I know I am adopted but who am I?

A Phenomenological Exploration of the Lived Experiences of an Adult Adoptee

By

Ruth Alvey

This thesis is submitted to the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) for the degree (Hons) Counselling and Psychotherapy from Dublin Business School, School of Arts.

April 16th 2013

Research Supervisor: Susan Eustace

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Susan Eustace for all her support and guidance during the writing of this thesis.

I would also like to express my extreme gratitude to all of the participants who took part in this research study. Their open and honest experiences allowed me to explore this research topic.

To my wonderful Jan, I would never have begun this journey without your support, encouragement and love, thank you.

I would like to dedicate this to my Father who I know would have been very proud of all I that have achieved on this journey, I miss you.

Abstract

Research studies on adoption have found that adoptees appear to experience issues that biological children never have to confront as they lack the historical and genetic knowledge of their birth families, (March, 2005). This study focussed on the lived experiences of adult adoptees that experienced a closed adoption by exploring their unique circumstances. Important issues such as age appropriate information, the impact of non-identifying information and building an adoptees sense of identity in the absence of identifying information were explored in order to identify whether their experiences were transferable from literature and research to date. This study also explored whether the emergence of fantasy was experienced by the participants in order to give meaning to their lived experiences. Finally this research study explored whether the psychotherapeutic relationship and other support services were of value and benefit to the adult adoptee.

The research method used in this study was qualitative semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied in order to analyse the data. As this study was explorative in nature, this enabled the participants to discuss their lived experiences as adult adoptees in an open and non judgemental environment. Interesting findings also emerged within this study with regard to the motherhood myth and the implications of secrecy the absence of identifying information. Unexpected findings also emerged with regard to the effect and relationship a search and reunion with a biological parent has on the adoptive parents. This research study concluded that in the absence of identifying information a fundamental question continues to arise for the adult adoptee: **I know I am adopted but who am I?**

. -

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Adoption in Ireland was legalised in 1952 and since then, over forty thousand domestic and inter-country adoptions have taken place. However, under the Adoption Act 1952, in order to protect the identity of the birth mother, the adoptee has no legal rights to their original birth certificate. In 2005, The National Adoption Contact Preference Register, (NACPR, 2005) in conjunction with the Adoption Authority of Ireland and Barnardos, established a national information tracing service for those affected within the adoption triad. Within the first two years of its launch, six thousand, two hundred and seventy applications were received. Analysis of the register reported that 71% of the applications received were from adoptees and that 60% of these applications were from females, (NACPR, 2005).

From this data, there is evidence to suggest that there is now a growing need for an amendment to the Adoption Act in order to obtain some level of indentifying information. A recent article written by Emily Logan, (2013) in the Irish Times highlights this very issue. In her opinion, " a desire to know about one's birth and origins is not a manifestation of simple curiosity, it springs from a need that runs deep enough to be a basic aspect of human dignity", (Logan, 2013, p. 14). Similarly, a poignant article written by Harrison, (2010), in the Irish Daily Mail, reported on the story of a woman who learnt of her adoption at the age of twelve. Now in her mid fifties, she is still desperate to obtain information as to her biological identity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1   Identity Formation of an Adoptee

Research studies carried out by March (1995) found that adoptees appeared to experience issues that biological children never have to confront as an adoptee lacks the historical and genetic knowledge of their birth families. In her opinion, this can lead to a, "sense of incompletion from their ability to fully integrate their biological background information into their identity structure", (March, 1995, p. 653). When little or no information is made available, or the adoptee is unable to experience others as biologically similar to them, it is said to affect the individual's experience of the self, (Schechter & Bertocci, 1993). Willbisch, (1952) stated that, "confusion during childhood about one's natural parents can be detrimental to an adoptee's sense of identity", (Willbisch, 1952, p. 41-42). Crain, (2005) refers to the theoretical findings of Erikson, who focussed on the emotional development through an individual's lifespan. He was of the opinion that as an individual endeavours to navigate through each stage of development, they encounter a crisis, a turning point in life where they must choose to move forward or regress. He identified the search for one's identity as a primary cause for crises, specifically when the individual reaches the adolescent stage of development. He suggested that the adolescent struggles to define who they are and where they are going in life. While these experiences and struggles are universal to all individuals, research to date has suggested that this crisis point in adolescents is made more difficult for adoptees, (Lord, 1991; Frankel, 1991; Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1992; Westwood, 1995; Jones, 1997). As discussed by Westwood, (1995) identity formation is an

essential component for the healthy development of one's personality and the ability to move forward into adulthood. He stated that determining one's identity is a difficult enough process even for individuals who have been raised by their biological parents, however he goes on to suggest that these issues may be exacerbated for those whose ancestry is unknown to them (Westwood, 1995). According to Pannor and Brown, (1984), adopted teenagers are more likely to struggle with their identities and their sense of loss and dislocation may be more acute because their past is unknown to them.

2.2   Genealogical Bewilderment

Sants, (1964), refers to the term of a genealogical bewilderment, when describing the experiences as lived by an adoptee. There is a "sense of disconnectedness from the past", (Brodzinsky et al, 1992, p. 14), a feeling of being, "cut off from your heritage, your religious background, your culture, your race", (Brodzinsky et al, 1992, p. 108). Westwood, (1995), is of the opinion that if in an adoptee is unable to obtain information about their biological origins and the reason behind their relinquishment, the adoptee may be unable to move past this crucial identity formation stage of development. In a case study by Lord, (1991), she presented the case of her client "Bob", who had been adopted in infancy. She described Bob as having the appearance of a well established identity and of having a very happy and healthy relationship with his adoptive parents. However, there was a part of him that still felt incomplete, but through his discovery of his heritage it enabled him to deepen and assimilate his expanding self, (Lord, 1991).

2.3   The right to know versus the birth parents right to privacy

Rosenberg, (1992) endeavoured to explore the impact of an adoptees need to know versus the birth parents' right to privacy. While a birth parent has the right to withhold historical information when placing a child for adoption, Leon, (2002) believes that the aspect of secrecy only increases feelings of loss or shame in the adoptee by "impairing self-esteem and magnifying losses to the self", (Leon, p. 655). Typically in closed or confidential adoptions, only non-identifying information such as medical information, is given to the adoptive parents through the intermediary of an adoption agency, (Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell & Schmidt, 1985). A study involving thirty adoptive families, where fifteen experienced a closed adoption and the remaining fifteen experienced an open adoption concluded that there were no conclusive findings to correlate that an open adoption is better or worse than a closed adoption, (Silverstein & Demick, 1994). However an interesting study by Silverman and Patti, (1994) explored the impact from the adoptive parents' perspective with specific reference to the adoptee seeking a reunion with the birth parent. They concluded that some of the adoptive parents who adopted a child under a closed adoption struggled with feelings of inadequacy. A number of adoptive parents stated that they "saw the adoptees behaviour as being disloyal to them", (Silverman & Patti, 1994, p. 545). However, Curtis, (1986), and Silber & Donner, (1990) are of the opinion that knowledge of one's past is a basic human need and that there is a potential risk to an adoptee's emotional development when this information is denied.

Turkington & Taylor, (2009) discuss that the concept of identity is a central task for all adopted children if they are to integrate successfully their adopted status. Similarly, Neil & Howe,(2004) state that, "adopted children have to work out what adoption means to them and other people in order to work out who they are, both to themselves and others. If they are

successful in this, self-esteem and self-confidence – both major protection factors – increase", (Neil & Howe, 2004, pg. 226-227). Similar stories were recently aired on the TV3 television network, titled, "Adoption Stories", (2012) which highlighted the emotional difficulties that are still being experienced today within the adoption triad

2.4   Age Appropriate Information

Similarly, as discussed by Brinich, (1990) the manner and age at which the adopted child is informed as to the nature of their adoption may have significant implications with regard to their emotional development and identity formation. A study of ninety families, carried out by, Holllenstein, Leve, Scaramella, Milfort & Neidersiser, (2003) endeavoured to ascertain whether prior knowledge of the birth parents information could assist in the adoptee's adjustment to their new family. They concluded that the level of openness of information only came into consideration if the adoptee was struggling to adjust into their adoptive families. .

