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Beyond Telling: A Phenomenology of Adoptive Parents' Adoption Communication Openness with Early Adolescents

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Errata Page

Location (page and line numbers)	Original Text	Correction
Table 1, pg 23		Juanita
31, L16		"
33, L12		"

41, L19		"
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BEYOND TELLING: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS'
ADOPTION COMMUNICATION OPENNESS WITH EARLY ADOLESCENTS

_____

THESIS
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Family Sciences in the
College of Agriculture, Food an Environment
at the University of Kentucky

By

Jane D. Samuel

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Ronald Werner-Wilson, Professor of Family Sciences Department

Lexington, Kentucky

2019

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

BEYOND TELLING: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS'
ADOPTION COMMUNICATION OPENNESS WITH EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Despite calls for increased Adoption Communication Openness (ACO) within the adoptive family, research indicates that families still struggle to accomplish the recommended elements and levels of openness. What could be holding families back from this key process? Three focus groups comprised of 17 adoptive parents of early adolescents (aged 10-14) who were age 0-2 at the time of placement were thematically coded. This inductive analysis revealed the complexity rooted in being —sometimes successfully and sometimes not—communicatively open. Four key themes emerged painting a vivid and rich picture of: a) the breadth and depth of this experience; b) the work entailed; c) the emotionality of it; and d) the grief and loss embedded in it. These results strengthen the understanding of the lived-experience of the adoptive parent thus magnifying the call for not only further research into what drives ACO in the family, but also consistent and supportive pre- and post-adoption services and clinical work.

KEYWORDS: Adoptive parents, early adolescence, adoption communication openness, phenomenology, grief and loss.

Jane D. Samuel

November 29, 2019

BEYOND TELLING: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS'
ADOPTION COMMUNICATION OPENNESS WITH EARLY ADOLESCENTS

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November 29, 2019
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Date

DEDICATION

To my participants, their children and their children's first families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the patient, honest and ongoing support of my Thesis Committee: Dr. Ronald Werner-Wilson, Dr. Diana Haleman, and Dr. Rachel Farr.

I would like to thank Catherine Tucker, PhD; Karen Buckwalter, MSW, LCSW; Judy Cockerton; Anna Paravano; Tif Sudela-Junker; and Mary Askew for their invaluable input in the design of the Focus Group Guide utilized in this study.

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Third, I would like to thank my husband and three daughters for their support during these busy graduate school years. Your ongoing patience with my hours of homework was a true gift to me.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I want to thank my participants for their willingness to share so candidly and emotionally about their personal experiences of parenting in general, and ACO in particular. You *are* real and your work is valuable.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Families continue to be formed through adoption. Current numbers indicate that of the over 112,000 adoptions each year, approximately 8,900 are from overseas (Trends in U.S. Adoptions: 2008-2012, 2016) and 57,000 are from foster care (Trends in Foster Care and Adoption, 2017). Unlike the adoptions of the mid-twentieth century born out of the "twin problems of illegitimacy and infertility" (Kirk, 1984, p. xiii), modern adoptive families—born out of a myriad of situations—mirror the growing diversity of non-adoptive families with increases in single-parent, same-gender and mixed-race parent households. Their double identities, adoptive and diverse, place them in a group of discourse dependent families who rely on internal communication to construct and negotiate their identities (Galvin, 2003). Similarly, the lack of biological bond between parent and child requires the building of a new attachment bond between the adoptive child, their adoptive parent(s) and the family as a whole (Kirk, 1964).

Consistent with my personal experience both in the U.S. and abroad, my review of the literature, as well as consultation with stakeholders: (a) adoptive parents still struggle to communicate openly around perhaps the most significant aspect of their child's identity—that of adoption (Brodzinsky, 2006, 2011; Jones & Hackett, 2007); and (b) clinicians continue to highlight the need for help with adoption communication (Borchers, Committee on Early Childhood, & Care, 2003; Brodzinsky, 2013; Eldridge, 2009). What continues to hold families back from this important adoptive family process? To address this critical question, it is imperative we better understand the phenomenon of adoption communication openness (ACO).

Role Handicapped

The significance of communication within the family regarding adoption was revealed in the 1950's with the seminal studies of adoption researcher Kirk (1964). The families of Kirk's studies were the homogenous adoptive families of the early to mid-twentieth century formed through the societal stigmas of infertility and illegitimacy. "Matched" by agencies with adoptive parents who appeared genetically related to them, these children were often not told they were adopted. Secrecy, it was believed, shielded both adoptive mother and her child from the pain of these joint disgraces (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003). However, in spite of the professed ability of these families to hide among normative ones, Kirk's studies revealed the subterfuge was fooling no one, least of all the child (Kirk, 1964). Despite never being told of their adoptive status, these children grew into adults sensing, but never knowing at times, that they were not biologically related to their family (Brodzinsky, 2005). Others upon being told, felt they had been living a lie (Kirk, 1964).

Kirk (1964) theorized that this lack of adoption communication was born out of adoptive families' status as "role handicapped" (p. 50). Simply put, adoptive families lacked role models in society as there was no existing script for how to parent the adopted child, including how to conduct adoption communication. Kirk's research highlighted, in fact, two patterns in adoptive families: those that acknowledged their differences from biologically formed families and those that rejected their differences (Kirk, 1964). The former families could accept the child fully, share information with the child and support the child's emotions as well as cope with birth parent searching. The latter families'

parenting patterns were rooted in the pain of infertility and driven by societal stigmas around the out-of-wedlock child and adoptive families as second-best (Kirk, 1964).

Twenty years later Kirk's studies were republished (1984) into an adoption landscape profoundly altered by changes at both family and policy level. No longer were adoptive families homogenous. Adopted children were more complex, joining their families from different cultural, racial and even national backgrounds, at varying ages and stages and increasingly with histories of adversity and prior placement. Adoptive families were also different; single-parents were being granted permission to adopt, and families with biological children already in the home were expanding their families via adoption. Kinship-placement and foster-parenting added to the changes to structure and meaning of "adoptive family" (Kirk, 1984). With this shift, Kirk found his work and the role of adoption communication as a key process in the family even more applicable.

Adoption Communication

Notwithstanding adoption's continued role as a means of forming families, and its ever broadening diversity (now to include same-gender parent households), communication regarding adoption remains an area where families struggle (Brodzinsky, 2013). This is despite adoption communication shifting from a one-time telling (Kirk, 1964) to a bidirectional non-verbal and verbal communication process (Brodzinsky, 2005; Wrobel et al., 2003), and research highlighting the benefits of increased—and the risks of constrained—dialogue, attunement and empathy (Brodzinsky, 2005).

Specifically, greater openness in adoption communication has been associated with increased self-esteem and self-concept, as well as identity formation in both adoptive child and parent. For example, in Brodzinksy's (2006) study of adoptive

children aged 8 to 13, those that were more communicatively open—including a felt sense of parental empathy and attunement—around adoption reported better self-esteem. Hawkins et al. (2007)'s study of adult adopted individuals is consistent. Similarly, a qualitative study of adopted individuals ages 18 to 84, revealed richer adoption narratives allowed exploration of the individual's sense of self and origin (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011), consistent with Grotevant (1997) that adopted individuals must move through "layers of complexity" (p. 140) in their lives to come to a coherent and manageable self-concept. Further, when the adopted individuals could ask questions of their adoptive parents, they developed a "coherent self-concept and self-understanding" (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011, p. 182). In a quantitative study of 143 adult adopted individuals aged 18-72 increased adoption communication openness was tied to decreased rumination and better self-concept (Horstman, Colaner, & Rittenour, 2016).

Identity development in the adopted individual has been noted to be complex, and in the interracially adopted even more so (Brodzinsky, 1987; Darnell, Johansen, Tavakoli, & Brugnone, 2017; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2005). Adoption stories (one aspect of adoption communication) shared early in the adoptive child's life are one means of identity development (Wrobel et al., 2003). For example, a qualitative study of the narratives of 18 adoptive parents (mostly mothers) reported on how their children took the narratives they began and expanded on them to form a positive identity of themselves (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Conversely, Jordan and Dempsey (2013) study revealed that adult adoptees who lacked such discourse reported "no sense of lineage…I don't know who I am" (p. 41). Similarly, Palacios and Sanchez-Sandoval's (2005) quantitative

study of 393 parents and children showed a correlation between secrecy/denial and identity development.

This identity development is not limited to the adoptive individual. Greater adoption communication aids in the development of overall family identity. For example, parents reported that they told their adoption story as much for themselves as for their children (Chatham-Carpenter, 2012). More specifically, adoption narratives help parents construct an understanding of who their family is, including culturally, and establishes them as a loving and legitimate family rather than one that is second-best (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001).

Similarly, significant to identity formation is adoption communication's role in psychological adjustment. Brodzinsky (2005) in his entrance piece on adoption "openness" (structural and communicative) indicated that psychological adjustment is tied to the ability of the individual to control their situation in some form, to be heard and to be able to seek an understanding. In this way family members influence each other. This is the family system at work. Where there is greater congruence and less conflict, then there will be better adjustment and satisfaction (Brodzinsky, 2005). Studies of both adoptive parents and children confirm this. Earlier research by Kirk (1964), Raynor (1980) and Berger et al. (1982) had previously begun to uncover this relationship, finding that greater dialogue and parental understanding is associated with increased satisfaction in the adopted child. This link continues to bear weight; several studies have revealed that adoption communication openness within the family is associated with: (a) more positive feelings about being adopted (Hawkins et al., 2007), (b) more positive feelings about birth parent contact, even where there was no contact yet (Farr, Grant-Marsney, &

Grotevant, 2014); (c) increased satisfaction with placement in the family, generally and with adoptive parents specifically (Howe & Feast, 2003; Palacios & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2005); and (d) less behavioral reporting by parents (Brodzinsky, 2006).

Openness" in Communication

Since Kirk's seminal studies the concept of adoption communication has moved from a one-time telling, to a multi-layered process that spans ages and stages and encompasses much more than the spoken word. Specifically, Brodzinksy (2005) defines openness in this way:

Openness in adoption refers, first and foremost, to a state of mind and heart (Gritter, 1997). It reflects the general attitudes, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and behavioral inclinations that people have in relation to adoption. It includes, among other things, a willingness on the part of individuals to consider the meaning of adoption in their lives, to share that meaning with others, to explore adoption related issues in the context of family life, to acknowledge and support the child's dual connection to two families, and perhaps to facilitate contact between these two family systems in one form or another.

Thus, openness in adoption is linked not only to content-based communication— that is, the exchange of adoption information—but, just as importantly, to the experience of affective attunement and the sharing and supporting of adoption-related emotions both within the adoptive family and between the adoptive and birth families (Brodzinsky, 2005, p. 149).

