

ADULT ADOPTEE COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCES WITH BIRTH AND  
ADOPTIVE FAMILIES: A MIXED METHODS INVESTIGATION

BY

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#AdoptionIsLove

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## **Abstract**

Child adoption touches over 100 million Americans who have adoption in their immediate family. Often these children are placed for adoption while still remaining in contact with their birth families in a variety of ways. Research has found these relationships are complex, fluctuating, and look different for each adoptive family. This mixed-methods thesis investigates adult adoptee's relationships with their adoptive and birth families, beginning with a qualitative analysis of an online adoption forum (Phase 1) followed by a survey of adult adoptees who communicate with both their adoptive and birth families (Phase 2). Results from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 indicate adoptees experience difficulty with relationship uncertainty, identity, and in their relationships with both adoptive and birth parents and seek social support in online adoption forums.

## Introduction

In 2017, 59,430 children were adopted in the United States through Title IV-E agencies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau, 2018). It is statistically unknown how many of these were open adoptions, where there is some form of ongoing contact between the adoptee and the birth parent(s). However, research has found that as of 2012, 95 percent of adoptions have some level of openness (Siegel & Livingston Smith, 2012). The trend of increasing openness in adoption has grown out of the diminishing stigma that adopted children would feel a sense of illegitimacy in an open adoption (Siegel & Livingston Smith, 2012). Limited research has looked at the complex relationships adoptees navigate after adoption, communicating with a biological (birth) family and an adoptive family. This thesis utilizes the mixed methods approach of a sequential exploratory analysis (Creswell, 2014), which contains two phases: In Phase 1, qualitative data was collected and analyzed in which themes served to inform the selection of measures for a quantitative data collection and analysis (Creswell). Results from the qualitative portion allowed themes to emerge, which then informed the instruments and measures as well as quantitative design considerations for Phase 2, a quantitative survey. Together, Phase 1 and 2 allowed the researcher to examine the communication experiences of adult adoptees in open adoptions including how adoptees approach their family identity, adoptees' levels of relational distancing and relationship uncertainty, as well as adoptees' attachment styles.

## **Rationale**

### **Openness in Adoption**

Adoption has a rich and complex history, with its roots in biblical stories of Moses and the beginnings of formal adoption law in the U.S. in the late 1800s. Modern adoption law attempts to put the best interests of the child first, with the primary goal of a permanent home for the child. Even after placement and adjustment, adoption continues as an ongoing process for an adoptee. Furthermore, this process continues for the entire adoption triad, which includes the birth family, adoptee, and adoptive family.

Most modern adoptions have some level of openness, in which the adoptee has contact with the birth family post-placement. Adoption scholars have described openness in adoption as a continuum with varying degrees of interpersonal contact (Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrich, 1996). On one end, confidential adoptions (sometimes referred to as closed) involve no identifying information about the birth and adoptive families. On the other end are fully disclosed (open) adoptions, “in which birth family members engage in direct, ongoing communication with the birth family” (Floyd, Morman, & Bugental, 2013). The communication that occurs within these groups is often complex, as adoptive families struggle with issues such as family identity and navigating these often-complicated relationships. As roughly 95% of adoptions as of 2012 have some level of openness (Siegel & Livingston Smith, 2012) it is of interest to study how these families communicate, and how adoptees perceive and manage these relationships.

A significant amount of adoption research thus far focuses on the benefits of open adoption on the adoption triad from a psychological perspective concerning elements such as self-esteem and mental health (Grotevant et al., 2008, Howe, 2001, Zamostny et al. 2003) and the effect of open adoption on family attachment (Farr, Grant-Marsney & Grotevant 2014). However, less research examines how the level of openness in an adoption may affect the adoptee's family communication and family satisfaction, and to the author's knowledge only one adoption study thus far has taken a mixed methods approach to better understand adult adoptees and their experiences with open adoptions (see Horstman, Colaner, Nelson, Bish, & Hays, 2018). While research has found that birth family contact is associated with positive outcomes and relationships in the adoption triad (Siegel & Smith, 2012), it remains unclear how adult adoptees perceive and navigate these fluctuating relationships.