.

2.5   Fantasy as experienced by an Adoptee

Fantasy of the biological parents is a contributing factor to the identity formation of adoptees, and making contact with a biological parent will inevitably challenge this fantasy. Creating a fantasy of the biological parents is thought to give an adoptee a greater sense of control of their history (Robinson, 2005). Brodzinsky, (1992) is of the opinion that when there is a lack of information as to an adoptee's biological origins, to compensate for this lack, the adoptee creates a fantasy. March, (2001) also refers to the impact secrecy has on the adoptees' experiences. For many, the secrecy surrounding the adoptees biological history and specifically their birth mother, gives way to illusions or fantasies being created to compensate for the lack of information. Barbara D'Amato, (2007) discusses how the role of fantasy is not

exclusive to the adoptee but rather is incorporated within the triad of adoption, that being, the adoptee, the adoptive parents and the biological mother. Quinodoz, (1996), and Wieder, (1977) suggested that an adoptee's fantasies may not always idealise their birth parents, rather they may focus their fantasies on feelings of abandonment or that of being un-loveable. Similarly the adoptive parents may fantasise about the loss of a non-existent biological child, while the birth mother may experience fantasies of loss, pain and grief having relinquished their child at birth. According to Leon, (2002), when an adoptee has little or no information as to their origins, their fantasies are more likely to be tinged with loss.

2.6   The Family Romance Fantasy

Articles written by, Schwartz, (1970); Brinich, (1990); Brodzinsky et al, (1992); Jones, (1997); Siegel, (2001); D'Amato, (2007), and Oppenheim, (2008), all refer to Freud's (1909), theory on the family romance fantasy. Such studies state that fantasy is universal for all children where feelings of love and hate towards their parents are likely to take place as they strive towards a level of independence. As they navigate through this transition of conflict with a parent, the child is likely to fantasise that they may have secretly been adopted and that their real parents would understand them so much better. However, each of these authors do note that for the adopted child, this family romance fantasy is in fact a reality, which in turn can make the resolution of this fantasy all the more difficult. Freud, (1909) suggested that by the time the child reaches adolescence, they have usually resolved these issues, but as discussed by Brodzinsky et al, (1992) it may take an adoptee much longer to work through the family romance fantasy due to the reality of their unique experiences. Brodsinsky et al, (1992) believe that, as the adopted child moves into early adolescence, they become more aware of their physical or emotional differences. This leads us back to the developmental stage of identity versus role confusion as the fantasy of the biological parent is a contributing

factor to the identity formation of an adoptee. As discussed by Robinson, (2005) creating this fantasy is thought to give an adoptee a greater sense of control of their historical origins.

2.7 The Motherhood Myth

For many adoptees, the fantasy resolution may only be achieved when they are able to obtain more information as to their birth origins. A Scottish study of seventy adoptees conducted by Triseliotis, (2000) concluded that in order for adoptees to resolve issues of fantasy, identity and self image, these issues can only be achieved when a reunion with the birth parent occurs. March, (1995) however conducted a qualitative study to get an understanding of the 'motherhood myth' and the consequences of searching for a birth mother. Her findings purported that, "when these adoptees confronted the reality of a stranger who they had to get to know, they recognised the fallacy of this myth", (March, 1995, p. 134). A study carried out in Northern Ireland by Turkington et al, (2009) explored the advantages and disadvantages of face to face contact with a birth parent from an adoptive parent's perspective. While it was agreed that contact may minimise a child's tendency to fantasise about their birth origins, it may also lead to confusion and issues of bonding with their adoptive parents. Brodzinsky, et al, (2003) suggest that the motivating factors for an adoptee to begin their search may be triggered by life changing events such the birth of their own biological child or the death of an adoptive parent.

2.8 Psychotherapy and Adoptees

While the researcher has noted that early emotional experiences are not unique to an adoptee, Jones, (1997) however purports that aspects of loss, separation, identity, secrecy and fantasy are poignant issues that reverberate throughout many adoptees' personal and therapeutic interpersonal relationships. The researcher has also noted that while there appears to be no

one particular modality used when working with adult adoptees, theorists such as Bowlby, and Ainsworth discussed the importance of our early attachment with the primary caregiver and how this can impact on the infant's early patterns of emotional development and regulation, (Gomez, 1997). Bowlby, (1980) was of the opinion that an infant can only navigate through the stages of separation, mourning and loss when they experiences a secure attachment with their primary caregiver. When the infant's internal working model is one of safety and well being, this enables the infant to regulate their emotions and develop their sense of self worth. However, Ainsworth, (1978) through her research on the, 'strange situation', notes that when the infant does not experience a secure attachment, where the inter-relatedness of their attachment is not attuned, the infant is likely to grow into adulthood with an insecure avoidant, ambivalent or disorganised perception/orientation on how to relate to others and, "are left feeling uncertain about their worth and whether they have the right to exist", (Gerhardt, 2004, p. 147).

Adele Jones, (1997) incorporated Winnicott's theoretical framework on object-relations and the 'good enough mother' into her work, as many of her adopted clients presented with a heightened vulnerability with regard to their sense of self in relation to the other. Similarly, while she identifies issues of self esteem and identity, which in her opinion, are crucial building blocks for an individual, as well as issues of self worth as being universal issues for many clients, Jones, (1997) is of the opinion that these issues are, "especially salient for the adoptee", (Jones, 1997, p. 66). Jane Goldberg, (2002) a psychoanalyst, explored the life-long vulnerability one of her adult adoptee clients had experienced around issues of separation and mothering. Through the therapeutic relationship, Goldberg, (2002) was able to re-build and model these early deficits of the mothering experience. Similarly, Lifton, (1994) and Homans, (2006) discuss the importance of developing a coherent life narrative when working

with an adult adoptee through the medium of narrative therapy. Hertz, (1998) on the other hand, who has also worked with adult adoptees, identified the pursuit of authenticity, a humanistic concept, as a key component within the therapeutic relationship.

Whichever modality is used when working with an adult adoptee, what is of importance is the understanding of the individual's early attachment patterns, issues of separation and loss, as well as issues of identity, secrecy and fantasy. Through the therapeutic relationship, the therapist can endeavour to re-build these early deficits by providing a new and corrective emotional experience, (Kahn, 2001).

2.9   Pre and post contact considerations for an Adoptee

Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, (2003) recommend both a pre-contact therapeutic exploration to clarify expectations the adoptee has before beginning the process of their search and similarly, a post-contact exploration to explore potential relationship issues which may arise between the adoptee and the birth parent after the reunion. Brodzinsky, et al, (1993) also recommend that before an adoptee begins their search, the adoptee needs to explore and understand what their search means to them and what outcomes they hope to achieve from their search. From a therapeutic perspective, it is recommended that both client and therapist explore the possibility that the birth parent may not wish to re-establish a connection with the adoptee, which may give rise to further feelings of rejection or abandonment, (Brodzinsky et al, 1993). Similarly, as discussed by March, (1995) it is important to explore any early fantasies that an adoptee may have with regard to the birth parent as these fantasies may not live up to the reality of the situation and may cause further emotional distress for the client. Moran, (1994) an adoptee and also a therapist, discusses the emotional stages an adoptee may experience after a reunion with a birth parent. If the reunion has not been successful, the

adoptee may struggle to reconcile aspects of their lost fantasy, but with the support and guidance of the therapist, an adoptee can endeavour to adjust their experiences post reunion and re-build their sense of self and self identity. A further consideration must be explored between the client and therapist of the possibility that the birth parent may no longer be alive, which may compound feelings of grief and loss for the adult adoptee.

2.10   Re-building a sense of self within the therapeutic relationship

As with any therapeutic relationship a therapist has with their client, a therapist is always mindful that the therapeutic alliance may be the first consistent, secure, held, contained and trusting relationship the client has experienced up to this point. These issues may be particularly prevalent for an adult adoptee and in this regard it is important that the therapist get an understanding of the relationship patterns the client has experienced as this will give significant insight into the work that lies ahead. It is also of paramount importance that both the therapist and client recognise the significance and value of the therapeutic relationship as this holds the potential for growth, "it is only when the client begins, however tentatively, to value himself in this way that real movement can take place", (Mearns & Thorne, 2008, p. 99). The therapist must appreciate how daunting and emotionally challenging the experience of therapy can be but, by allowing the client to truly engage in the process, take ownership and responsibility for their future and increase their self awareness, therapy can be an empowering and rewarding journey, (Yalom, 2002).