According to Brodzinsky (2005), this openness occurs on three different levels: intrapersonal, intrafamilial, and interfamilial within the entire adoption triad. The first level is within the self of the adoptive parent, the birth parent, and the adoptive child. For

the adoptive child this self-reflection begins at the time of cognition about the adoption. This intrapersonal contemplation—including one's feelings and perceptions about the adoption—does not stop once the adopted child is told, or once the child is placed outside the birth home, but rather is an ongoing internal process, which constructs and reconstructs the meanings that each person holds about the adoption. The second level is within the adoptive family (or the birth parents' families as the case may be). What is going on between and among the members of each independent family? What are the conversations, the "open, active, and emotionally attuned dialogue," (Brodzinsky, 2006, p. 4) especially between parent(s) and child(ren) about the adoption? This empathic sensitivity is considered essential to the accomplishment of adoption communication openness (ACO). Without it the verbal piece of adoption communication, from entrance narrative to adoption-talk may be constrained; it sends a non-verbal message that it is okay to bring up the topic of adoption (Barbosa-Ducharne, Ferreira, Soares, & Barroso, 2015; Berger, Hodges, Elliott, Rabb, & Salo, 1982; Wrobel et al., 2003) and continues to be critical to the adjustment to adoption (Brodzinsky, 2005; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Kirk, 1964). The third level for consideration is that between two (or three) distinct families: the birth family—which may include the two separate families of the birth father and birth mother—and the adoptive family. This last level of communication only occurs where there is structural openness or contact between birth parents and adoptive family. However, openness is not limited by a lack of information (or contact), but rather is driven to be greater in the face of it (Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005). Specifically, Brodzinsky (2006) counsels that where there is no verifiable pre-adoptive information, "adoptive parents need to encourage their child to share his or her

thoughts, beliefs, fantasies, and/or feelings about the birth parents and the reasons for the adoption placement" (p. 14). To do so, allows the child to feel safe and supported in the face of their curiosity, facilitates increased communicative openness, and provides parents a window into their children's emotional well-being (Brodzinsky, 2006).

Despite increasingly widespread research and practice literature on the importance of adoption communication openness, parents still struggle with this key task (Barbosa-Ducharne et al., 2015; Brodzinsky, 2006, 2011; Howe & Feast, 2003; Jones & Hackett, 2007; Tarroja, 2015). Perhaps as significant are parents' reports of the lack of training and support regarding adoption in general and communication more specifically (Barnett et al., 2017; Jones & Hackett, 2007; Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2010), despite a clear call for this training and support (Brodzinsky, 2011; Jones & Hackett, 2007; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). This is unfortunate for the reasons stated above as well as the fact that where there is decreased parental communication openness, the child is much less likely to be curious or to inquire (Eldridge, 2009; Horstman et al., 2016; Le Mare & Audet, 2011; Wrobel et al., 2003), thus stunting the necessary bidirectional discourse between parent and child regarding adoption.

Prior qualitative research has examined the adoption story and entrance narratives told by adoptive parents from the parent perspective (Chatham-Carpenter, 2012; Harrigan, 2010; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001), and the adoptive individual's perspective (Darnell et al., 2017; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). However, ACO extends beyond the entrance narrative to ongoing "adoption talk" (Brodzinsky, 2005; Wrobel et al., 2003), as well as communication in the form of attunement and affect (Brodzinsky, 2006).

Additionally, communication researchers Harrigan and Braithwaite (2010), examined the discourse—systems of meaning—parents assign to communication about adoption in the visibly adoptive family. Framed by relational dialectics theory, this study of 40 parental narratives highlighted four themes: (a) pride and imperfection; (b) love, constraint and sacrifice; (c) difference, pride, and enrichment; and (d) legitimacy, expansion, similarity, and difference. These themes, while each independent, work together to contribute to how parents make sense of adoption. Similarly, Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, and Scharp (2014) analysis of online stories of domestic adoption as told by adoptive parents revealed how parents use such discourse to resist the notion of "adoption as 'second best'" (p. 257).

Finally, one small-scale exploratory study by British social scientists Jones and Hackett (2007) examined the experiences of 10 parent dyads (of domestically adopted children, the majority interracial) regarding adoption. Interpretative analysis exposed the theme of "adoption talk" within parental narratives about the adoption experience. Further detailed analysis of this theme exposed the sensitivities and challenges of adoption talk in general (Jones & Hackett, 2007).

While each of the above studies brought additional clarity to parents' beliefs and attitudes about adoption, and more specifically certain elements of adoption communication, no study to date has looked in depth at ACO, as defined by Brodzinsky (2005), between parent and child as perceived by parent. Further, while the level of ACO has been quantified through analysis of parent interviews and written responses no study to date has examined adoption communication from a phenomenological lens. That is to say, by in-depth exploration of the verbal and non-verbal, the intrapersonal and

interpersonal, the cognitive and affective, the "lived-experience" of adoptive parents beyond that of telling, and basic "adoption talk" and levels of accomplishment. Consistent with Brodzinsky's call for a greater attunement and empathy of parents' own thoughts and feelings about adoption (intrapersonal) as well as those of their adoptive child (intrafamilial), and building on the preliminary work of Jones and Hackett (2007), this study is the first to examine the ACO phenomenon.

Early Adolescence

Beyond these three levels, adoption communication occurs across the developmental stages of child and family. That is, it is an ongoing process tied in part to the child's developmental understanding of adoption (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Wrobel et al., 2003). For example, research indicates that although parents assume an early telling results in a clear understanding by the child that they are adopted, many children have very little understanding in the preschool years of what "being adopted" means (Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984), and thus the issue must be visited again and again as the child shifts through different developmental stages, all the way through to adulthood (Brodzinsky, 2011; Jones & Hackett, 2007; Wrobel et al., 2003).

Thus, as children and the families that raise them, move through certain developmental time periods, adoption communication needs change as does the experience within the family around adoption communication (Brodzinsky, 2011; Wrobel et al., 2003). With specific regard to children in middle childhood and early adolescence, these youth experience increased cognition and socioeconomic development which in turn leads to increased problem solving and understanding of family changes. This in turn

opens the door to increased awareness of birthparents' decisions regarding adoption and raises questions in the adoptive child about whether they were ever even "wanted" (Brodzinksy, 2011, p. 201). Second, as logical thought appears children may begin to realize that adoption, while a gain and cause for celebration in one family is equally a loss and cause for grief in another (the birth family) (Brodzinksy, 2011). Third, in developing a capacity to step into another's shoes and feel empathy for the other, the child may start to think about their birth parent's thoughts (Brodzinksy, 2011).

Adolescence, with its emergence of abstract thinking, builds on this middle childhood development bringing added changes such as an expanded understanding of the meaning and implications of adoption. Adolescents have the ability to grasp the permanence of adoption, positive or negative as this experience may be for them. Continued capacity to hold another's thoughts and feelings along with their own, leads to even more awareness of the birth parents' experience. Increased ability to conceptualize adoption as a societal construct has its pluses and minuses for the adolescent experience—it can be seen both as a resource and solution, but also as a less than optimal way of forming a family, or for that matter, being part of a family. Finally, adolescence is a period of identity development, made even more complicated because of the presence of two lives—one tied to the before, the birth family and one tied to the now, the adoptive family.

Prior quantitative research has analyzed factors both within the adolescent and within the adoptive home that play a role in ACO, however there is an absence of qualitative research into this key period. This study is the first to slow down and look with depth at ACO in the early adolescent, through the eyes, heart and mind of the parent

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raising the early adolescent. Research has theorized and confirmed that this time period is one of more give and take, greater bidirectional communication, simply put a period "beyond telling" in most adoptive households. Understanding the phenomenon of ACO in the family raising an early adolescent lends a greater understanding into what is happening, what is not happening and perhaps why.

Shared Social Reality

"From the cradle to the grave, humans construct and reconstruct the story of their identities" (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011, p. 180). Adoptive families, despite their lack of genetic links, are no different. In forming these stories, adoptive parents draw from existing cultural scripts to shape the stories that are told (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Consistent with Kirk's role-handicap theory of adoptive parenthood (1964), where cultural scripts are lacking, inaccurate or outdated adoptive families may struggle to understand their role and pass that on. Indeed, Jones and Hackett (2007) specifically highlight the value of developing stories of adoption that could be shared with other adopters to facilitate increased adoption communication openness, arguing that such stories could help adoptive parents reflect on their own circumstances and inform the development of stories around adoption, as well as "provide some sense of how other families negotiate the discussable and the undiscussable" (Jones & Hackett, 2007, p. 176).

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

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While prior research, some of it qualitative in nature, has shed light on certain aspects of the key process of adoption communication (entrance stories, online stories of adoption), no research has explored and reported on the full experience of ACO as it occurs in the adoptive family raising an early adolescent adopted prior to age three. Thus,

the purpose of this study was to step out of the statistical data and away from one-time telling and topic specific conversations (e.g. deciding to search for a birth parent) previously researched and into the lived-experience of ACO in the adoptive families. In furtherance of this, the study was specifically designed to explore the behavior, thoughts and emotions that adoptive parents experience regarding all aspects of adoption communication between themselves and their early adolescent children.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research

This study utilized a hybrid qualitative research design—focus groups and exposure to stimuli—in order to uncover the lived-experience of parents around Adoption Communication Openness. The deductive, inductive and interpretative nature of this qualitative research lead to a lush, descriptive understanding of these experiences.

Interpretive framework and associated philosophical beliefs.

In designing this study, I drew from a rich history of philosophical assumptions and epistemological theories.

The phenomenological tradition

Phenomenologists consider the primary scientific problem to be "how things get to be that way: how life acquires its natural quality" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 37). Additionally, consistent with the theory of a shared social reality, the phenomenological tradition of qualitative research embraces the notion that individuals orient to others by assuming they can and will reciprocate their perspective. Thus, individuals—through intersubjectivity—take a "leap of faith: if you were to trade places with me you would see situations the same way I do and vice versa" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 38). Through this "we-relation," individuals orient their actions toward a common sense of

relevance. Yet, it is only through the meaning placed on it, that action—the

contemplated—becomes the accomplished act. For example, by gaining insight into a

parent's motives for action the phenomenologist gains understanding into how the parent

accomplishes, or doesn't, ACO. That is to say, through a second-order, interpretative

examination of parental perspectives, feelings, and behaviors about their child's feelings

about adoption, the researcher gains insight into why ACO is difficult or easy (Willig,

2012).

The sociocultural tradition

As an adoptive parent and researcher, I also found the interpretative frameworks

of social constructivism and transformativism, with their ontological assumptions of

reality as encompassing multiple realities, well suited for this particular study. For it is

through an understanding of numerous families' experiences of adoption that the essence

of this phenomenon emerges. Additionally, the epistemological assumptions which

undergird social constructivist and transformative qualitative study allowed for a close

examination of the phenomenon by those who conduct and construct ACO work in the

family. It is these individuals, daily living the experience of adoption, who best shed light

on ACO, including what helps and hinders its accomplishment. Finally, it was through

this interpretative framework that the individual values of those engaged in the

phenomenon were best honored.

While some might argue that this dual approach to knowledge—that is

phenomenological as well as constructionist—was counterintuitive, I believe that the

nature of ACO called for exactly such a position in a focus group study design. ACO,

occurs both intrapersonally—informed by the *within* perspectives, feelings, and beliefs of

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the adoptive parent (Brodzinsky, 2006), as well as via the internalization of external

social constructions (Harrigan, 2010; Jones & Hackett, 2007; Kirk, 1964). By gathering

participating parents into focus groups to elicit dialogue regarding their lived experience

of ACO, I was seeking to gather both phenomenological knowledge (the intrapersonal,

inner reality of the parents) and constructionist knowledge (how the discourse of ACO is

reflexively formed and informed through group interaction and through the use of

stimuli).

Hybrid epistemological approach

Through the use of focus groups, open-ended questions, and the gathering and

analysis of discourse around stimuli, I sought a richer understanding of the internal

processes (phenomenological knowledge) as well as the influence of external processes

(constructionist knowledge) of adoption communication openness. This design approach

drew from Robinson and Mendelson (2012)'s and Nind and Vinha (2016)'s qualitative

research with focus groups and stimuli.