### **Discourse Dependent Families**

Adoptive families are considered "discourse dependent." Discourse dependent families do not have "traditional" family images, and as a result they rely on discourse, or communication, to establish their identity as a family, both to outsiders and themselves (Galvin, 2006). Discursive strategies help discourse-dependent families establish their family identity. These strategies within the family members include *naming*, in which family members emphasize and honor someone as family, *discussing*, explaining how someone is considered part of the family, *telling stories* to remind members of their connection, and *ritualizing*, in which families include members in family traditions and celebrations (Galvin & Braithewaite, 2014). Horstman et. al's (2018) study found that the use of naming helped manage tensions between ingroup and outgroup identities with

birth and adoptive families. The study also found that children tended to avoid using address terms for a birth family member and suggests that “individuals entering open adoptions should carefully consider which terms to use.”

Adoptee’s communication with their birth families is undeniably important considering that discourse dependent adoption triad members “depend on communicative practices to raise and manage multiple issues that surface across decades of connection” (Floyd, Morman, & Bugental, 2013). The complexities of the biological and adoptive family relationships allow for a unique study of the communication approaches in discourse dependent families (Horstman, et. al, 2018).

### **Birth family communication**

Families in open adoptions often vary in how much the birth parent(s) is present in the adoptees’ lives, either as a result of legalities, preference, or other factors (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014). Although each adoption triad’s situation is unique, the frequency and type of adoptive and birth family communication is a distinguishing feature in adoptive relationships (Grotevant et al., 2008) and is typically one of the first decisions made by adoptive and birth families during the adoption process (Colaner & Sharp, 2016). While this communication is critical to the triad, the adoption often puts an adoptee in the middle of a complex relationship web of an adoptive family and a birth parent(s) that may be difficult to navigate. Colaner et. al (2014) discuss that reunions between adoptees and birth parents are often messy and emotional, typically involve inconsistencies in ongoing contact, and adoptees navigate these relationships while also

“managing the stresses of adulthood” which can create a barrier in connecting with the birth parents.

Qualitative evidence has shown adoption involves a variety of emotions and experiences for adoptees who are in contact with their birth families. In a study with 25 adoptees, 12 had contacted their birth families while the rest had not for various reasons. Those who were in contact with their birth families reported difficulty in navigating their place between the two families, and “feeling as though they were somewhat but not fully connected to either family.” One adoptee expressed feeling an obligation to feel connected to her birth family, and guilt that she did not feel she belonged with them because they were strangers. Another expressed that she felt her birth mother was let down that she did not want to give up holidays or her wedding day for her birth family because of her obligation to her adoptive family who she “grew up with first” (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014). This evidence suggests that adoptees find difficulty managing expectations between adoptive and birth families in various ways throughout their lives.

Logan and Smith (2003) also found mixed results from interviews and questionnaires with adopted children about their experiences with birth family contact after adoption. Children in the sample were asked to finish the sentence “being adopted makes me feel...” Ninety percent of the children responded with positive words about their adoptions and adoptive families such as feelings of happiness and safety (p. 133). Additionally, they interviewed several children who expressed relief at being out of the foster system and in a “forever home.” However, children who had open adoptions and had remained in contact with their birth parents expressed discontent. Some expressed

discontent with interactions between birth and adoptive parents because it led to disagreements. Others expressed concern because they felt their adoptive family was still temporary and that eventually they would return to their birth families. For example, “Shiela,” a 12-year-old participant, said: “I’ll go and see my old Mum and Dad and tell them I want to live with you again or they might live with me. Adoption is not so good – I’d like to see my real parents; they were good to me” (p.136). “Gerry,” also 12, said that he wished he “wasn’t born into a family that couldn’t look after him,” and said he wanted to live with his birth family from when he was born. Logan and Smith conclude: “For some children, adoption seems to be experienced as a ‘mixed blessing’” (p. 136).