2.11   Conclusion

As discussed within this chapter, the lived experiences of an adult adoptee are at best challenging as they endeavour to navigate through life. From the articles and studies presented, it is suggested that in the absence of identifying information on the adoptees birth origins, this can give rise to issues of identity formation along with the use of fantasies as a method of re-building a life narrative to their lived experiences. Studies would suggest that for many adult adoptees this fantasy may not live up to true reality of the experience which may exacerbate existing feelings of loss for an adoptee. Through the support of the psychotherapeutic relationship, an adult adoptee may be able to explore thoughts and feelings with regard to their adoption and endeavour to re-build a sense of self and self identity.

2.12   Aims and Objectives

This research study will endeavour to get a better understanding as to how an adult adoptee has experienced their world with the knowledge that they have been adopted. This study aims to explore how this knowledge may have shaped or impacted their life and if feelings of loss or rejection were experienced due to a lack of biological identity. This study will explore the consequences of a closed adoption, if the adoptee struggled in the absence of identifying information while being mindful of the birth parents right to privacy. This study also endeavours to explore and obtain an understanding as to the aspect in which fantasy may have provided a narrative in order to give meaning to the adoptees experiences. Finally, this research study will explore how psychotherapy can endeavour to work with an adoptee in the absence of identifying information to re-build their sense of self and self identity

Objectives:

- To explore the experience and meaning of adoption as lived by the adult adoptee.

- To explore how a closed adoption may have impacted on an adoptee.

- To explore the impact on the adoptee with regard to the birth parents right to privacy.

- To explore the birth parent fantasy by adoptees and how this may have impacted on their identity formation.

- To explore how Psychotherapy can re-build an adoptees sense of self and self identity.

Chapter 3:   Methodology

3.1   Research Design

As this research was explorative in nature, a qualitative approach was used to enable the researcher to build trusting relationships to include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirm-ability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with the participants thereby encouraging "the disclosure and expression of relevant data", (McLeod, 2005, p. 95).

3.2   Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview

Through the use of semi-structured interviews the researcher endeavoured to get a sense of the participants own experiences and perspectives in order to explore the "texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings", (Mason, 2009, p. 1). The aim of the semi-structured interviews was be to bring forth connections and common meanings to understand how the participants made sense of their experiences as an adoptee, "the fundamental goal of qualitative investigation is to uncover and illuminate what things mean to people" (McLeod, 2005, p. 73). This in-turn provided a rich source of data when exploring the meaning and human complexities that may be experienced by an adult adoptee.

3.3   Recruitment

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, this study focused on the experience and impact of an adult adoptee. The sample included six participants to "gain a sense of the whole of that lived experience" (McLeod, 2005, p. 85). Each participant was adopted in Ireland before the age of six months old and all six adoptions took the form of a closed adoption. These

inclusion criterions were used for this study in order to explore the experiences of children born after the Adoption Act of 1952 was implemented in Ireland.

3.4 Participant Selection

As this study was qualitative in nature, the focus of this research was on the analysis of six adoptees through the method of semi-structured qualitative interviews. The participants who were involved in this research study consisted of four females and two males. The demographic age ranged from thirty to forty six years in age. All participants were known to the researcher.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, the wellbeing of the participant was of paramount importance, "what emerges for the informant may be painful and distressing, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to do everything possible to ensure the well-being of the person" (McLeod, 2005, p. 169). The researcher followed the Belmont Principals (1997) of respect, beneficence and justice when conducting the semi-structured interviews. Anonymity was clearly discussed with each of the participants to ensure that their identities would remain anonymous. Each participant was advised of the potential risks involved due to the sensitive nature of the research. Each participant was fully informed as to the nature and purpose of the research being carried out and their participation was voluntary. All participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any stage during the research process as they had the right to "privacy, confidentiality, self-determination and autonomy" (IACP Code of Ethics, p. 2). Ethical considerations on the data collected after completion of the semi-structured interview was of utmost importance. Transcripts of each interview were coded by a pseudo-name and stored in a secure location. The researcher was mindful to ensure ethical

considerations of duty of care to each participant specifically as they were known to the researcher.

3.6   Method of Data Collection

Due to time constraints and limited availability of the participants, the researcher was unable to conduct a pilot interview. However, following approval by the research supervisor, the proposed questions were sent to each participant in advance of the interviews in order that each participant would be aware of the interview format and would have the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences of being adopted (Appendix A). The researcher also spoke at length to each participant in advance of their interview in order to identify any issues or concerns the participants had. The location of each interview was pre-arranged via telephone conversation with each participant thereby ensuring privacy and ease. This enabled each interviewee to deliver their information on their own terms which facilitated both flexibility and clarification within a safe environment. The qualitative interview endeavoured "to generate a fairer and fuller representation of the interviewee's perspectives" (Mason, 2009, p. 66), as the researcher adopted and maintained a curious stance throughout. The semi-structured interviews were held on a one to one basis in order to "establish a relationship with the interviewee characterised by high levels of respect, empathy and congruence" (McLeod, 2005, p. 76).

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the semi-structured interviews took place (Appendix B).   Each participant was also provided with a list of confidential support services to contact if the need arose (Appendix C). The interviews took approximately one hour and breaks were provided as required. Each participant was asked the same questions and probes were given by the interviewer for further clarification on information when required. A portable digital recorder was used to record the semi-

structured interviews as the researcher was interested in not only "what people say but also in the way that they say it" (Bryman, 2004, p. 239). All data collected was then transcribed and all written and taped information was stored in compliance with the Data Protect Act 2003. On completion of this research, a de-briefing has been offered to each participant.

3.7   Method of Data Analysis – Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

The data from each interview was transcribed verbatim and all identifying information was removed. Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. As this research was qualitative and exploratory in nature, the data was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is "concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience" (Smith, 2011, p. 9). This method of data analysis allowed a detailed exploration of how participants "make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pg. 1).

Through the use of IPA the researcher endeavoured to use the theory of double hermeneutics to interpret and analyse not only the participants' use of language, thoughts and emotions but also the "process of engagement and interpretation on the part of the researcher" (Smith, 2011, p. 10). In order to analyse the data, the researcher adhered to the IPA analysis format to generate codes from that data. The first transcript was read thoroughly and emerging codes on the participant's experiences and perspectives were transcribed on to the left hand margin. From these codes, themes to include patterns of meaning, were identified and transcribed on to the right hand margin. These themes were organised into super-ordinate themes. A table of master themes from the first transcript was drawn up to ensure that each theme was represented by the data in the transcript (Appendix D). IPA analysis was

replicated on the remaining transcripts until all data from the interviews had been analysed and tables of master themes drawn up for each transcript. A final master table of themes was then identified and drawn up as per IPA data analysis (Appendix E).

Chapter 4:   Findings

4.1   Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the data gathered following Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The demographic details of the participants were captured within the table below. The master themes were then identified and outlined. The results section was narrative in style and vignettes from the transcripts were used to to illustrate the master themes. Subordinate themes were also discussed within the narrative and highlighted within the vignettes.

4.2   Demographics of Participants

The demographics of all six participants who took part in this research study are outlined in table below.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Age of Adoption	Adopted Siblings	Relationship Status
Katie	44	Female	7 weeks	1	Divorced (2nd)
Elaine	42	Female	8 weeks	0	Single
Sharon	40	Female	8 weeks	2	Single
Annette	29	Female	10 weeks	1	Married
Cathal	32	Male	10 weeks	1	Single
Connor	47	Male	24 weeks	1	Married (2nd)

4.3   Master Themes:

- Age Appropriate Information

- Secrecy

- Legacy of Non-Identifying Information

- Fantasy

- Motivating Factors

- Psychotherapy/Support

4.3.1   Age Appropriate Information

From this study five out of the six participants were told of their adoption before the age of ten. However one participant, Sharon, was not told of her adoption until the age of twelve:

> "*Well I was a bit confused, I didn't really know what it meant and I thought, god the last sort of twelve years have been a lie.....and it was never discussed again*".