Traditionally, researchers seek to test a hypothesis about audience perception of

persuasiveness quantitatively through the use of Likert scales or quantitatively analyzing

responses to open-ended questions. However, through their hybrid approach, Robinson

and Mendelson (2012) argue, the "larger (thicker) sense of the full narratives people form

in response" to stimuli is lost, as well as the "chance to observe people as they process

that information in real time" (p. 335). For example, in expanding his design of audience-

participant testing beyond quantitative analysis following the introduction or

manipulation of stimuli (here National Geographic Magazine articles), to more fully

capture the stories that people construct when exposed to certain media texts, Mendelson

found he more fully captured the process and richness of meaning construction (as opposed to the effect of meaning construction). The use of focus groups allowed the researcher to "reveal the interactive nature of meaning construction off the stimulus" (Robinson & Mendelson, 2012, p. 336). While the study proposed herein does not venture into true mixed methodology as Robinson and Mendelson (2012)'s did, it definitively drew from its hybrid approach in that it sat squarely within the gathering of phenomenological knowledge (what is the lived experience of the adoptive parent around ACO) and the constructionist knowledge (how is that further deconstructed or reconstructed) following the introduction of stimuli regarding other's experiences of ACO?

Similarly, citing Coffey (2011)'s commentary that methodological innovation is vital to the future significance of qualitative research, Nind and Vinha (2016) turned to the vibrant interactive spaces of focus groups in their study into inclusive research. Nind and Vinha (2016) believed that in focus groups, the studied, through reflexivity, expose not just their reality, but "know it critically and…engage in re-creating knowledge in a communal way, transforming their understandings of themselves" (p. 11). By locating the "authority" away from the researched, and embedding it into the interactive space, the aim was to "embrace the praxis of naming the world collaboratively, and transformative[ly]" (Nind & Vinha, 2016, p. 11). While the study herein does not go as far as Nind & Vinha's—which created the stimulus within the group—the idea again emerged from their work that it is in the interactive space of the focus group, exposed to other's perspectives on adoption communication, that an additional form of knowledge

was revealed—the knowledge of how parents construct or deconstruct their perceptions and attitudes about adoption communication.

Researcher within the research design

Despite my philosophical and epistemological assumptions, throughout this study I was keenly aware of the need for the phenomenological researcher to bracket themselves out of the study, most specifically at the point of data collection and analysis, in an effort to set aside their own experiences and allow for the flow of new information. Given my extensive experience—both in my personal and professional life—with the phenomenon of adoption communication, it was imperative that I "engage in disciplined and systematic efforts" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22) to reveal and then set aside my beliefs, feelings and perceptions on adoption in general and ACO in particular.

I came to my passion for this work and particularly this research topic through personal experience. Several years ago, we adopted a child via international adoption. As she joined our family, we joined the ranks of the visibly-adoptive, culturally and racially diverse families that pepper American homes, neighborhoods and schools. Consistent with certain overseas adoption practice, we received no familial or historical information on our child (Evans, 2008).

Based on her adoptive status, and in the presence of this dearth of information, we have worked as parents to help her find her place in a new world, new family, and new identity. This work has been far from easy; indeed, it has been an ongoing struggle. A struggle to inform, but not inform too much. A struggle to support and empathize. A struggle to accurately—as much as is possible in the face of missing and/or painful

information[1]—form a cohesive narrative. A struggle against and within wider familial and societal beliefs about adoption generally, and what we should tell our child specifically.

The dialogue in our home began early, its origins tracing back to our adoption agency's pre-adoption training which included: (a) attendance at a conference in which we were—among other things—advised not to adopt in order to "rescue" a child; (b) meetings with other adoptive parents; and (c) reading a list of suggested books on adoption, among them Eldridge's (2009) *Twenty Things Adoptive Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*[2]. Amidst this preparation there was no overarching communication instruction beyond that of telling the child about their adoptive status.

Consistent with research findings, adoption dialogue in our home has been handled predominantly by me, her adoptive mother. I began early sharing books on adoption, some sappily sweet, some realistic. I had no idea if anything was sinking in, but I wanted to believe it was. Fairly quickly—at an age much younger than we expected—she took an active role in the dialogue. Since that time, this dialogue has moved from various stages of grief to a splitting away of cultural origins and acceptance of us as "the best" parents, to ongoing, weighty questions and insights regarding her birth family.

Along the way, I have grappled with our role in information dissemination, our spoken words and our silences—and the meaning behind both, as well as my own discussion—in front of her—with those outside our immediate family.

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[1] The veracity of which is always in flux, depending on who is providing the information (Leland, 2011; Mather, 2007).

[2] While Eldridge's writings shed considerable light and advice, some parents in my online support group argued against reading books like this citing the painful nature of what she reveals.

Outside of these direct experiences, additional layers have been added to our individual and collective encounters in adoption communication. These include residence in the multi-cultural society of Singapore; work in the US and Singapore as a parent peer mentor, speaker and writer on adoption; and my current graduate experience as family sciences researcher and clinical intern marriage and family therapist.

Through our move to Asia I became exposed to a societal view on adoption very different than the current US position. Adoption in Singapore is not common, and adoption communication is even more rare (Mohanty, 2012). Due to cultural and historical traditions, adoptive children are often not advised of their adoptive status, though this is slowly changing. During monthly adoption support group meetings, the Western and Eastern cultural split regarding if and how much to talk with your child about adoption became abundantly clear as some "local" adoptive parents shied away from discussing adoption at all, while ex pat adoptive parents attempted to more openly navigate this sensitive subject.

Most recently, in returning to graduate school I have found myself researching the very phenomenon I have lived as a parent and professional. On any given day I am immersed in the topics of attachment, family systems, child development and social-ecology as it informs the family, and I have found myself drawn continually back to the phenomenon of adoption communication.

In bracketing myself out of this study I have shared these personal experiences regarding adoption communication—as well as any and all assumptions regarding ACO—with my Thesis Committee in writing and verbally.

Additionally, in an ongoing effort to bracket myself and my beliefs out of the data collection and analysis I performed several other key tasks. For example, since the first seeds of this work began to germinate in my heart and mind, I kept a journal regarding my experiences as a researcher. This allowed me a means of sharing and processing my thoughts and feelings while also increasing my awareness of the need to keep those separate from those of my participants. Second, in an effort to further step out of the vacuum of my own lived experience I engaged with stakeholders in the field of adoption. Thus, my focus group guide for example, was not merely informed by my beliefs and biases, but rather is cultivated from the curiosities of many who seek to gain a better understanding into the phenomenon. Third, I utilized various measures to increase the rigor and trustworthiness of my qualitative analysis, which are discussed in greater depth below.

Design and Procedure

Participants

Following IRB approval, I recruited participants from parents attending adoption support and/or training gatherings in Kentucky. Specifically, I attended the 2018 Orphan Care Alliance annual conference and recruited volunteers by manning an exhibit table. Orphan Care Alliance is a non-profit organization providing training and support opportunities for prospective and current adoptive parents. In addition, recruitment flyers were posted on a local Facebook page which serves as an announcement venue for area adoption activities. I also used sampling criteria to narrow the possible participants from the overall population (which might include prospective adoptive parents as well as foster parents) to only those parents who: (a) were over the age of 18; (b) had completed all

legal adoption proceedings; (c) had adoptive children ranging in age from 10 to 14; (d)

adopted their children prior to the age of 3; (f) had personally advised their child of their

adoption status; (f) were not adopted themselves as children; and (h) did not have a

spouse already participating in the study.

Ultimately, 17 mothers volunteered to participate in one of three focus groups

held in two cities in Kentucky (Participant Demographics, Table 3.1). One focus group

(n=1) had 5 participants and was held at an area marriage and family therapist's office

unknown to any of the participants. Two other focus groups (n=2) had 7 and 5

participants respectively and were held at the University of Kentucky, Department of

Family Sciences Conference Room.

Of the mothers attending, 16 were White and one was Asian. All were married

living in heterosexual marriages. One was now divorced from the spouse with whom she

had adopted the children qualifying her for the study; this parent was now remarried and

maintained custody of her adoptive children. The majority had more than one adoptive

child in the home (n=11); of these, four had two adoptive children who fell within the

qualifying ages of 10-14. Several participants also had biological in addition to adoptive

children (n=6), and two had only one child (which was adoptive). Of the total number of

adoptive children qualifying participants for the study (21 among 17 participants) seven

identified as male, and 14 as female.

Finally, of the 17 mothers in the study, the majority had adopted internationally

from China (n=7), Guatemala (n=3), Korea (n=2), Ethiopia (n=1), Nepal (n=1), and

Kazakhstan (n=1). The remaining three mothers had adopted from private domestic

adoption (n=1) and public domestic (foster) care (n=2). Most of the mothers reported no

contact with their adoptive children's birth families though of those adopted within the US (n=2), one family reported a fully open adoption with the birth family, one reported some minimal contact, and one reported none. Of those who had adopted internationally only one reported contact with a birth sibling.

All participants received a $50 incentive payment for their time and travel.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Parent Race	Adoption	children meeting criteria	Child(ren)'s Age	Child(ren)'s race/ethnicity
Nora	White	transnational	2	11, 11	Asian, Asian
Cindy	White	transnational	1	12	Asian
Roberta	White	transnational	1	14	Asian
Sandra	White	public-domestic	1	11	White
Lisette	White	transnational	1	14	Asian
Lily	White	private-domestic	1	13	White
Mary	White	private-domestic	1	13	White
Juanita	White	transnational	2	14, 13	Asian, Asian
Laura	White	transnational	1	14	Asian
Esther	White	transnational	1	11	Asian
Catherine	Asian	transnational	1	10	Asian
Leslie	White	transnational	1	10	Black
Ida	White	transnational	2	14, 13	White-Hispanic, Asian
Kimber	White	transnational	1	12	White-Hispanic
Dorothy	White	transnational	1	13	White-Hispanic
Heidi	White	transnational	1	14	Asian
Nancy	White	transnational	2	14, 13	Asian, Asian

Data collection

Field issues were minimized by: (a) the use of a field guide/focus group guide (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Liamputtong, 2011) (Appendix A); (b) the recording of field notes; (c) the offering of references for adoption support, including the names of therapists versed in adoption; and (d) the recording via audio and visual equipment. The focus group guide utilized both open-ended questions in order to elicit the richest and least influenced responses. I paid particular attention to the design of this guide, working to further bracket out any assumptions and my personal experience through both consultation with stakeholders and reflexivity. Specifically, the focus group guide was developed in collaboration with adoption experts, including clinicians and researchers, as well as two adoptive parents and one birth mother. Additionally, while I informed the participants, I was an adoptive mother, I shared no other personal information and did not engage in any of the focus group discussion, relying instead on my intern therapy training to elicit responses through simple, non-leading questions and an empathic presence.

As a stimulus for further discussion, and in order to collect data on the role a different perspective plays on parental attitudes, beliefs and emotions around ACO, I administered three short monologues (see Appendix B) drawn from prior qualitative research regarding adoption and adoption communication half way through each focus group (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Robinson & Mendelson, 2012). Based on the theoretical underpinnings of the current study, monologues were selected for their diverse perspectives; their ability to portray parental empathy and conflicted emotions; and their ability to capture the emotional nature of the adoptive status (Darnell et al., 2017; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). As with the focus group guide, input on the selection of

these was elicited from the same adoption community stakeholders, as well as members of my thesis committee.

Finally, both the focus group guide and the stimuli were informed by developmental, ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1995), and adoption communication openness theories

Data analysis

I transcribed the first two focus groups removing all identifying material. The last one, while professionally transcribed following redaction of identifying material (changing personal names to pseudonyms), was heavily reviewed and edited by me for accuracy. Observational data, including bodily response (e.g. tears, reticence in speech, laughter and tone) were also added to the transcripts via inserted notations within the lines of the script (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). The transcriptions totaled 87 single-spaced pages of text.

Thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006), with additional guidance from Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, and Ponterro (2017) and Goldberg and Allen (2015), in order to define themes within (and between) the focus groups.

I began this inductive analysis with line-by-line open coding of segments of data which initially resulted in 250 segments of coded text. This process included numerous readings of the transcripts with accompanying highlighting and margin notations, followed by the creation of notecards of these initial key segments of text. As codes emerged in one transcript's key segments of text, I returned to earlier transcripts for reanalysis. In the wake of preliminary coding of all three transcripts, I began to refine and

reduce codes using a joint process of collating the notecards into groups of similar meaning as well as constant comparison with the transcripts. This process resulted in the reduction of the text segments from 250 segments of open code to 27 segments of code to ultimately 14 segments of focused code. For example, the initially identified text "I'll ask questions about those [other adoptive] friends like…" became part of the ultimate code "segue," and codes of "guessing" and "puzzling things out" were absorbed into the code "detective work."

As coding proceeded, overarching themes began to arise that were symbolic of the phenomenon of adoption communication within the family, such as "parental desires around communication" and "tools and coping measures." As with the open-coding process, these themes were continually compared and contrasted against the highlighted transcripts, the coded segments and key quotations. Ultimately, four key themes, with further specification denoted by sub-themes, were identified by means of a thematic map. Throughout this process I kept handwritten memos of each step of the process as well as updated Word documents of all codes, themes, exemplars, and applicable quotes.

Validation strategies

In addition to the validation tactics used in the design of this study including stakeholder consultation and reflexive journaling I employed several strategies during the analysis phase which are of note (Angen, 2000; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Tracy, 2010).

First, in order to continually bracket any personal assumptions, I approached each analysis session with the mental question, "What does the data say about *these* parents'

lived-experience regarding *ACO* with their *early adolescents.³"* Thus, I was not seeking

what I thought I should see within the data, based on some preconceived notion I had as

researcher or adoptive parent. Nor was I seeking pat answers to specific questions I asked

as part of the focus group process. Rather, inductive analysis required me to don an open

mind and heart so that I could hear—and thus bring forth—what these parents wanted the

academic and clinical world to know about the process of ACO within their families.

Second, as a means of increasing the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis I

utilized several methods of triangulation. Part of this involved consultation with a code-

checker who is a doctoral candidate within the Department of Family Sciences at the

University of Kentucky. This person was chosen consistent with the idea of employing a

listening guide method which focuses on multiple readings of qualitative data by a

"'interpretative community' that is diverse with respect to life experiences and social

position," (Syed & Nelson, 2015). While trained in family sciences and also a licensed

marriage and family therapist associate, the code-checker has no personal experience

with adoption (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1996). The code-checker was trained using a

thematic analysis guideline which included the theoretical underpinnings of the study and

Braun & Clarke (2006) steps of thematic analysis.

Initially, the code-checker was provided with a clean copy of each transcript for

initial review. The code-checker was then provided with copies of each step of my

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[3] As several families had more than one adoptive child living in the home which did not fit the criteria of early adolescence care was made to only code segments of text pertaining to the early adolescent adoptive child adopted prior to age three. In addition, care was made to not code segments of reminiscent text regarding early adoption communication experiences which occurred early in the adoptive experience, (e.g. tales of how they first told their child they were adopted).

analysis, along with applicable segmented text and exemplar quotations. Once the opening 27 codes were identified, the code-checker was consulted to check the accuracy of the inductive analysis, that is, did codes and accompanying examples of segmented data under each code accurately reflect the lived experience of the participants regarding ACO? Discussions ensued, and codes were further adjusted. Next, the code-checker assisted with refining these primary codes into 14 final focused-codes. Lastly, the code-checker was consulted during the process of integrating the focused codes into key themes of the phenomenon of ACO. While ultimate power regarding thematic analysis was left in my hands, the code-checker did serve to both confirm and question—with queries such as "tell me more about why that should be coded?"—the analytic process thus lending the inductive analysis further independent trustworthiness. An audit trail was kept of this process which included dated documents and tracked changes of my and the code-checker's suggestions, questions and ultimate modifications (Syed & Nelson, 2015).

Another aspect of my triangulation process involved consultation on several occasions with Rachel Farr, PhD, a professor in the Department of Psychology and a member of my thesis committee. Dr. Farr has extensive prior research experience with adoption communication in general and with analysis of ACO in particular.

A final aspect of my triangulation process involved attempts at member checking of codes and ultimate themes with a randomly selected member of the focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2009). Unfortunately, this member-check did not result in any response to the questions:

1) Does this match your experience? If not, why?

2) Do you want to change anything? If so, what?

Ethical issues

Ethical considerations began early in this qualitative study and continues through to the writing, presentation and publication of these research findings with specific attention paid to the fact that this is qualitative research on adoptive families (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lo, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2019).

First, at the early stages of this study I strove to examine my experiences and assumptions regarding both adoption communication and my role as a qualitative researcher. As noted, I also reached out to key stakeholders in an effort to step outside of my biases. In doing so, I endeavored to develop a respectful working relationship with other researchers, clinicians and parents all of whom informed this study in some way. Following this initial work, but prior to collection of data, or participant contact, I obtained approval from the University of Kentucky IRB.

Moving into the study I worked to meet my ethical duties of respect for the persons involved. I informed my participants of the purpose of the study, that the study was voluntary, and that I had personal experience with the experiences to be investigated. I also protected my participants from physical, emotional and psychological harm by protecting their anonymity, respecting their time and space, and by recognizing the sensitive nature of the phenomenon being investigated. Specifically, because this study sought entry into an intimate process in the lives of adoptive parents, I used special care during and after data collection. I was also especially aware that participating in a focus group could cause distress to the family and the adoptive child, should the participating parents feel the need to engage in dialogue that had not been conducted before or increase

dialogue before the child is developmentally ready. These risks were minimized by: (a) informing participants that their participation might cause them stress, and reminding them that participation in the group was voluntary and they could leave the focus group session at any time; (b) sharing of adoption support group and parent peer support information; and (c) providing a list of clinicians and agencies who work with adoptive families and children in the areas of adjustment and attachment.

Following data collection, I assigned fictitious names to each participant and removed all other identifying information. In reporting, I have striven to honestly set forth the results obtained, keeping in mind to shield my participants from identification, while also making sure that it is their voice, ultimately, that is reflected here. Following defense of this thesis I will give all participants and stakeholders who aided me in the study, a copy of the report, remembering also to thank anyone who had a significant role in this research including but not limited to the participants.

RESULTS

Four central themes, each with thematic subcategories, reveal the adoptive mothers' lived experience regarding the phenomenon of adoption communication with early adolescent children. These themes are presented from the outside in, moving from the logistical and perhaps logical, the meat and potatoes of the process, to the interior environs, where the surprising and subtle lurked.

It's a Deep and Broad Experience

> *[O]ne definitely writes endlessly about things. I have read a few things that [this child has] written, but I don't push it. I want them4 to express all that in their journals and if they let me read it, they will come and throw it on my bed, and they will run. They do a lot of hiding. They've been under the covers a lot whenever their struggling....they will hide their face, but they will say those little mean things...., "well you can't tell me what to do because you are not my real mom." (Cindy)*

When talking in general terms about what adoption communication is within their family mothers reported a range of experiences that fell into three intertwined subthemes: the nature of the communication, how the outside pushes in—wanted or not, and the role of the child's developmental stage (see Table 4.1).

The nature of the communication

> *Right there in the grocery aisle in a small town...they would bring up adoption and want to have those complex conversations out in the open in front of everybody. (Juanita)*

Parents painted a vivid portrait of the breadth and depth of this work in their discussions about when, where and in what way they verbally communicate regarding adoption. Descriptions ranged from "teeny, tiny bits" of information passed from parent to child, to more "formal" discussions back and forth between family members to informal passing remarks made by a child when introducing his mother as, "not my real mother." Adoption "stories," often making an entrance in the early years of adoptive

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[4] Cognizant of the guidelines recently established in Lo, Grotevant and McRoy (2019) identifying pronouns have been changed to the gender neutral they, them, theirs to add an additional layer of anonymity to these reported results.

childhood, were also still being exchanged from parent to child and sibling to sibling, told and retold at bedtime or on special occasions at the behest of the child. For example, Kimber reported that her child "likes to hear the story. So sometimes before bed, as soon as it's bedtime, [they ask], 'tell me the story again'" while Nancy shared, "and the [adopted sibling] will say, 'You know—you know what Mom thought when she first saw you. She's told you a million times.' And I said, 'I know, but I love telling [this child].'"

The topics and tone of these interchanges were equally broad. Parents could be engaged in intellectual discussions about genetics (arising now in part due to the prevalence of DNA testing) just as much as hard questions about the when's, why's and who's of their early days, months and years[5] before adoption; they might be engaged in positive and upbeat dialogue about what title to use when referring to a birth parent or they may be engaged in angry or tearful interchanges with a child caught between two familial worlds. Mothers especially highlighted the timing and location of their communication experience. For example, participants in different groups noted conversations in personal spaces such as cars, at bedtime and when "they get me alone." However, one mother commented on her child's choice of community spaces, such as the local grocery to open discussion. Additionally, communication was just as likely to arise "after fights" and "meltdowns," as well as on special holidays that evoke a tone of family or remind the child that their birth mother or father might also be thinking of them on that day.

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[5] All children reported on by their mothers were adopted before the age of 3.

Interestingly, when asked to share openly about what the term adoption communication meant to them, the mothers were just as likely to share about non-verbal experience as they were verbal. Stories of a broad range of activities flowed forth in each focus group from poignant reports of the child "hiding" or "shutting down" to requests by a child for time together to hug and cuddle when feeling separate. Parents were just as likely to share that they showered their children with hugs and kisses or stayed present to soothe uncomfortable feelings as they were to enter into verbal discussion about whatever was bothering the child. In particular two mothers shared about sitting with their children and crying about an aspect of their adoptive status.

Several parents also recounted the creative ways that their children engaged with them—or even the outside world—in "communicating" their inner conversation. For example, while Cindy told of her child's writings (above), Juanita reported:

> *[My child] dances their emotions. So, I kind of thanked the choreographer for all the things that she brought into our lives, unbeknownst to her that touch sensitive subjects because they have opened that door to more complex conversations.*

Whatever the manner—verbal or non-verbal—it was abundantly clear from all three focus groups that adoption communication in some form or fashion is "always" or "ongoing" in some way, even if to the inexperienced eye it does not appear so. It is also both premeditated and wholly surprising and spontaneous. Finally, like most things in the realm of parenting they related that their attempts could be both successful and unsuccessful at times.

The outside world pushes in

> *I've sensed discomfort [in my child]...when people keep asking us
> which of the kids are biologically related. So, it's almost that sense
> when we are out, and it brings out the reality of their adoptedness and
> you can see them getting impatient like 'why does it matter?' (Leslie)*

Across the board parents noted the visibleness or non-visibleness of their family's

adoptive status. For example, the parents who were different in racial or ethnic origin

than their child (n=14) reported the "reality of the difference" of their family, which

reality in turn drove intrusive questions and comments from outsiders and in some

situations, even family. These questions/comments were not limited to exchanges

between the adoptive parent and child and a third party but, given the child's age (see

"developmental stage" below), now included conversations between the child and their

friends or teachers (exclusive of the parent), which conversations then drove further

conversation between mother and child. Some of this dialogue was instigated by the

outsider, however in a few situations the child played an equal role in driving the outside

discussion.