Based on the previous research we can conclude that these complex relationships in the adoption triad are handled in unique ways and beget a variety of outcomes for adoptees and their families. This study will further explore adult adoptee’s communicative experiences in adoptive families and birth families, including how adoptees navigate issues surrounding family identity, relationship uncertainty, relational distancing, and attachment styles.

### **Online Social Support**

According to Mehta & Atreja (2015), online support groups are an online community in which “participants have a shared goal and desire to help and support each other.” These communities span geographic and temporal distances. Participants in these communities are able to sense-make and process experiences in an anonymous way (Kellet, 2019), and therefore are able to discuss sensitive issues (Dosani, Harding, & Wilson, 2014). Chung’s (2014) study of online social network users revealed that users

either have emotional support needs or information seeking needs, and the ways they use these networks can reveal which needs are more salient. The benefits of joining online support groups have been widely studied and shown, in particular throughout the health field (see Mehta & Atreja, 2015). One study found that users say online networks are more helpful and informative than static information sites, and easier to utilize than telephone conversations. They also reported it was easier to talk to strangers online than friends and family (Jones et. al, 2011).

Existing evidence suggests adoptive parent support groups can help with issues such as relationship strain (Schwartz, Cody, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Fong, 2014), mental health challenges, and youth behavior issues (Clutter, 2014), however the support groups in these studies are in-person, not online. Research on online adoptive support groups is much more limited (Miller et al., 2018). Miller et al. (2019) examined online adoptive parent support groups. Overall, their findings demonstrate that participants in online support groups can “foster meaningful connections and empathetic support for participants.” Much more research is needed to understand users of adoption support groups, the topics of conversation within these groups, and how users are seeking and providing social support.

A Google search for “adoption online support groups” yields 146,000,000 results. Of these, the most popular include social media such as Facebook’s public and private groups and Reddit’s r/adoption Subreddit, in addition to websites and forums that have support groups and chat features available. These groups vary in topic and content, ranging from support for adoptive parents, potential adoptive parents, adoptive families, birth mothers, birth families, transracial or visible adoptions, and adoptees. *Adult Adoptee*

*Support Group* is an example of an open forum for adoptees to find a network of other adoptees, seek support on adoption related issues, and provide support for other members. This support group was examined for Phase 1 of this thesis.

### **Overview of Phase 1 Results (For Complete Results Section See pg. X)**

In Phase 1, I conducted a thematic analysis of an online adoption forum, *Adult Adoptees Support Group*, to explore and better understand the experiences of adult adoptees and inform the quantitative portion, Phase 2. Phase 1 was guided by the following two research questions:

**RQ1:** What emotions do adoptees report experiencing when either communicating or seeking communication about adoption-related topics with their biological families?

**RQ2:** What emotions do adoptees report experienced when either communicating or seeking communication about adoption-related topics with their adoptive families?

These research questions provided important insight into the emotional experiences adoptees have while navigating complicated relationships with their birth families. There is little research that explores these emotions and adoptee communication with birth families, therefore these questions provided a starting place into exploring the topic and creating further constructs to measure in Phase 2.

### **RQ1 Results Preview**

In order to contextualize the rationale for Phase 2, this thesis offers a preview of results for Phase 1 here. In depth analysis of Phase 1 appears in the formal results section. The findings from the qualitative analysis of *Adult Adoptee Support Group* suggest that

adoptees are experiencing a range of salient emotions in their relationships with their birth families and adoptive families.

RQ1 asked: What emotions do adoptees report experiencing when either communicating or seeking communication about adoption-related issues with their biological families? The following themes were emotions that characterized communication experiences with birth families: (1) Fears of abandonment and rejection from birth families, (2) emotional reactions to perceived abandonment and rejection from birth families, (3) disconnection and lack of belonging stemming from unfulfilling interactions with birth family, (4) sense of relational closeness stemming from interactions with birth family that demonstrate commitment or similarity, (5) guilt surrounding birth and adoptive family needs and expectations and (6) feelings towards birth family change over time.