While four of the participants did not appear to struggle with the age or manner in which they were told of their adoption, the remaining two participants noted their adoptive parents' unwillingness to openly discuss their adoption. Sharon recalled her adoptive mother saying:

> "*I don't care if you search, I don't want to know about it ..... you just remember I took you out of the gutter*".

Connor was told of his adoption when he was approximately eight years of age. He recalled that what stood out the most for him was the manner in which he was told on his adoption.

"He sort of phrased it in the sense that, you know, I was being watched and people were observing me ....I think my self-consciousness was born at that point, I sort of became very, sort of, looking over my shoulder because he had given me this ... it was almost a negative connotation to it and I think I connected that to the adoption at that time ....maybe I shouldn't be talking about this".

4.3.2 Secrecy

Four out of the six participants discussed the aspect of secrecy. In each of the four examples, the participants referred to the fact that their birth mothers, at the time of their adoption, had not informed either family or friends. Annette who is now in regular contact with her birth mother reported that:

"My birth mother hadn't told anybody for twenty years that I existed, she had not told a single person about her being pregnant so it was just the secret that got bigger and bigger and bigger and she didn't feel like she knew where to go or who to turn to".

Connor spoke about the aspect of secrecy from a slightly different perspective where he referred to his adoption as:

"A private adoption, no, it was called a secret adoption, a special Roman Catholic secret adoption handled through the church ....she went to London to have the secret birth before she had the secret adoption (laughs), it was 1965 and everything was done in secret back then".

Two of the participants confirmed that the birth mothers' need for secrecy was still in place. Elaine stated that having written to her birth mother she had been informed by her that:

"She had a large family and they knew nothing about me, her family were unaware that she was pregnant."

This experience also resonated for Sharon:

"She never went home for the last three months of the pregnancy to hide it, nobody knew and she never told anybody....her husband doesn't know, her family doesn't know, nobody knows, she didn't tell a soul...I asked her if she was going to tell her husband and she said no....she has no intention of telling her husband or kids ....she said her husband will leave her if this comes out ....it does feel like a bit of a rejection".

A subordinate theme of the right to privacy versus the right to information emerged for three of the participants. Due to this right to privacy on the part of the birth parents, two participants have resorted to the medium of social networking as a way of locating and contacting their half siblings while the third participant is considering this option.

Elaine stated that:

"While I wouldn't want to affect the relationship of my natural mother ..... I did go on to facebook which I shouldn't have done ....I did it discretely ....but nobody got back to me ....I suppose it was curiosity".

Annette also turned to Facebook in order to get in touch with one of her half siblings from her birth father's family:

"Through facebook I eventually contacted his daughter ...and I told her the story and the truth about who I was".

4.3.3   The Legacy of Non Identifying Information

All six participants who took part in this study experienced a closed adoption. At the time of their adoption no access to any identifying information was given to their adoptive parents. However all six stated that before contact was made with a birth parent, they all obtained some non-identifying information. Five participants obtained this information directly from the adoption agency while one participant was given this information by the priest who handled his adoption. Only two participants stated that they struggled in the absence of non-identifying information.

Annette recalled when she was thirteen she was really struggling with this lack of information. Her mother then obtained some non-identifying information which she thought would help Annette with her sense of identity. Annette admitted that while she clung to the little information she was given it only raised further questions for her:

"The lack of information drove me insane, it absolutely destroyed me ...not knowing if she was alive, if she was in the country, not knowing the real reasons, if she even cares....not looking like anyone in my family ....things that people take for granted and that really bothered me ....it massively affected me...I needed something, because it's hard not knowing where you came from and who you are".

Similarly, Sharon has struggled with the lack of information stating:

"Every adopted person whether they admit it or not, has to be affected by not knowing who you are, it's a basic human instinct isn't it, knowing who you are ...I think it's wrong that there is no information, I know every family is different but there should have been some information....to have a biological connection".

While Connor did not give specific examples as to whether he struggled in the absence of any identifying information, he did state that in his early teenage years:

"I was unhappy on some levels, I had identity issues at that time and I made the wonderful discovery when I was thirteen and that was alcohol...I struggle for identity now you know, I challenge anyone to tell me they don't, you know it's a lifetime process".

4.3.4 Fantasy / Family Romance / Motherhood Myth

The most prevalent theme that emerged for five out of the six participants fell under the headings of fantasy, family romance and the motherhood myth.

Two participants discussed their use of positive fantasies in childhood. Sharon, who had a particularly difficult relationship with her adoptive mother admitted to regularly fantasising about her birth parents:

"I always thought or wondered what she was like or he was like, if I found her, then they'd be loaded so from that point of view I had the best possible fantasies, not particularly a narrative around them, but yeah just, maybe she's just wonderful and she'd welcome me into her family".

Connor also admitted that during his childhood he fantasised about his birth family:

"I'm absolutely sure I spent my time as a child imagining what my family were like, obviously I was descended from royalty when it suited me ....and I dodged a bullet when I was feeling good".

One participant experienced negative fantasies about her birth mother. Annette stated that:

"I guess I had some negative ones, I was afraid I wasn't going to like her if I met her or maybe she wouldn't like me...there was a part in her note that said something like she felt like she had gotten away with it, it was like the secret hadn't been exposed ....those words stuck with me forever ....so it was kind of more in a negative way".

One participant discussed her childhood fantasies which concur with the family romance fantasy. Katie stated that in her early teens:

"I always thought about my mother, it was if I was in trouble (laughs), I would wish that my real parents, my real mother could pick me up and I bet she lived in a really big house with stables (laughs), like a sort of princess fairytale story ....the grass would always be greener on the other side (laughs)".

Four out of the six participants experienced fantasies of the 'motherhood myth'.

Sharon was the most expressive when relating her experiences of meeting her birth mother. The researcher noted Sharon's descriptive use of language, referring to her birth mother as a "razorblade".

> "*I was actually disappointed when I saw her, I thought she would be glamorous...she wasn't the warmest person, I could see that she was somewhat, I would say, broken by it....I called her the razorblade...she wasn't very forthcoming with information, she was very quiet, quite controlled in her emotions and I got the impression that she was very uncomfortable with it all*".

Two participants were of the opinion that their birth mothers were stuck in the past, unable to move forward after relinquishing them a birth. Connor appeared quite angry as he recounted his experience of meeting his birth mother:

> "*We met (laughs) and it was a fucking pain in the ass ...I'm the kid right, so it's all about me right, I don't care how hard the adoption was because I had nothing to do with that ...but then she came out with I don't know how I survived giving you up, it was so hard for me...she never got beyond it ...my half siblings had to grow up with this (shouts) massive hole in their heads ....she was an emotional void because she was just totally (laughs) focussed on this, you know and wanted nothing more than to take me back* ".

All six participants have made contact with their birth mothers. Four of the participants have met with their birth mothers but only two participants are in regular contact with them. Only one participant stated that they had met with their birth father, the remaining five have not.

4.3.5   Motivating Factors

Four out of the six participants stated that their motivating factors for beginning their search were:

- Their need for information on their birth origins

- Medical information after the birth of their first child

- A desire to meet with half siblings.

Annette stated that:

> "*I knew I was going to search because I couldn't have those unknowns, like racing around in my head, I couldn't deal with that without having closure so I knew I was going to search...there was always something, there was always a reason for me to search and I connected it to everything....it's in you or it's not, you know and it was in me*".

Elaine's motivating factor for beginning her search was twofold:

> "*It was more curiosity that I wanted to find out maybe, how they looked, did they look like me, did I have the same interests as them.......my son had a lump on his neck and this is why I, you know, started*"

The remaining two participants were contacted directly by their birth mothers.

All six participants have half siblings. Four of the six participants have met with half siblings while the remaining two are still eager to make contact.