This awareness of the role of visibility which draws the outside world into the

experience of adoption communication was even noted by parents who shared the same

race/ethnicity of their adoptive child. They experienced the opposite effect, that of being

able to walk through life without the intrusion.

Intrusion didn't just involve outside actors, however. Across all three focus

groups there was a loud acknowledgement of the role that media—books and

movies/television—continues to play in non-verbal and verbal adoption communication

in the home. Parents agreed on the struggle to select books and movies, and the

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experience of being blindsided by a rather sensitive or triggering scene in a movie that

they had not been prepared for. They shared many of the same experiences around

movies such as *Stuart Little, Rapunzel* (also known by Disney's title *Tangled*), and *Meet*

the Robinsons. They also noted the role that other adoptive parents and/or more aware

individuals played in warning them about certain books and films. Heidi related this

experience,

> *My sister adopted a child from [a foreign country] a few years before I*
> *did. If she hadn't done hers, I would never have felt I could go through*
> *mine. But they watched a movie. I forget what it's called but it's- it's a*
> *very scary place. A scary school that's also an orphanage. And [her*
> *child]…sent a copy to my [child], giving it as a Christmas gift. And my*
> *Mom was able to say, "No. Don't watch that movie." I was like, "Okay.*
> *Thanks for the clue."*

This exchange captures the negative but also, perhaps positive aspects of the

outside pushing into the mother-child adoption communication.

Developmental stage

This sub-theme centered heavily around both the shift that has occurred in the

nature of adoption communication between parent and child as well as the topics being

covered at this age. Even for parents where there was not a lot of verbal adoption

communication, there was an increased awareness that the child's adoptive status was

hanging in the air anyway.

First, all three mother groups agreed that they were no longer entirely driving the

communication—whatever form that took. As one parent summed it up, "now they are

old enough to have an opinion about going to a [cultural event] and they don't want to

anymore. When they were little, we took them, and now it's, 'well this is your choice.'"

Similarly, several mothers reported that the child's understanding of "family" and their

role in that family lead to not only greater "curiosity" and therefore, questions but also more "mature" dialogue than encountered at a younger age. It has moved from a drive forward lead by the parent to one wholly or in part owned by the child. Outside connections, as noted above, propels some of this increased awareness. For example, Cindy noted the role that her child's friends' questions as well as classroom curriculum had on increasing dialogue occurring outside and inside the home.

Yet, maturity did not always lead to an increase in communication, for just as much as one child can begin to push mom to talk more, another child—even in the same household—can begin to push back more. A child at this stage can own the "shut down" and "hiding behaviors" that Cindy reported about above as much as another child can own the pushing in, seeking answers to questions. As well, a child at this age can on the one hand be "so emotional…[while another] is so together—or wants to appear together." As the parent of many an early adolescent can attest, "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink."

Second, the issue of identity development was heard in the voices of these mothers as they shared about this developmental stage of adoption communication with their child[6]. Several mothers reported discussions with their children about DNA testing, the origins of their birth parents, as well as the key role that race plays for some. Leslie explained it this way, recounting her beliefs about her child's current needs,

> *"I need to understand my identity as a person of color and as a person—as a transracial adoptee—in this family." Like the questions*

[6] This discussion around identity development was elicited without any prompting from the investigator.

[from them] are more about, "how do I fit in?" and "who am I?" more
than what happened, like "how did I get here?"

Yet again, the individuality of the experience of adoption communication and identity development shown through in what one parent shared, "I have [a child] who just entered the 'Um, I'm not [Asian] today'" and in another mother's comment that her child at this stage was "so concerned about fitting in."

Table 2 Theme One

Theme	It's Deep and Broad	
Sub-themes	Codes	Quote
Nature of Communication	- verbal and nonverbal - questions & conversation - ongoing - situations and place driven	"…[R]ight there in the grocery aisle in a small town…she would bring up adoption and want to have those complex conversations out in the open in front of everybody."
Outside Pushes In	- intrusive and supportive "visibleness" can drive it - movies, books, curriculum	"I've sensed discomfort [in my child]…when people keep asking us which of the kids are biologically related."
Developmental Stage	- child driving it more - just want to be "normal" - tied to identity development - child more open/more withdrawn	"Like the questions from them are more about, 'How do I fit in?' and 'Who am I?' more than what happened like, 'How did I get here?'"

It's an Experience of Hard Work

Most of it is when [my child] is way out of whack and has meltdowns,
then I know something has triggered them and we try to talk it through
to see what was sad or what they're thinking. See what we can figure
out the bottom line is, and what often is, is questions about adoption,
the unknown things that [the child] doesn't know, that we don't know.
So sometimes it is sitting on the floor crying and me trying to control
myself from getting mad. (Kimber)

This theme is about the parental work that these mothers reported as part of their adoption communication experiences and includes three key sub-themes: how the work does or doesn't get done, the responsibility of the work and the focus of the work (see Table 4.2).

How the work does or doesn't get done

The focus group discussions revealed that mothers use many different techniques and tools to accomplish adoption communication with their child. Yet for many, even the ones with a more open communication style, at times a myriad of things got in the way.

In order to accomplish talk, about half of the mothers related being direct with their children. "Asking", "wondering aloud" and "offering" were often a means mothers used to get, or keep, the conversation going. Lisette recounted, "we've just always talked about it….Besides the fact we look different…We tell them they can ask anything they want to ask." Slightly less direct were reports such as Esther's who "gives just enough information to satisfy whatever questions they were asking."

Yet for others detective work such as puzzling or guessing, anticipating, hypothesizing and evidence gathering came in handy when trying to increase communication. This was repeated across all groups in great detail. For example, parents talked about attempts to get birth family/ethnicity information via DNA testing or other sleuthing methods. Specifically, Heidi's work in country when she traveled to adopt reflected the efforts of several other parents to gather information at the time of adoption to be shared later, "I went back to the orphanage to talk to them. 'Is there anything else you can tell me about them?'" Nancy recounted continuing to seek information to share

with her child by sending letters every so often to her child's country to check if the birth family has come looking for the child.

Beyond tangible evidence gathering, when children were not sharing or talking or were too emotionally upset to do so, parents reported resorting to wondering, hypothesizing or putting themselves in their child's shoes before offering to talk. Such behavior was done in order to resolve upset (tears and/or anger) or get the ball rolling when they could "see the wheels spinning" but there was no talk. Esther summed this up in more detail with these thoughts, "I could see the gears grinding and them not saying a lot. And I said, 'Do you want to ask me some questions.'" Even where it got nowhere verbally, the mothers' experience included nonverbal awareness that created a path between parent and child regarding the child's adoptive status,

> *[My child] put the picture of themselves and their biological mother up and then the baby book…up in their room…displayed and that was interesting…. On the other hand, when I have asked them if they wanted to call their biological mother…they said, "No." So it's interesting. (Lily)*

Parents also relied on nonverbal means such as the use of spaces traditionally regarded as "safe" for sensitive talk (see above), laughing among themselves in the group discussion to one mother's rhetorical comment, "don't all these conversations happen in the car?!" Finally, two parents reported on using their other adopted children (non-biological siblings of the child) to drive the conversation where the child showed no interest in talking with the parent.

Most poignant perhaps was how one parent relied on their own past experience of parental loss as a springboard to grasping their child's experience and to be better able to realistically discuss things with them:

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I just tried to make it, um, tried to be as realistic as possible because I knew from my own experience my Dad—after they divorced—he just… he was out of the picture…he just couldn't be part of our lives. And so, I would have that fantasy. I didn't want [my child] to have that fantasy that, you know, they were going to be able to go and be with their uh birth mom and that was going to be roses. (Kimber)

Even experiences of anger and sadness by the child were shared as segues to increased conversation where the parent and child came into a moment of deeper connection following upset or "meltdowns":

When [my child]'s gotten mad at me [and said], "I want to go home. I want to go home." I say, "If we did take you home, and you met your birth mom, what—what would you want then…? Would you want to stay with her?' And they said, "No, I just want to hug her, and I want to know what her favorite color is."

Despite all this direct and indirect effort to keep the flow of adoption communication going, mothers also had lots of discussion about things that prevented openness. For example, one mother reported that her own over-analysis and anxiety got in the way of her being able to communicate openly, while another reported that her over-analysis of what her child was thinking made her too pushy about communication. Yet another noted the need for her own self-care, saying, *"if I'm not taking care of myself…I don't think I can handle these – those conversations as well. I feel I am better when I am participating in self-care."* Still another parent bravely shared how their own "neglect" in failing to talk about adoption possibly resulted in their child creating an invalid fantasy narrative about their birth family.

Mothers described their children also playing a role in halting the flow by "shutting down" and/or not approaching the parent. One parent highlighted the finality of this with these words,

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> *We just ask them questions and let them know. Um, they still don't*
> *know their story because they actually don't want to. We ask, "Are you*
> *ready?" And they say, "I'm not ready mom." And I said, "Ok."*
> *(Catherine)*

Another parent described their child's behavior as less direct but still stifling; "[my child] shows pretty much no interest in it…I point it out to them sometimes [how their friends are also adopted], and they haven't noticed."

The responsibility

As with all work, most especially the task of raising one's child, the experience of adoption communication was reported on with added seriousness by the participants. This experience is perhaps best summed up this way,

> *Pressure. Responsibility. Stress. I mean I think that all parents feel that*
> *about raising – raising any kid – but I feel extra pressure. (Lisette)*

Across the board, all mothers but one related or agreed with this sensation of ongoing, overwhelming work with regard to the process of adoption communication, even when actual dialogue about adoption was not occurring. For example, they discussed the sense of needing to be on guard all the time, prepared for anything so as not to be blindsided. One mother wanted to be ready so as not to be "too slow in my processing," while another noted, "I don't want to say the wrong thing." The toll of this constant pressure—even in the absence of verbiage—is evident in Juanita's words above about needing to make time for self-care or risk not being able to handle the talk as well.

Hand in hand with the need for self-care to balance out this heavy responsibility, came reports of needing to be "prepared" in order to ward off surprise and thus, parental missteps. Some of this preparation had a more formal appearance as with Ida who shared, "I used to go to every adoption class there was…because I wanted to be prepared as

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possible for everything." Other parents noted the almost constant obligation of monitoring their own emotions and keeping these in check in order to face whatever may come up in the best way possible for the child. Lily explained it this way, "I am working on like every minute of every day not passing on my stress and putting my struggles and my labels, my prejudice, my whatever…on my children." In an entirely different group, the persistent need to—all in the same breath—guard yet be open is echoed in a slightly different way in Leslie's narrative,

> *[I]t goes back to my wanting to protect them, but I still try to talk myself into a place that's saying, "I'm prepared for that conversation, but I'm also prepared for that conversation, but I'm also prepared for…." I need to help them however that looks. And that's scary for sure to think about but I also feel a responsibility."*

The focus

On top of the weightiness of this communication work, the theme of parental work also encompassed descriptions by the participants of all the varied tasks that needed to be accomplished by them. Their experiences ran the gamut from needing to plant seeds to protecting their child to correcting misinformation. The vast majority of mothers put heavy emphasis on a few key missions:

- to be "open" and "honest",

- to build "confidence" and "identity",

- to instill feelings of "love", "connection" and "perman[ency]", and

- to avoid compounding the child's "pain" or "trauma."

Leslie summed it up this way,

> *I think a big part of it is honesty, that's what comes to mind with [communication]. Is that anything related to the adoption story always*

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gets back to how can I convey information about the stories as honestly as possible….[H]ow can it be done in a way that's telling the truth of the story because that's their story to own and to be able to understand."

