive Status
Sandra	24	Black	Female	Open	Yes- on-going	Given to agency at birth; adopted at 4 yrs.	Birth
Jenny	30	White	Female	Closed	Very limited	Birth	Birth
Louise	26	White	Female	Closed	None	Given to agency at birth; adopted 82 days later	6 years old
Belle	23	White	Female	Open	Limited-on-going	Birth	14 years old

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