4.3.6 Psychotherapy and Support

Four out of the six participants reported to having sought the support of therapy however, only one participant reported to having attended therapy specifically with regard to her adoption.

Sharon stated that for her, therapy has allowed her to explore her true feelings about her adoption:

> "*Things are being explained to me about my behaviour, the reasons for it...I never realised the importance of a mother and bonding for a child ...I just thought of adoption as I want to look like someone*".

Cathal who is currently in therapy stated that:

> "*I would have found it hard traditionally down the line to get close to people, in any walk of life but especially with relationships, it definitely all goes back to adoption I have zero doubt about that*".

All six participants reported that in hindsight, they saw the value in obtaining therapeutic support before and during the adoptive search.

Elaine was of the opinion:

> "*I do think eh if I was ever to do it again (laughs), to go back in time, I would have definitely thought of speaking to somebody before going into the adoption agency, I would be more prepared and I would be able to focus on my feelings*".

Three participants referred to the poor level of support they received from the adoption agency. Elaine recalled that she felt the adoption agency tried to put her off making contact with her birth mother:

"I got on to the adoption agency and they warned me that I could be opening a can of worms, my mother could be an alcoholic or a drug addict".

Annette struggled with Adoption Agencies timelines:

"They were so understaffed ...two years is a long time to ask people to wait....it was frustrating because they weren't prepared to listen to any individual, they weren't prepared to deviate from their plan at all and they were just expecting me to slot into that".

As discussed within the master themes there was evidence to support the importance of age appropriate information for an adoptee. Similarly, the aspects of secrecy, fantasy and the need for identifying information were prominent themes which reverberated for these participants. The value of psychotherapy for an adoptee was acknowledged by the participants and reference was made to the importance of increased support from the adoption agencies involved.

.

Chapter 5:   Discussion

5.1   Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore the lived experiences of adult adoptees. The researcher reflected on the title of this study "**I know I am adopted but who am I?**" when endeavouring to understand and explore what adoption meant for an adult adoptee. The researcher explored whether the adult adoptee struggled with their sense of self or self identity in the absence of identifying information. The researcher also explored whether the use of fantasy was used in order to compensate for the lack of information on their historical origins. The researcher was curious as to whether the theoretical findings of Erikson's identity formation would emerge. Through this research study the researcher endeavoured to explore whether the participants could identify with any of these experiences as adult adoptees.

5.2   Age Appropriate Information

As discussed within the results section, five of the participants within this study were notified of their adoption before the age of ten whilst the sixth participant was told at the age of twelve. It appeared that five of the participants, while curious as to their birth origins, accepted this information with relative ease at the time. However the one participant, Sharon, who was not told of her adoption until the age of twelve, admitted that she struggled to come to terms with this information. Before the age of twelve Sharon had no reason to question her biological origins however in her opinion, once informed of her adoption this information seemed to shake the foundation of her existing sense of self and self identity.

She recalled that when she was told of her adoption she felt that the initial twelve years of her life had been a lie and from then on struggled to reconcile her life and her relationship with her adoptive parents. This would support the view of Brinich (1990), as he believed that the manner and age at which the individual is informed of their adoption may have significant implications later to their emotional development and identity formation.

While four of the participants did not appear to struggle with the manner in which they were told of their adoption, the remaining two participants may have benefited from further explanations by their adoptive parents. Sharon put this lack of communication as a contributing factor to the strained relationship she had with her adoptive mother. This breakdown in communication is referred to in the study carried out by Holllenstein, Leve, Scaramella, Milfort & Neidersiser, (2003). They concluded that the level of openness of information may need to be considered if the adoptee is struggling to adjust into their adoptive families.

5.3   Secrecy

The aspect of secrecy was a recurring theme for four out of the six participants. In each of the four examples, the participants referred to the fact that their birth mothers, at the time of their birth, had not informed either family or friends. While two of these participants had understood and accepted their birth mother's need for secrecy at the time of their birth, the remaining two struggled to accept why their birth mother felt the need to continue with this secrecy. Both participants reported that their birth mother's had to this date, not informed their husbands or subsequent children of their existence. For these participants, their birth mothers' unwillingness to expose their existence appeared to cause them further distress as

they wanted their existence to be acknowledged. As discussed by Leon, (2002) he believed that the aspect of secrecy only increased feelings of loss or shame in the adoptee.

One participant, Connor, referred to the aspect of secrecy of his adoption from a different perspective. Connor's adoption was not handled through the intermediary of an adoption agency but rather was handled by the Catholic Church. The researcher noted his caustic tone of voice when he referred to his secret birth and secret adoption, that in his opinion, this was a reflection of Catholic Ireland and the need for secrecy at the time of his birth.

The researcher was made aware that due to the continued secrecy as requested by the birth mother, a subordinate theme emerged for three out of the six participants. These participants admitted that due to their birth mothers' continued need for privacy, the participants either had resorted to using the medium of social networking sites or were considering using this as a method of contacting biological relatives. While one of these participants noted that on reflection she should not have used a social networking site to obtain this information, she felt that her birth mother had left her with no choice.

5.4   The Legacy of Non Identifying Information

All six participants who took part in this study experienced a closed adoption. As discussed by Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell & Schmidt, (1985) typically in closed or confidential adoptions, only non-identifying information such as medical information is given to the adoptive parents through the intermediary of an adoption agency. All six participants stated that before contact was made with a birth parent, they all obtained some non-identifying information. Five participants obtained this information directly from the adoption agency while one participant was given this information by the priest who handled his adoption.

Two participants in this study stood out with regard to the difficulties they experienced with their sense of self and self identity in the absence of non-identifying information. Annette recalled that at the age of thirteen her adoptive mother realised that she was struggling to come to terms with the knowledge that she had been given up for adoption. During Annette's interview, she discussed her unrelenting desire for information as to her biological origins, the reasons for her relinquishment, if her birth mother was still alive and living in the country and if she looked like her birth mother. As stated by Annette, "*the lack of information drove me insane, it absolutely destroyed me*". She also highlighted the fact that for individuals who have not been adopted, information as to their biological origins is taken for granted as it is a given.

This concurs with Westwood's, (1995) opinion that if an adoptee is unable to obtain information about their biological origins and the reason behind their relinquishment, the adoptee may be unable to move past the identity formation stage of development. Research studies carried out by March, (1995) also found that adoptees appeared to experience issues that biological children never have to confront as an adoptee lacks the historical and genetic knowledge of their birth families. Annette's experience also resonates with what Sants, (1964), referred to as genealogical bewilderment, where, for some adoptees, there is a sense of disconnectedness from their biological origins.

While the researcher was mindful of the Adoption Act 1952, which was established in order to protect the identity of the birth mother when placing a child for adoption, the researcher noted that due to this Adoption Act, these participants at the time of their adoption had no legal rights to their original birth certificate. Sixty one years later the Adoption Act 1952 has remained unaltered with regard to the identity of the birth mother however, poignant issues concerning the rights to identifying information continue to reverberate within Irish society today. As discussed within in the article written by Emily Logan in The Irish Times, (2013)

she suggested that the current "law must enshrine child's right to birth information" (Logan, 2013, p. 14).

This frustration was highlighted by Sharon who was of the opinion that every adoptee, whether they admitted it to themselves or not, had to have been affected by the absence of identifying information. She went on to state that she believed that information of one's biological origins was a basic human instinct. This would support the opinions of Curtis, (1986) and Silber & Donner, (1990) who stated that knowledge of one's past is a basic human need and in the absence of this knowledge there may be a potential risk to an adoptee when this information is denied.

The researcher endeavoured to explore whether in the absence of identifying information, this may have impinged on their emerging identity formation, specifically within their teenage years. Lord, 1991; Frankel, 1991; Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1992; Westwood, 1995; Jones, 1997 all referred to Erikson's theories on identity formation. While they noted that these experiences and struggles are universal to all individuals, from their research they suggested identity formation in adolescents may be more challenging for adoptees. Similarly, Turkington & Taylor, (2009) stated that the concept of identity was a central task for all adopted children if they were to integrate successfully their adopted status.   While the findings were not conclusive from this research study, three out of the six participants alluded to the fact that their teenager years were difficult and that the absence of identifying information may have been a contributing factor. Connor recalled struggling in his early teens with regard to his identity nevertheless he stated that he perceived identity formation as a lifelong process.