While Sandra—to rousing agreement from the members of her focus group—used these words,

I wanted [my child] to feel comfortable with it…confident in it…that they weren't rejected by their [birth] mother. That they were—that it wasn't their fault. I just want them to feel okay with this. Like how I present it to them, like what I say. I want them to feel accepted, that they're a good person.

Finally, several parents incorporated the child's birth family into their communication work, saying their ultimate goal was wanting to help the child connect with their birth parents through DNA testing or birth parent search if possible. A few noted wanting to avoid any possessiveness on their part that might prevent a possible reunion. As part of this making room for the birth parent—in reality or simply in their heart—several parents shared about guarding any of their own negative feelings they have for the birth parent (due to the birth parent's behavior that lead to the ultimate separation between birth parent and child) from the child. Other mothers shared that they felt part of their responsibility was to be "honest" with both the positive as well as negative information in their possession. Two mothers found that this meant they had to provide a "dose of reality" where the child was fantasizing about how much better their life would have been if they had not been adopted.

Table 3 Theme Two

Theme Two	It's Hard Work	
Sub-theme	Codes	Quote
How It Does or Doesn't Get Done	• detective work • using safe spaces/situations • parent's anxiety/over-analysis • child's "hiding/shutting down"	"We just ask them questions and let them know. Um, they still don't know their story because they actually don't want to. We ask, 'Are you ready?' And they say, 'No, 'I'm not ready mom.' And I said, 'Ok.'"
The Responsibility	• overwhelming pressure • need for preparation, self-care • ongoing analysis/thinking • balancing act •	"[I]t goes back to my wanting to protect them, but I still try to talk myself into a place that's saying. 'I'm prepared for that conversation, But I'm also prepared for that conversation, but I'm also prepared for…' I need to help them however that looks. And that's scary for sure to think about but I also feel a responsibility."
The Focus	• build connection • build confidence & identity • to be honest, and open • to not compound child's pain • to incorporate birth family	"I wanted [my child] to feel comfortable with it…confident in it…that they weren't rejected by their [birth] mother. That they were—that it wasn't their fault. I just want them to feel okay with this…like how I present it to them, like what I say. I want them to feel accepted, that they're a good person."

It's an Emotional Experience

> *I just have to say to myself, "You know who you are dealing with here.*
> *Don't have your feelings hurt. They don't mean [to hurt you]." Then*
> *they might be hugging onto me or clinging, or you know, snuggling up*
> *to me at the very next moment. (Nancy)*

This theme is about the emotionality of the experience of adoption communication. This emotional experience played out in both heart and head and is best summed up in the two subthemes 1) Intrapersonal and Interpersonal and 2) Interior Dialogue (see Table 4.3).

Intrapersonal and interpersonal

Much like the breadth and depth reflected in the overall experience of adoption communication with early adolescents, the mothers' shared emotional encounters were also wide ranging. However, these opposing feelings were often felt within the same situation and with the same child, as indicated in Nancy's words above. These emotions arose in both individual experience—intrapersonally—as well as when engaged with the child.

For example, several mother's talked about their own fear: fear of the child rejecting a particular narrative the parent had created, fear that the child would rather be with their birth parent, fear that they will do this adoption communication work all wrong, and fear of the unknown—what's lurking around the next corner? For several of the mothers this fear was under much of their reports of this work being "overwhelming" and "stress[ful]" and "a lot of pressure."

Another strong emotion was sadness. Sadness was expressed in discussions when thinking about the prospect of sharing painful information with their child. For example, Nancy shared, "I think it's sad—you known on my behalf—my kids have to have these thoughts that you know, questions that may not be able to be answered." For several mother's this experience of sadness wasn't limited to their thoughts about their adoptive child but extended to the birth parents. Cindy talked of "longing" to be one large family

with her children's birth families. Nancy summed it as "compassion and just really sorry for what [the birth mother] had to go through."

These discussions about the emotions experienced in the moment of contemplation revealed positive feelings as well. Mothers reported feeling "grateful" their child wanted to know his birth parents and how "lucky" they were in being able to parent this child. One expressed "joy" when thinking about their child's birth parents while another said her joy came from when her child "open's up" about adoption. Yet another said she was "glad that we've had some of these conversations."

Beyond the intrapersonal, the mothers reported strong emotions when engaged with their child in the task of adoption communication. They shared of going "right there" with the child in their emotions, mirroring the child's emotions—sadness with sadness or anger with anger. Ida reported "crying together" over her child's inability to know their birth parents while Nora tearfully shared her heartbreak at seeing her child's heartbreak,

> *I was heartbroken [seeing my child struggle with historical information]. It was hard to watch – (parent cries). "Well why would they leave me there? How did they know it was a [safe place]?" Of course, you try to make it as nice as you can. "Well honey she left you somewhere safe." They're that deep thinker and they're like, "She did not! What if—what if….?" Yeah, tough! And it was like, "Whew!" (shaking hands like explosion in front of her face as she cries).*

Cindy said it felt "like a stick in the knife kind of thing," when her child yelled, "Well you are not my real mother." Juanita candidly shared this exchange with her child that left them both frustrated with their situation,

> *What did bother me was the days they started talking about how much better their life would be. Okay, I was like, it's time for a dose of*

reality. "You know what? You would probably be working on a farm.
Not have time for school."

Yet, the mothers did not always "go there" with the child; several told how they worked hard to keep their feelings under wraps (Nancy above), trying to not let their child "get to them." Nora summed it up with her bodily expression this way, "…whenever they bring a topic up. I find myself going (Nora sighs and moves her hand across her chest in a gesture of calm, bringing her shoulders down and body into a soft position)."

Finally, guilt was an emotion shared by a few of the mothers. One had guilt over being able to raise this child, instead of the birth parent. One expressed guilt over "doing [my child] a disservice by not talking about it as much," a guilt felt despite the fact that her child "never really wanted to." Leslie explained her feelings of guilt this way,

> *We have double mom-guilt. We have to carry the mom guilt for*
> *ourselves just being parents who screw up, but then also carry that*
> *weight with them of the losses that they've had and that we were never*
> *able to protect them or shield them from that and the hurt they've*
> *experienced but that we were not responsible for, but we carry guilt*
> *from.*

Interior dialogue

Driving the diverse emotions behind the experience of adoption communication was a plethora of interior dialogue. This dialogue was between the mother and herself as well as with her child and birth family members. The dialogue the mothers had with themselves was weighted more critically and often involved questioning or blaming themselves, such as:

- "My child's pain is my fault."

- "I am not doing this [adoption talk] right."

- "I'm selfish [because I chose a country where my child wouldn't be able to know their birth parent]."

Mary—to the agreement of her group—shared, "I think lots of times, I think in my mind, 'Don't mess up. Don't say the wrong thing.' Whatever the wrong thing is, I am not sure." Leslie said she heard this in her head, "Did I do it the right way? Did I help in healing, or did I make it worse?" Lisette says this to herself, "I'm not saying it right. I'm not doing it right."

Interior dialogue about and/or with the child occurred equally as much; several mothers tied these into the feelings of overwhelm and stress. These conversations were strongest when the child: (a) appeared to be troubled (overly quiet or different from their normal selves); (b) was triggered/could be triggered (i.e. by something someone said or by a movie); or (c) was especially curious. Comments included such beliefs/thoughts about their child regarding their adoptive status as:

- my child needs/wants to know more;

- my child doesn't want to feel pain;

- my child doesn't want to hurt me with their questions/comments;

- this is also hard work for the child;

- you cannot fool this child;

- when my child talks about it, it means they want to know;

- my child just wants to be normal;

- my child is afraid or in pain;

- my child thinks that I don't understand their situation; and

- what my child says doesn't mean that is what they are thinking.

Mothers also reported interior conversations between themselves and with their child. Catherine shared, "I read more into it when they ask me questions. 'What is this? Where is this coming from? What are you feeling? Is this your identity crisis or something else?" Similarly, Nancy had this conversation with her child playing in her head, "How much is the right amount for you to know? I honor your question, [but] I'm not sure if the entire sordid story is good to know."

Finally, birth parents also appeared in this internal dialogue. Juanita shared how she prayed for her children's birth parents and want to "telepathically send a message [so] they would know that [their child is] doing well and that they are happy and content." Two mothers who have more information about the birth parents mentioned thinking and having a difficult, one-sided conversation with them. Nancy shared it this way,

> *Well, I think about my [child]'s. I do have mixed feelings. Some days when their behavior is real intense, I will think, "Damn you for drinking and taking drugs. I know, what an amazing mind this child has, and I wish you hadn't behaved in a way that has caused them to have to struggle, you know, against their impulse all their life." And then you know of course, in a calmer moment, you realize she didn't choose. You know it wasn't like, "This will be fun. I'll use a lot of alcohol and drug." So, for her in particular just because I know her behavior very strongly impacted [my child's] disability, I'll occasionally feel angry toward her. And then more often compassionate and just really sorry what she had to go through.*

Table 4 Theme Three

Theme	It's Emotional	
Sub-theme	Codes	Quote
Intrapersonal	• fear & sadness • guilt • grateful & lucky • frustration & anger	"I think it's sad—you know, on my behalf—my kids have to have these thoughts that you know, questions that may not be able to be answered."
Interpersonal	• mirror child's emotions • work hard to keep own emotions in check • longing & compassion for child and birth parent	"I was heartbroken [seeing my child struggle with historical information]. It was hard to watch (parent cries)….Of course, you try to make it as nice as you can….Yeah tough! And it was like, 'Whew!' (shaking hands like explosion in front of her face as she cries)."
Interior Dialogue	• conversations with self, child and birth parent • blaming/soothing self • beliefs and thoughts about what child needs or wants	"I read more into it when they ask me question. 'What is this? Where is this coming from? What are you feeling? Is this your identity crisis or something else?'"

It's an Experience of Loss and Grief

> *I came to the realization that, "No, I know nothing about their first…months." And I had to deal with that grief. And then help them deal with that grief. (Juanita)*

This theme is perhaps the strongest of all the themes and is about loss and the grief that follows this loss, when they experience adoption communication in all its forms. This theme was vehemently repeated and its strength and poignance was surprising. It was also woven throughout the other themes. It encompasses three sub-themes: loss of knowledge, loss of connection and loss of control (see Table 4.4).

Loss of knowledge

In all three focus groups the majority of mothers talked about the effect the loss of their child's prior life-history has on adoption communication. This lack of information

causes pain as well as ambivalence, confusion as well as grief for what is lost. "It's hard to look your own child in the eye, and say, 'I have no idea'" (Leslie). It brings up "real sadness…because I know how much they have lost and how much they wish they knew, and they can't know what it is" (Ida). Several mothers also commented on how this loss of information leads to a loss of "knowing" that can be final, especially the longer it has been since the adoption or the weaker any documentation was in the birth/adoption process. For example, mothers who adopted from overseas universally shared about this loss, even where some had been given basic information. Many of these mothers also questioned whether the provided information was accurate or just a "party line" that the government and/or case worker offered to appease prospective adoptive parents. For example, three of the mothers in one focus group had this exchange:

> *Lisette: So that's hard…and…like…yeah…I mean we know some of what they told us, but we won't know if it's true so that's then the next…you know do we even say anything? Because we don't know if it's true.*
>
> *Nora: Yes, so that's where I practice my verbiage a lot. How can I word this that might…you know, "this is what we think happened, but we won't ever know…? This is what most mothers feel like and…"*
>
> *(Mary shakes her head in agreement)*
>
> *Lisette: Like I don't know how they do it in [another country] but in [child's birth country]…like there's a verbiage…what the truth is and so like…will we give that to them? Because it's what we have. But it's probably not true. Will I just give it to them and say, "well it's probably not true."*

A few mothers knew other mothers—or came to know them in the focus groups—who had painful historical information. The mothers who had none, or very little information then wondered aloud if it wouldn't be easier to have "negative information rather than no information at all." However, a mother who had difficult information

countered that perhaps it was more positive to have none. Similarly, in another group a mother commented that where there is no information you have to focus on the positive.

Building on the strong discussion regarding the stress and overwhelm of adoption communication, several mothers commented that the lack of information caused added stress. For example, Catherine said,

> *And I get the third degree, "Why don't you know mom? Why don't you know?!" And I'm like, "Oh, my gosh [child's name], let me go check. Let me go look. I'm so sorry." "Mom, you need to know the answer!" They want that answer.*

Finally, Leslie and Nancy also noted that for them lack of information lead to reduced adoption talk because they didn't have anything to talk about. Conversely, Mary who adopted through open adoption and has a positive relationship with her child's birth family was the only parent who did not have a similar experience with lack of information. Mary summed it up this way:

> *I think I am a little bit different than most because it's not super stressful for me. Um, with my oldest who was adopted as an infant….[They've] had a lot of knowns from the beginning. And so, there aren't a lot of those deep questions of unknown things that the parents can't know. I've been able to answer every question—they're not a big questioner in the first place but if they do ask, I am able to answer—so it hasn't been stressful.*

Loss of connection

This loss of information also leads to the loss of something more—connection. Mothers shared of the lost link with the child's "first life" and the lost opportunity to integrate the child's first life into their life with this adoptive family. Heidi said it this way, "I'm guessing [my child] was full term. But I don't even know anything about their birth parents or the pre-natal experience."

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Mothers also shared about the loss of connection with the child because of lost communication opportunities. For example, Leslie said, "because there was so little information you know…for a while we didn't—we neglected to even bring that up." And even where the parent did bring it up, the talk was less because there was less to share. A few parents noted that to combat this they would just "wonder" aloud what it could have been like, while others tied in genetics and traits to have some conversation in the face of nothing (see above conversation about what tools mothers said they used to get the talk going).

From an interfamilial perspective, a few participants said the loss of information caused a loss of ability for child and/or adoptive family to connect with the birth family. Indeed, a couple mothers indicated that without any information, or way of finding out information, they couldn't even properly contemplate whether they wanted to connect. It was as if they were saying they might have considered it if they knew something but because they don't know anything, they have also lost that choice, which leads to the third sub-theme of loss—loss of control.

Loss of control

Heidi commented that the experience of adoption communication for her was a "wild ride. You never know what's going to come next." This sentiment was echoed in several other participants' reports of not knowing what in the world they were doing when it came to communication. As already evidenced in the interior dialogue sub-theme, many of the mothers questioned exactly what they were doing and whether they were doing it right, which lead to feelings of stress and pressure. Remember the mothers'

interior dialogue with herself? It was about how to do this so that they didn't make a

mistake. Laura wanted to be in control, and she was not;

> *"Don't mess up." Like, "Don't say the wrong thing." Whatever the wrong thing is I am not for sure, exactly. But I don't want to say the wrong thing or…with my body language say something that's going to make them feel awkward or scared or left out or like, all these different things that they may associate with adoption.*

The bottom line was that many of the mothers felt they didn't know what to do, or

how to do it, when it came to the adoption talk process. Mothers talked about making up

stories in their head because they didn't know what the story was, but they had to—for

themselves—have something to think. Juanita said she had delayed talking with her child

because, "I don't know how you share that information [about why they were left]—the

not knowing of their story, I find is much more complex." Leslie said point blank, "how

are you going to tell your kids all these difficult things?" And Nora noted that if she

could make sense of things, if there was even information to make sense of "it makes it

easier."

Table 5 Theme Four

Theme	It's About Loss and Grief	
Sub-theme	Codes	Quote
Loss of knowledge	- loss of child's origins - finality of "not knowing" - what is even real? - Knowledge is power over pain	"I came to the realization that, "No, I know nothing about …[early] months." And I had to deal with that grief. And then help [my child] deal with that grief."
Loss of Connection	- Inability to integrate first life with this life - Decreases communication opportunities - Removes ability to connect with birth family	"[B]ecause there was so little information…for a while we didn't—we neglected to even bring that up."
Loss of Control	- Blindsided "how do I even do this?" - drives helplessness	"I don't know how you share this information [about why she was left]—the not knowing of her story, I find it is much more complex."

The Focus Group Experience

As has been revealed the experience of adoption communication is not limited to parent-child. It is also not limited in time or place. It is ongoing and always. With this in mind, this study was specifically designed to encourage dialogue between parents (in this case mothers). I felt that using group exchange rather than individual interviews would elicit richer reporting of the lived experience because it created a sense of safety in sharing with others of like experience, rather than reporting alone to a researcher in an interview. In addition, as has been noted in prior research adoptive families are units that form their identities not through biological connection but through discourse (Jones & Hackett, 2007; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). This discursive work is ongoing both in the

home and outside the home—as dually noted by the mothers in the theme "outside pushes in"—and would even occur as mothers interact with other mothers about the experience.

The data from the three focus groups is consistent with both my safety hypothesis and did indeed lead to increased discourse which lead to richer data. Additionally, it led to increased awareness regarding the need for ongoing intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. First, several mothers noted how the experience brought new thinking, or caused them to consider revisiting adoption communication. For example, Laura, reported,

> *I think this focus group is a good reminder that we still need—even*
> *though our kids are getting older, and they don't ask questions as much*
> *anymore—it's a good reminder for us to bring the topic up – to bring it*
> *up again and say, "Where are you on this?"*

Lily's comments reflected the in-the-moment experience spurred by the group discussion, "[I am] literally processing it – it's just occurring to me tonight – it's something that just dawned on me."

Several participants saw it as "a way to bond" and field notes, audio and video of the groups specifically revealed that the experience provided a chance for parents to normalize their feelings and behaviors, as well as get support from others. As one mother would share, others would shake their heads in agreement or laugh along in related understanding; as one exposed a painful experience, others adjusted their facial expressions mirroring the speaker's sadness, frustration or confusion in an empathetic gesture of comradery. In one particular group, as one mother shared that their own journey has been so difficult it has been near impossible to get much communication done, another mother empathically listened and offered "I'm glad they have you as a mother." From pause that followed, it was interpreted that the first mother had not often

heard such acknowledgement or support before. In sum, one mother put it this way, "I think you are on to something here…" while another mother outright asked, "can't we just do this every month?"

DISCUSSION

Adoption communication practice has evolved over the past century from one of secrecy to a onetime telling, to a bidirectional verbal and non-verbal communicative process. With this evolution has come a need for greater understanding of this key adoptive family process. Prior research has constructed a much needed aerial view of adoption communication within the adoptive family, including what might perhaps—or what should be—occurring at each age and stage (Brodzinsky, 2005, 2011; Wrobel et al., 2003). Through statistical analysis of data gathered from adoptive children and adults, as well as their parents, ACO's elements, including resources and risk factors within and without the adoptive family unit are now better understood. With this study, the mother's testimonies move the focus from an aerial view into the journey itself. What we learn in joining them in this experience is two things: it is an experience that is consistent with past findings and it is much, much more.

Connection to Prior Research

Kirk's (1964) extensive qualitative interviews and focus groups with adoptive parents of the 1950's opened the door to the previously secret world of adoptive parenting and its "role handicap." Almost seventy years on, the mothers of this study continue to feel this handicap as revealed in the theme loss of control and in comments that other's "don't understand." Mothers are overwhelmed and uncertain about what to share and how to share it. This was emphasized by the camaraderie the mothers found in

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being able to talk to those similarly situated through networking and in the focus groups themselves.

Furthermore, key adoption research has highlighted the experience of loss felt by the adoptive child and adult (Brodzinsky, 1990; Leon, 2002; Nickman, 1985). Loss in separation from the birth family and loss in being second best (Brodzinksy, 2011). This loss, one which often "goes unrecognized by society" is similar to the experience of unresolved—or disenfranchised loss—in that it is not necessarily a permanent form of loss such as loss of a parent through death (Brodzinsky, 2011, p. 204). The statements of the mothers in the current study echo and expand on this theme of loss, highlighting their own experiences of ambiguous loss. They shared about the loss of their child's historical information and the loss of being able to integrate their child's early life into this life. And while their loss is not as great as the loss their children have experienced, it is a loss none the less that also causes in turn a loss of connection with others: the child, the birth family, other adoptive families who do have access to information and non-adoptive families who do not understand their experience.

Additionally, for parents of early teens, Wrobel et al. (2003) previously noted that adolescence is a time for maintaining an atmosphere of communication in order to support the child in the normative grief process that comes with adoption. The mothers' reports here of their own feelings of loss and grief due to the adoption process mirrors in a way the loss being experienced in their child (Wrobel et al., 2003). Parents themselves have moved from a position of positivity (over their adoption, for some from a country where they will not have to face "sharing" their child) and control (over the sharing of information with their young child) to one of grief (from a new found understanding of

the depth of their child's loss, as well as the loss of information to share) and loss of control.

The sub-theme developmental stage (within the theme of "deep and broad") is also consistent with prior research (Brodzinsky, 2011; Wrobel et al., 2003). As the child moves into adolescence, the experience of adoption, including that of communication, takes a new direction with increased cognition, curiosity, empathy and identity development. The parents here convey this with their reports of, for example: a) increased questioning by the child regarding origins and birth parents; b) more mature conversations and queries; and b) their awareness of the child's need to be normal and to know who they are. They also express their own appreciation of the new bidirectional give and take, push and pull that is taking place. Conversely for some communication decreases, and the child's internal emotional struggles may be played out in non-verbal ways such as artistic endeavors or crying/shutting out.

Finally, as if to heed the call of Wrobel et al. (2003) for added research into the role of emotion in the family adoption communication process, the mothers of this study laid out in detail the complex emotional aspect of this work.

Riding Along on the Journey

The reports of the mothers captured here fill in the previous outline for ACO. As we get closer to their lived experience a clearer picture of the phenomenon with early adolescents comes into focus and as one mother noted, the picture of ACO we have jumped into is that of "a wild ride." These emotive words conjure an image of a roller coaster, or a sports car winding its way along the roads of a European Grand Prix race. As we look around, we see the vehicle they are strapped into—for when one is on a wild

ride it requires buckling up. In the driver's seat is the adoptive mother who graciously gives us permission to not only look over her vehicle but to actually get in and go. As we get in, we see the others in the car, an early adolescent or two, as well as other children.

Embarking out on the open road, we notice the drive constantly changes and then changes again. It's clearly going to be a varied and profound journey. The outside scenery alternates with each moment; sunny and calm with puffy blue clouds inviting of a family picnic and rainswept and dark foreshadowing potential danger ahead.

At times the mother commands the wheel, at times the child—now a tween or early teen on the brink of learning to drive but perhaps not fully there developmentally— does. Occasionally an outsider jumps in wresting control of the car from the mother; occasionally someone—perhaps another child—voluntarily spells the mother from her duties. These mothers know that by this age and stage, who gets to drive and when is not always clear or negotiable.

Despite valiant preparation and the use of various skills and tools the ride is never predictable. This unpredictability causes emotional turmoil for the mother, and the mother senses it in her child as well. The mother thinks about—and feels internally— each missed turn and scraped curb, as well as expertly maneuvered curve or detour. She questions her directions—poor as they are—and considers consulting her child, who she constantly thinks about as each mile ticks by. Sometimes we see her anxiety, her fears, the stress of the drive, hold her back from doing so, other times she steps in and engages the child.