5.5   Fantasy / Family Romance / Motherhood Myth

The most prevalent theme which emerged for five out of the six participants fell under the headings of fantasy, family romance and the motherhood myth. Brodzinsky, (1992) and Robinson, (2005) suggested that when there is a lack of information as to an adoptee's biological origins, to compensate for this lack, the adoptee creates a fantasy which is thought to give adoptees a greater sense of control of their history. In their opinion, fantasy of the biological parents is a contributing factor to the identity formation of adoptees, and making contact with biological parents will inevitably challenge this fantasy.

Similarly, Triseliotis, (2000) also concluded from his study that in order for adoptees to resolve issues of fantasy, identity and self image, these issues can only be achieved when a reunion with the birth parent occurs. Two of the participants discussed their use of positive fantasies in childhood. Both admitted that while there was no one particular narrative within the fantasy itself, they recalled fantasising about how wealthy their birth parents might have been or that they must have descended from royalty. One of these participants recalled that her fantasies revolved around the idealised notion of how wonderful her birth mother must have been and if /when they met, that she would be welcomed into the family.

Only one participant stated that after she learnt of her adoption she experienced negative fantasies about her birth mother. Annette recalled that she was afraid that either her birth mother would not like her or that she herself would not like her birth mother. Annette was left with a negative impression of her birth mother when as a teenager she obtained some non identifying information. In the form that she had been given by the adoption agency, there was a reference to the fact that her birth mother had stated that she had "gotten away" with giving birth to her child. This information, albeit non-identifying at the time, seemed to

haunt Annette until she finally made contact with her birth mother. This would concur with Quinodoz, (1996), Wieder, (1977) and Leon's (2002) reports that an adoptee's fantasies may not always idealise their birth parents, rather they may focus their fantasies on feelings of abandonment or tinged with loss.

One participant discussed her childhood fantasies that support articles written by, Schwartz, (1970); Brinich, (1990); Brodzinsky et al, (1992); Jones, (1997); Siegel, (2001); D'Amato, (2007), and Oppenheim, (2008), when referring to Freud's, (1909) theory on the family romance fantasy. These articles state that while the family romance fantasy is a universal component for all children as they navigate through this transition of conflict with a parent, for an adoptee these fantasies are in fact a reality. For Katie, while there were no negative repercussions from her family romance fantasies, she did recall that her fantasies usually occurred when she was in trouble with her parents and that it was during these times that she fantasised about her birth parents rescuing her, especially as they must have lived in a big house which had stables for horses.

What was of significant interest to the researcher was that four out of the six participants experiences concurred with what March, (1995) referred to as the 'motherhood myth'. In her qualitative study to get an understanding of the motherhood myth and the consequences of searching for a birth mother she concluded that when an adoptee is finally confronted with the reality of this situation, the motherhood myth does not always live up to the stark reality.

Sharon was the most expressive when relating her experiences of meeting her birth mother. The researcher was very aware of her descriptive use of language, referring to her birth mother as a "razorblade". This reality was made all the more difficult for Sharon as she had expressed her relationship with her adoptive mother as strained and so had placed huge

emphasis and expectation on how she perceived her relationship with her birth mother would be. Sharon described her birth mother as someone who was broken, lacking warmth and not forthcoming with identifying information. The reality of meeting with her birth mother only shattered Sharon's illusion of the myth she had created. While they have met a number of times their relationship is still fragile and uncertain.

Two participants referred to their birth mothers as being stuck in the past, unable to move forward after relinquishing their child. While Connor had no specific fantasy of his birth mother aside from the fact she might have come from royal lineage, he was excited at the prospect of meeting her when she contacted him directly when he was thirty. However, the researcher was aware that as Connor spoke about that first meeting, he became quite anger and dismissive of his birth mothers feelings. He was of the opinion that his birth mother had not moved on since giving him up for adoption, she had somehow become stuck in the past. He was irritated by her blatant disregard for his feelings on being adopted, rather she kept telling him how much she had been affected by having put him up for adoption.

5.6   Motivating Factors

Brodzinsky, et al, (2003) suggested that the motivating factors for an adoptee when beginning their search may be triggered by life changing events such the birth of their own biological child or the death of an adoptive parent.

These motivating factors were evident in four out of the six participants. Three of these participants stated that while they were eager to obtain information as to their own birth origins, it was the birth of their first child which had encouraged them to seek historical medical information. Katie's first child was diagnosed with autism and she was keen to explore whether there was a genetic component within her medical family history before she considered having a second child. Interestingly Katie also discussed that it was at this time that she learnt that her birth mother had given birth to a second child whom she had also placed for adoption, a year after Katie's birth. It transpired that Katie's half sibling's motivating factor for searching for information on her birth origins was after the death of her adoptive mother.

5.7   Psychotherapy and Support

Three out of the six participants reported to having sought the support of therapy however, only one participant reported having begun therapy specifically because of her adoption. While the researcher noted that early emotional experiences are not unique to an adoptee, Jones, (1997) purported that aspects of loss, separation, identity, secrecy and fantasy are poignant issues that reverberate throughout many adoptees' personal and therapeutic interpersonal relationships.

Sharon, who is currently in therapy, discussed the importance in exploring her true feelings about her adoption. Before attending therapy she had struggled to openly discuss her experiences of adoption as the subject was not encouraged within the family home. Through the nurturing of the therapeutic relationship, Sharon has begun to explore the reasons for her past behaviour as well as understanding how maladaptive coping strategies may have manifested. Up to this point Sharon had never realised the importance of early attachment

and bonding between mother and infant, but through the assistance of the therapeutic relationship she is beginning to explore the complexities of living her life as an adult adoptee.

One participant discussed his experience of therapy from an interesting perspective. While Cathal did not enter into therapy due to his adoption, rather it was a requirement of his studies, he admitted that with the knowledge he acquired from the course, it had now complicated his relationship with his birth mother. Cathal was of the opinion that while he had a greater understanding of his own experiences and feelings towards adoption, he was left grappling with the fact that his birth mother did not have the psychological training or insight to understand the complexities of placing a child for adoption. He stated that while he would welcome the opportunity to speak to his birth mother about the importance of early attachment he was hesitant to do so for fear that his birth mother may interpret this as a criticism.

All six participants reported that in hindsight, they saw the value in obtaining therapeutic support before and during the engagement of the adoptive search. This concurs with Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely's, (2003) findings in which they recommend both a pre-contact therapeutic exploration to clarify expectations the adoptee has before beginning the process of their search and similarly, a post-contact exploration to explore potential relationship issues which may arise between the adoptee and the birth parent after the reunion.

Three of the participants referred to the poor level of support they received from the adoption agency. Brodzinsky, et al, (1993) stated that before an adoptee begins their search, the adoptee needs to explore and understand what their search means to them and what outcome they hope to achieve.

It was Elaine's experience which stood out the most to the researcher. Elaine had recalled that she was stunned by the initial response she received from the adoption agency. It was surprising to hear that the adoption agency had informed Elaine that her birth mother might be an alcoholic or a drug addict. The researcher could only interpret this response as a method of deterring a potential search due to the adoption agency's limited recourses.

5.8   Unexpected Findings

A reoccurring theme for four out of the six participants, which the researcher had not incorporated into her exploration of an adoptees lived experiences, was the impact the participants' search of their birth parent(s) had on their relationships with their adoptive parents. Two of the participants stated that a rupture had occurred within their relationship on learning that they had now made contact with their birth mothers. Connor's experience was the most prolific as he recalled that when he decided to meet with his birth mother, his adoptive mother was very angry and upset, she felt betrayed as it was she who had raised and nurtured him. He stated that while he recognised that his relationship with his adoptive mother was at times enmeshed, he was disappointed that she had not been more understanding and supportive of his natural curiosity to obtain information from his birth mother. In Connor's opinion, his adoptive mother was his mother while his birth mother would only ever be at best a friend as she had not raised him. To this day, Connor's relationship with his adoptive mother is difficult but he hopes that in time, she will come to understand his reasons for requiring information as to his historical origins.

Two further participants stated that to date they had not informed their adoptive parents that they had either met or had made contact with their birth mother. Both participants stated that their reasons for not informing their adoptive parents that contact had been established was for fear that they would cause undue stress or feelings of failure on the part of the adopted parents.

This would reflect the findings of Silverman and Patti, (1994) who stated that for some adoptive parents, the struggle to reconcile that their adoptive child may not only seek information on their birth origins but may also wish to reunite with a birth parent, only exacerbates feelings of inadequacy for the adoptive parent.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1   Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore and interpret the phenomenological lived experiences of adult adoptee and indentify whether the participants in this study had considered the question, "**I know I am adopted but who am I?**

In order to explore the lived experiences of an adult adoptee, the researcher referred to the existing research and literature that has been gathered by subject matter experts in this field in order to identify whether the existing research and findings could be transferable to the participants lived experiences within this study.

This was achieved by examining and interpreting the responses of the participants with specific reference to age appropriate information, the legacy of non identifying information, secrecy and the use of fantasy.

The findings from this study only refer to the six participants involved so their experiences are not a representation for all adult adoptees. From the findings there was substantial evidence to support previous literature and research with regard to this topic.

This was demonstrated when exploring age appropriate information. Five of the participants in this study had been made aware of their adoption before the age of ten. The researcher noted that they accepted this information with relative ease. The remaining one participant was not told of her adoption until the age of twelve and the manner and age at which she was made aware of her adoption caused her distress and anxiety. This was reflected by her tone of voice and use of language.

When exploring whether non identifying information may have impacted on the participants' sense of self and self identity, the researcher could only identify two out of the six participants who expressed strong opinions with regard to the absence of identifying information. The researcher observed the level of emotion that was elicited by these two participants. Both were insistent that as adoptees they felt they were being denied their biological right to identifying information.

The researcher noted that the aspect of secrecy evoked a strong emotional response from four of the six participants. These responses ranged from irritation with regard to how religious institutions handled adoption in the past, to anger and frustration with the birth mothers rigid insistence that secrecy remain in place for fear of rupturing an existing relationship.

The findings that elicited the most evocative response from the participants were their use of fantasy. Of these fantasies, the most prevalent was the motherhood myth which four out of the six participants had experienced. The researcher observed that disappointment and loss of illusion were common responses from these participants. One participant was very angry and descriptive when discussing her experiences, referring to her birth mother as a razorblade. However the researcher interpreted that her feelings of anger were also tinged with great sadness.

In concluding this research study, the researcher was mindful that the experiences of the six participants who took part in this study were not representative for all adult adoptees. While experience of one's adoption is subjective to the individual, the topic of adoption invariably elicits strong emotional responses, both positive and negative, from all members affected within the adoptive triad. The researcher surmised that adoptees do face challenges that biological individuals do not. As all these six participants experienced a closed adoption, they were not entitled to identifying information. When testing the transferability of the

existing literature and research on this topic, the researcher concluded from her interpretation that in the absence of identifying information and the aspect of continued secrecy, this gave rise to the use of fantasies in order to provide a life narrative for the adoptee. However, with this use of fantasy, the researcher observed that when the adoptee was faced with the reality, it only reinforced feelings of loss and disillusionment. It also left the adoptee with further unanswered questions as to their biological origins and reasons for relinquishment. The researcher reflected on the title of this research study once again and questioned whether any adoptee who has experienced a closed adoption can categorically answer the fundamental question: **I know I am adopted but who am I?**

6.2   Recommendations for Future Research

A number of interesting questions arose from this research study which may be of benefit for future research.

- Four of the six participants discussed that they had siblings who were also adopted however the participants in this study stated that their adopted siblings experienced their adoption differently to them. The researcher would recommend that further research would be beneficial in comparing and contrasting the different experiences of adopted siblings.

- When researching this topic, the researcher noted that little information or studies were available with regard to the experiences of the adoptive parents, specifically when considering the impact an adoptees reunion might have on the family dynamic and relationship. Further research on this may be of benefit in understanding the complexities of the adoption triad.

- The researcher also noted that the findings obtained by the National Adoption Contact Register, (NACR, 2005) stated that they had received over 71% of applications from adoptees, of these, 60% were female. Future research might explore the difference, if any, between male and female adoptees experiences.

APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

<div align="center">

Interview Consent Form

</div>

Title: **I know I am adopted but who Am I?**

<div align="center">

An Exploration of your lived experiences as an adult adoptee

</div>

This study intends to explore how you experienced your world with the knowledge that you had been adopted. This is part of my final year research project, (BA, Counselling and Psychotherapy) in Dublin Business School and my research supervisor is Susan Eustace.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time or withdraw your participation.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, this interview may elicit an emotional response in you so I have attached a list of confidential support services that may be of benefit to you in the future.

The process involves an interview which should take no more than 45 minutes and will be recorded. The questions are about your experiences, views and the unique challenges you may have faced.

You will not be identified in the results of this research or in any part of the finished project. The information will only be used by the author for this research project.

Under data protection I am required to keep the transcripts from the interviews for a period of five years and they will be stored in a secure location during this time.

The purpose and process of this study has been explained to me, and I agree to Participate.

Participant's Signature: _____   Date: _____

Participant's Name in print: _____

Researcher: Ruth Alvey   Supervisor: Susan Eustace

              Ruth.alvey@gmail.com   eustacsm@tcd.ie

              086-8218985   087-7550020

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Schedule

1. Can you tell me about the background of your adoption? (age, reasons, open/closed information of biological family and at what age you were told of your adoption)

2. In the absence of any identifying information on your birth parent(s), can you tell me how the lack of this information make you feel?

3. Can you tell me about some of the fantasies, if any, you had about your birth parent(s)?

4. Can you tell me about your experiences if / when you made contact with your birth parent(s)?

5. Can you tell me about the motivating factor(s) that triggered your search?

6. Can you tell me if you sought the assistance of a therapist with regard to your adoption, and if so, was it helpful?

APPENDIX C: SUPPORT

Confidential Support Services:

Barnardos Adoption Advice Services Ireland

Christchurch Square,
Dublin 8.
T: (01) 453 0355 Callsave: 1850 222 300
F: (01) 453 0300
E: info@barnardos.ie

Adoption Ireland

27 Templeview Green

Clare Hall

Dublin 13

T: (01) 8674033

E: chairperson@adoptionireland.com

Age Appropriate Information	- On learning about being adopted	2.58	"I was a bit confused"
	- Impact of information	3.04	"last 12 years have been a lie"
	- Not discussed	2.49	"we won't talk about it again"
Secrecy	- Birth Mother never told anyone	17.05	"she hasn't told a sinner"
	- Unwilling to tell anyone now	14.20	"no intention of telling husband or kids"
	- Feelings of rejection	14.49	"it does feel a bit of a rejection"
Legacy of Non Identifying Information	- Basic Human Instinct	21.59	"it's a basic human instinct"
	- Need for information	6.38	"there should be some information"
	- Biological connection	8.11	"to have a biological connection"
Fantasy/ Family Romance/ Motherhood Myth	- Best possible fantasies	7.45	"she'd absolutely welcome me into her family"
	- Disappointed	10.30	"I was actually disappointed"
	- Razorblade	12.12	"She's a complete razorblade"
Motivating Factors	- Information	5.42	"there was a lot more questions"
	- Curious	9.39	"just obsessed with it all the time"
Therapy/Support	- Importance of bonding	21.11	"I never realised the importance of mother and bonding for a child"

APPENDIX E: MASTER THEMES

4.2   Master Themes

Following IPA Analysis of the data the following six master themes were identified in table below.