Along the way the mother stops to take in the scenery, finding joy in the journey. But when the rain thunders down, and the driving becomes erratic she struggles to keep

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her wits about her. She alternately withdraws from and soothes her child; her child alternately turns to her and shuts her out. On more than one occasion she wishes there was another mom in the car with her to compare notes with, while their children compare their own. The fact that she wasn't given good—if any—directions to begin with makes the drive all the more challenging. She looks for bystanders to stop and ask but notices they all seem to be wholly unaware of the path she is taking.

Always present in her mind, her heart, is the fact that there are those who are missing from the ride, those who—through their actions—made this ride possible to begin with. This absence hangs in the air between mother and child. At turns she and the child acknowledge this absence, internally—and less frequently externally—exploring what it might be like if the others were here and discussing how this journey came to even be, because as hard as the ride is at times, the mother is grateful to be here on this ride. Most of the time the mother wishes that her directions showed her where to find these individuals so she could invite them for a ride. At times, with honesty, she realizes she is so frustrated with these others she is glad she doesn't have to invite them into this ride or their lives.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Limitations

The results from this study will need to be considered in light of several study limitations. First, the use of focus groups, sometimes argued to be a more shallow form of the richer qualitative interview study (Liamputtong, 2011), may have resulted in a weaker understanding of the mothers' ACO experience. Additionally, over-participation by some members, and under-participation by others, especially given the sensitive nature of adoption communication, may have led to more limited findings. Finally, while

participation was robust within and between all focus groups, "groupthink" (MacDougall & Baum, 1997) and "audience effect" (members needing to perform for each other; Jarrett, 1993) might have hindered the ability of the study to reflect the accurate lived experience of *all* participants.

Second, the nature of the sample, a purposive sampling of parents who participate in adoption conferences and/or support groups might be a limitation. Parents who attend such activities are generally ones who play a more active role in the experience of adoption. That is, they may be more communicative with their child to begin with. Similarly, they may be more attuned to the feelings and needs of their adoptive child about their adoptive status. Furthermore, parents who attend such events, may have a higher level of training and support, and this training and support may have already filtered down into the family's experience of adoption communication. This sample was also more homogenous in their make-up—all married, all women, all White but one— thus limiting the perspective underlying this phenomenological report.

Research and Clinical Implications

Within the research and adoption clinical communities there exists a consensus that ACO is a key family process. This view has its origins in Kirk (1964)'s seminal research and has been expanded on significantly in the last 15 years. Repeated calls for increased communication *and* parental attunement and empathy regarding adoptive status; the formulation of guidelines for the implementation of adoption communication (Brodzinsky, 2011); calls for assistance from those outside the adoption practice such as pediatricians; and the publication of adoptive parent self-help books (Eldridge, 2009)

have all contributed to a picture of what needs to be accomplished in adoption communication. Nonetheless, to this day parents continue to struggle with ACO.

This study's findings are the first to reveal the underpinnings of maternal attitudes, emotions and behavior regarding adoption communication. They shine a spotlight on the complexities that underly this ongoing struggled to be communicatively open. This rich, thick description then provides a platform upon which further ACO research can be built, including but not limited to studies regarding adoptive fathers', adoptive children's, and birth parents' lived experiences with ACO. It is imperative that researchers studying ACO remember that adoption is a triadic experience occurring across all *three* units of the triad: birth parent, adoptive parent and adoptive child.

Additionally, led in part by the prior work of Jones & Hackett (2007), this study provides guidance to agencies of the specific needs, especially emotional, of families regarding ACO and lends insight into the value of sharing other adoptive parent and child perspectives to shift culturally engrained beliefs that: (a) adoption is second-best, (b) if the adoptive child does not ask they don't want to know; and (c) that adoption communication is limited to telling and talking. Moreover, the interactive nature of this study—focus groups exposed to evocative adoption stimuli—plants a seed for use of such a medium in training parents pre-adoption, along with the use of parent peer mentors and ongoing agency support throughout the child's developmental stages.

While such ongoing support may be prohibitive (most agencies bow out after completing their required time-sensitive post-placement assessment), ongoing support would be in the best interests of agencies and governmental oversight organizations if they desire increased permanency outcomes. This is consistent with prior calls for

agencies and the state to live up to their moral obligation to provide ongoing support (Barnett et al., 2017; Brodzinsky, 2006; Jones & Hackett, 2007). Additionally, an informal survey of adoption based therapists indicates that many do not incorporate discussions about ACO into their assessments or therapy practice with families and children. Given the role that reciprocal attuned and empathic communication plays in the processing of past emotional experiences and building attachment it would behoove adoption clinicians to take these research findings and the insights it sheds on ACO into their practice.

Relatedly, as the foster care roles increase—currently in large part due to the ongoing opioid epidemic—there is a profound need for communicative openness in foster and kinship placements. Openness not only about foster/kinship status but openness about the tragic circumstances that have led the children to their new home. Research into the plight of this particular population could go a long way into bringing awareness to their needs.

The implications of this study are not, however, limited to those with direct contact with the adoptive family. It is time for the calls of adoptive families regarding societal stigmas to be heeded. Adoptive families have existed in some form or fashion since the dawn of time, and in the increasingly diversity-conscious Western society it is only fitting that media moguls begin to shed the outdated narrative of the adoptive family as second-best, non-normative, and thus, requiring secrecy and less ACO. Such a concerted effort across media platforms would allow adoptive families to don a normative stance and discard the emotional baggage and perceptions that drives adoption communication into the dark corners where it lingers attempting to avoid the often

sensitive and uncomfortable nature of the adoptive status. Indeed, such action by media specifically and society as a whole, would go a long way in removing the role handicap experienced by parents even today.

CONCLUSION

Early adolescence is a key period for cognitive and emotional development. During this age and stage, the process of adoption communication within the family is moving beyond telling to one of increased intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences even when there is not a lot of verbal dialogue occurring. This study is the first of its kind to examine the phenomenon of adoption communication openness as faced by mothers with their early adolescent children. By stepping into the mother's lived-experience a full, rich picture is revealed of this complex process. In turn, this research identifies a way forward for further research, clinical practice and adoption advocacy professionals. Finally, it provides these mothers with a voice for their struggles. Struggles that they feel "no one understands." .

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Hello and welcome to our session. My name is Jane Samuel and I am a graduate student at the University of Kentucky in Family Sciences.

I want to start by thanking you all for taking the time to join us for our discussion on adoption communication. We appreciate you making the time to come today. The purpose of this focus group is to share ideas to help us develop a better understanding of parents' experiences with communicating with their adoptive children about their adoption. This experience may include actual situations of dialogue with the child, as well as parents' thoughts and feelings about communicating with their child, and finally parents' perceptions of what children are experiencing, feeling or desiring.

You were invited here today because it is important that we hear from adoptive parents like you. Today we will be discussing your experiences and perceptions. There are no right or wrong answers, only differing perspectives. We are interested in all points of view, so please feel free to share all your thoughts, feelings, beliefs and attitudes, even if those differ from other members of the group. Even if no one else in this room has the same opinion, there may be hundreds or thousands of other people in the adoption community who feel just as you do. Also, we are interested in hearing from all of you. So, if you aren't saying much, I may call on you specifically. Feel free to have a conversation with one another about my questions. My role here is to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share. My role is not to convince anyone of something in particular or to change anyone's mind. In addition, we are interested in negative comments as well as positive comments so please do not feel the need to filter what you say.

Before we begin, let me share a few ground rules.

1) This research project is protected by confidentiality. That means when I write up or report the information from this study you will not be identified in that process by anyone on the research team. As we are a group here today, I ask that we all respect each member's confidentiality by not sharing what we discuss here with anyone outside the group. We will potentially be on a first name basis and later no names will be attached to comments. If you do not want us or others in the room to know your real name today, you are welcome to use a fake name (a pseudonym) if you do not want to share identifying information.

2) I will be recording the session to ensure that everything that was said is accurately captured. Please speak up and only one person should speak at a time. I don't want to miss any of your comments and if several people speak at once, the recording will get distorted. I may also take notes during our session. This is again to help me capture as much as I can from our conversation here today.

3) Our session will last about 60 to 90 minutes. We will take a five-minute break if it appears, we will be going over the hour mark. If we do break, please hurry back to join the group.

4) If you feel troubled or overwhelmed at any point and would like to end your participation in the focus group, please know that you are free to do so. You may exit quietly and if you wish follow-up with the researcher afterward. A list of resources regarding adoption support as well as a list of therapists familiar with adoptive families' needs will be provided.

Let's find out a little bit about each other by going around the room one at a time. Tell us something about yourself as well as the age(s) of your adoptive child(ren). I will start off. As you know my name is Jane. Something about myself is that I am is what some might call a "mature, nontraditional student" having returned to graduate school after raising my children. My adoptive child is 16.

Opening Question:
1. Tell us something about yourself as well as the age(s) of your adoptive child(ren).
   Introductory Question:
2. What does it mean to you to communicate about adoption with your child?

- Transition/Prompt Questions:
  o How often does this communication occur?
  o What does this communication look like?
  o Tell me about the timing of this communication.

Key Questions (Include Follow-ups):

3. When you think of communicating with your children about their adoption, what goes through your mind?

4. What feelings or emotions do you experience when you think about this communication?

- Prompt/Follow-up:
  o It could be a full range of emotions, or feelings.
  o There is no right or wrong feeling or emotion.

5. What effect do these emotions have on your ability to be open with your child about adoption?

6. How do you deal with these emotions?

7. What do you think your children want to know about their adoption status?

8. What feelings do you think your children have about their adoptive status? How do you know what your child's feelings are?

   Introduction of Stimulus 1:
1) Adoptive parent monologue (Developmental/ongoing perspective)

     a. What emotions did you experience reading this parent's perspective?
     b. To what extent do you think developmental ages and stages impact adoption communication?
     c. What has been your experience with your child(ren) as they have grown from placement until now?

Introduction of Stimulus 2:

2) Adoptive child monologue (musings and wonderings)
     a. What emotions did you experience reading this?
     b. What do you think about this child's thoughts?
     c. What do you think your child's thoughts are about their birth parents?
     d. How would you know if your child was having these thoughts if they don't verbalize them?

Introduction of Stimulus 3:

3) Adoptive parent monologue (empathy for birth parents' perspective)
     a. What emotions did you experience reading this?
     b. What do you think about this parent's thoughts?
     c. What goes through your mind when you think about your child(ren)'s birth parents?
     d. What emotions do you experience when you think about talking with your child about their birth parents?

APPENDIX B STIMULI

Stimulus Number 1

I felt like it was really important to say the word [adoption] a lot when he was little so that it would never be unfamiliar. So, we used to talk about it a lot…I was shocked when he turned to me one day and asked me this question as if he had never heard of being adopted. And, umm, I was just stunned. I thought we'd been talking about this so much for years, but I think that you have to realize that when a child matures, his, umm, his perception of it changes entirely…So we kind had to review the whole thing, step by step. [adoptive mother]

Stimulus Number 2

In terms of my past, I wonder if my parents were ever married, if I have other siblings or half-siblings, if my birth parents think of me, if they would be proud of what I have achieved in my life, if they would try to take credit for me being who I am today. [adoptive individual]

Stimulus Number 3

I find no alternative but to love those they came from….It sounds idealistic and unreal to some to not be threatened by my children's "other parents." And on the day my ten-year-old son said, "I wished I lived with my real mom and never knew you." I had to stop and think and realize his loss of the family he never lived with was so huge I bet he did wish that at that moment….If I was him, I might also. Does that mean he does not love me? No, by his very love for me, he is safe to grieve and share the pain of his loss. [adoptive mother]

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