Table of Master Themes

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5	Theme 6
Age Informed	**Secrecy**	**Legacy of Non Identifying Information**	**Fantasy**	**Motivating Factors**	**Therapy/Support**

References:

An Bord Uchtala, Office of the Attorney General Adoption Act, (1952).
    http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1952/en/act/pub/0025/index.html

Adoption Authority of Ireland, (2013), http://www.aai.gov.ie/

Barnardos, (2013), http://www.barnardos.ie/what-we-do/specialist-services/adoption.html

Brodzinsky, D. & Schechter, M, (1990). *The Psychology of Adoption*. New York: Oxford
    University Press

Brodzinsky, D. Schechter, M. & Henig, R. (1993*). Being Adopted. The Lifelong Search for
    Self.* New York: Anchor Books

Brodzinsky, D.M & Smith, D. W. (2002) "*Coping with birthparent loss in adopted children."*
    Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 43(2): 213-223.

Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and Loss, Vol. 3, Loss: Sadness and Depression*. London:
    Hogarth Press

Brinich, P. M. (1990). Adoption from the inside out: A psychoanalytic perspective. In
    Brodzinsky, D. & Schechter, M. (Eds.), *The Psychology of Adoption* (pp. 42-61).
    New York: Oxford University Press.

Crain, W. (2005). *Theories of Development* (5th ed.). New York: Pearson Education, Inc.

Curtis, P. (1986). The dialectics of open versus closed adoption of infants. *Child Welfare,
    65*, 437-445.

D'Amato, B. (2010). Adoption: perspectives and fantasy. *Modern Psychoanalysis*, *35*(1), 53-
    67.

Frankel, S. A. (1991). Pathogenic Factors in the Experience of Early and Late Adopted Children. *Psychoanalytic Study Of The Child*, *46*91-108

Freud, S. (1909). *Family Romances*. Standard Edition. London: Hogarth Press.

Gomez, L. (1997). *An Introduction to Object Relations*. London: Free Association Books.

Goldberg, J. G. (2002). Abandonment, Rejection and the Search for Union. Modern Psychoanalysis.

Harrison, A. (2010, July 24). Every day I pray I'll find out who my mother is. I don't blame her for giving me up. All I want to know is who I am. *Daily Mail*. p. 30.

Hertz, J. E. (1998). In Pursuit of Authenticity: An Adoptee's Quest. *Modern Psychoanalysis*, *23*(1), 103-112.

Hollenstein, T., Leve, L. D., Scaramella, L. V., Milfort, R., & Neiderhiser, J. M. (2003). Openness in Adoption, Knowledge of Birthparent Information, and Adoptive Family Adjustment. *Adoption Quarterly*, *7*(1), 43-52.

Howe, D. (2006). Developmental Attachment Psychotherapy with Fostered and Adopted Children. *Child & Adolescent Mental Health*, *11*(3), 128-134.

Homans, M. (2006). Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins. *Narrative*, *14*(1), 4-26.

Jones, A. (1997). Issues relevant to therapy with adoptees. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, *34*(1), 64-68

Kahn, M. (2001). *Between Therapist and Client*. New York: Holt Paperbacks

Kraft, A. C; Palombo, J; Woods, P. K; Mitchell, D. & Schmidt, A. W: Some Theoretical
Considerations on Confidential Adoptions: The Birth Mother. *Child and Adolescent
Social Work Journal 2, 1 (1985): 13-21*

Leon, I. (2002). Adoption Losses: Naturally Occurring or Socially Constructed. *Child
Development, 73(2)*

Lifton, B.J. (1994). *Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness*. New York: Basic
Books

Lifton, B.J. (2010). Ghosts In the Adopted Family. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, *30*(1), 71-79.

Lord, R. (1991). Adoption and Identity—A Case Study. *Psychoanalytic Study of The Child*,
*46*355-367.

March, K. (1995). Perception of Adoption as Social Stigma: Motivation for Search and
Reunion. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57(n3),* 653-60.

March, K. (1997). The Dilemma of Adoption Reunion: Establishing Open Communication
Between Adopted and Their Birth Mothers. *Family Relations*, *46*(2), 99-105.

Means, D. & Thorne, B. (2007). *Person-Centred Counselling in Action (3rd ed.)*. London:
Sage Publications Ltd.

Muller, U., Gibbs, P., & Ariely, S. (2003). Adults Who Were Adopted Contacting Their
Birthmothers: What Are the Outcomes, and What Factors Influence These Outcomes.
Adoption Quarterly, 7 (1), 7-53.

Moran, R. A. (1994). Stages of emotion: An adult adoptee's post-reunion perspective. *Child
Welfare: Journal of Policy, Practice, and Program*, *73*(3), 249-260.

National Adoption Contact Preference Register, (2005).
http://www.aai.gov.ie/attachments/article/23/NACPR

Neil, E., & Howe, D. (2004). *Contact in adoption and permanent foster care.* London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering

Oppenheim, J. (2009). The magic of adoption: a consideration of the pre-oedipal genesis of the family romance. *Modern Psychoanalysis*, *34*(1), 79-105.

Pannor, R, & Brown, D. (1984). Adopted Teens: Searching for Identity. *Adopted Child, 3.*

Quinodoz, D. (1996). An Adopted analysand's transference of a "hole-object*". International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 77:*323-336.

Robinson, E. (2005). *Adoption and Loss. The Hidden Grief.* Australia: Clova Publications.

Sants, H.J. (1964). Genealogical Bewilderment in children with successful reunions of adult adoptees and biological parents. *Brit. J. Med. Psychol. 37,* 133-141.

Siegel, A. M., & Siegel, R. N. (2001). Chapter 11 Adoption and the Enduring Fantasy of an Idealized Other. *Progress in Self Psychology*, *17,*129-147.

Silverstein, D. R., & Demick, J. (1994). Toward an organizational-relational model of open adoption. *Family Process*, *33*(2), 111-124.

Schechter, M. & Bertocci, D. (1993). The Meaning of the Search. In D. Brodzinsky, & M. Schechter. The Psychology of Adoption (pp. 62-90). London: Oxford University Press.

Schwartz, E. M. (1970). The Family Romance Fantasy in Children Adopted in Infancy. *Child Welfare*, *49*(7), 386-391.

Silverman, P. R., Campbell, L., & Patti, P. (1994). Reunions between adoptees and birth parents: The adoptive parents' view. *Social Work*, *39*(5), 542-549.

The Irish Times, (2013). *Law must enshrine child's right to birth information.*
http://www.irishtimes.com/debate/law-must-enshrine-child-s-right-to-birth-information-1.1313677 Logan, E. Ombudsman for Children.

Triseliotis, J. (1973). *In Search of Origins*. London: Routledge and Kegan

Turkington, S., & Taylor, B. J. (2009). Post-adoption face-to-face contact with birth parents: Prospective adopters' views. *Child Care in Practice*, *15*(1), 21-38

TV3, (2013). *Adoption Stories* http://www.tv3.ie/shows.php?request=adoptionstories Lawless, S. Executive Producer.

Wegar, K. (1997). *Adoption, Identity and Kinship: The Debate over Sealed Birth Records*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Westwood, P. (1995). Who am I ? *Youth Studies Australia*, *14*(1), 52.

Wieder, H. (1977). The Family Romance Fantasies of Adopted Children. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, *46*(2), 185-200

Wieder, H. (1997). The Family Romance Fantasies of Adopted Children. The *Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 46*:185-200.

Willbisch. E. (1952). Children without Genealogy, A problem in Adoption. *Mental Health, 13,* 41-42.

Yalom, I D, (2010). *The Gift of Therapy*. London: Piatkus Books Ltd.

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social Research Methods* (2nd ed). New York: Oxford University Press

IACP (n.d). Code of Ethics and Practice for Counsellors/Psychotherapists.
http://www.irish-counselling.ie/index.php/code-ethics

Office of the Attorney General, Data Protection Act
http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2003/en/act/pub/0006/

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. USA: Sage Publications Ltd

McLeod, J., (2005). *Counseling Research (2nd ed.)*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

McLeod, J., (2003). Doing Counseling Research. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Mason, J. (2009). *Qualitative Researching* (2nd ed.) London: Sage Publications Ltd

Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. H*ealth Psychology Review*, *5*(1), 9-27.

Smith, J., & Flowers. P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Zimmerman, J. (1997). *The Belmont Report: An Ethical Framework for Protecting Research Subjects*, USA: The Monitor, ACRP.
http://www.impactcg.com/docs/BelmontReport.pdf