### **RQ2 Results Preview**

RQ2 themes surrounding adoptive family experiences included similar experiences to RQ1. RQ2 asked: What emotions have adoptees reported experiencing when either communicating or seeking communication about adoption-related issues with their adoptive families? Three themes emerged from analysis: (1) challenges in interactions between adoptive and birth families, (2) distress from feeling adoptees do not belong in adoptive family, and (3) birth family interactions cause an appreciation for adoptive family.

These salient themes that emerged from Phase 1 informed the quantitative measures and study design of Phase 2. Phase 2 utilizes the following theories:

## **Adoptive Family Identity**

An increase in open adoptions impacts “the communicative complexities of adoptive family members’ lives as multiple parties negotiate and renegotiate their familial identities across their lifetimes” (Colaner & Galvin, 2014). While all of us undergo the process of developing an identity that is unique from our parent or guardian, adopted individuals are forced to create an “adoptive identity,” or “an understanding of what it means to be an adopted person” (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014). This complex process often involves recognizing differences between the adoptee and their adoptive family, whether these differences be cultural, physical appearance, or other differences. As Colaner and her colleagues (2014) conclude, “relational layers embedded in both families are present in individual’s adoptive identity, contributing particular sources of knowledge, tendencies, and experiences that give weight and context to the personal identity adoptees espouse.” Adoptees are also often missing pieces of their own histories. They may have incomplete information about their past and their birth families or pursue a search for a birth parent(s) that is not successful. As a result, adoptees often struggle with identity in ways unique from their peers, and these challenges can have lasting effects (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004).

Social identity theory (SIT) explains and predicts messaging and response behaviors of particular groups, and social identity complexity theory (SIC) provides an understanding of how individuals negotiate multiple identities. Social identity theory aids us in understanding the ways individuals define themselves within groups, using the processes of social categorization, social comparison, and social identification. The Shared Family Identity Scale “provides a way to examine inter-group connections and

perspectives between different kinds of members of a family unit” (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Developed using a combination of communication accommodation theory and SIT’s intergroup contact theory, this scale has been previously used to measure the degree to which a strong sense of family identity is shared between a child and parent. Research on stepparent and stepchildren relationships (also discourse-dependent families) using the Shared Family Identity Scale found that step parent engagement in appropriate accommodation behaviors is positively related to the overall shared family identity development with stepchildren (Speer, R. B., Giles, H., & Denes, A., 2013). They also found that a greater sense of shared family identity between stepchildren and stepparents was positively associated with deeper levels of satisfaction in all aspects of engagement in a blended family life.

Both theories have been previously used to study adult adoptees’ adoptive identity (Colaner, Horstman, & Rittenour, 2018). Results argue that dual family identifications, in which adoptees identify with both their adoptive family and birth family, can create tension for adoptees and their families (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014). Furthermore, research also demonstrates that adoptees have reported intergroup strain when simultaneously identifying as a member of their adoptive and their birth families. Colaner et. al (2014) write: “these perceived family memberships may create an intergroup (i.e., in-group versus out-group) dynamic if adoptees view these families in conflict with one another.” Despite findings that adoptees benefit when adoptive and birth parents collaborate to promote adoptee well-being (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000), it has also been found that identifying with their adoptive family may prohibit adoptees from strongly identifying with their birth mother (Colaner et al., 2014).

Additional evidence for this construct has shown that when shared family identity between the adoptive and birth parents are in conflict, adoptees may require complex identity structures to make sense of these conflicting family identifications. Family identity is created, shared, revised and performed through communication (Segrin & Flora, 2018). Because adoptive family communication is critical to the adoptee even in uncertainty, (Brodzicknsky, 2006) it has been shown to be the greatest influence on adoptee's understanding of their adoption and connection to their adoptive family (Wrobel et. al, 2003). Thus, I am predicting:

**H1:** Adult adoptees report greater family identity within their adoptive families than within their birth families.

### **Relational Distancing**

Results from Phase 1 of this study suggest that not all adoptees like or enjoy their parents, including both adoptive and birth parents. Jon Hess (2000) suggests that while individuals voluntarily develop relationships with liked partners, they also often have non voluntary relationships with disliked partners as well. These relationships occur in families, the workplace, and other social situations. Often they are relationships that are hard to end, however they are not necessarily unsatisfying (Graham, 2009). Hess (2003) argues that these relationships may cause individuals to create social distance from partners, given that the relationship or actual distance is often not feasible. This social distance is referred to as relational distancing. In order to better understand this complex relationship, the Relational Distancing Index operates under the idea that distance is not merely the absence of closeness. Distancing behaviors are broken into three categories:

avoidance (tactics which reduce the amount of interaction), disengagement (tactics such as concealing information about the self or treating the other impersonally), and cognitive dissociation (tactics that are characterized by a mental detachment and disregard for the other) (Graham, 2009). Based on the Phase 1 results in which adoptees often show one or more of these kinds of distancing behaviors from either an adoptive or biological parent, I hypothesize:

**H2:** Adoptees experience higher levels of avoidance with their birth families than with their adoptive families.

**H3:** Adoptees experience higher levels of disengagement with their birth families than with their adoptive families.

**H4:** Overall, adoptees experience greater overall relational distancing with their birth families than their adoptive families.

### **Adoptee Relationship Uncertainty**

Grounded in Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), the Relational Uncertainty Measure identifies sources and content of relational uncertainty. The measure assesses three elements of uncertainty: self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty. It is “a comprehensive, multidimensional, extensively tested, and valid measure that is a useful addition to the battery of interpersonal communication tools” (Rubin, Rubin, Graham, Perse, & Seibold, 2010).

URT posits that people are motivated to reduce uncertainty in their social environment, defining uncertainty as “feeling unsure about interaction.” Uncertainty can

come from expectancy violations, anticipation of future interactions, or a lack of control over the “rewards and costs” we get from interactions (Rubin, Rubin, Graham, Perse, & Seibold, 2010). Notably, it has been found that people avoid talking about sensitive topics until uncertainty has been reduced, and relational uncertainty mediates the relationship between topic avoidance and intimacy (Knolbloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004).

Adoptees’ familial relationships are often filled with relational turbulence and uncertainty. “Adoptees face uncertainty about what their adoption means for their sense of self, characteristics of their birth parents, and their adoptive parents’ feelings about their adoption.” (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010). While ambiguity is always present in social situations, one can imagine an increase in ambiguity in new, fragile, and often unstable and inconsistent relationships such as those between an adoptee and their birth parent(s). Additionally, adoptees may feel ambiguity in their adoptive families as well, particularly if they have also expressed feeling they do not belong in their adoptive families, or if they begin to feel uncertainty about their adoptive families after a reunion with their birth families, both of which occurred in Phase 1 results.

Because evidence supports that adoptees are likely to experience significant amounts of uncertainty, it is not surprising that this was exemplified during Phase 1, and that adoptees were seeking social support from other adoptees during this process, as social support aids individuals in coping with uncertainty and can decrease negative affect (Kellet, 2019). Phase 1 results indicate that adoptees express various degrees of uncertainty when thinking about and communicating with their birth families, in particular when the relationship is ambiguous or there are expectations and needs not being met.

There is evidence to suggest that unmet expectations in relationships lead to relational dissatisfaction (Vaglesisti & Daly, 1997). Therefore, I focus on the relationship uncertainty scale of the larger relational uncertainty scale, which measures how certain individuals are about aspects of their relationship. It consists of four subscales: behavioral norms, mutuality, definition, and future. Behavioral norms refers to what is appropriate or not appropriate behavior in the relationship; mutuality addresses uncertainty about what is reciprocated, definition focuses on doubts in the relationship, and future refers to the possible “prospects and opportunities” in a relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005). I am hypothesizing:

**H5:** Adoptees experience greater relationship uncertainty when communicating with their birth families than with their adoptive families.

**H6:** Adoptee’s relationship uncertainty is associated with their levels of relational distancing.

### **Adoptee Attachment Styles**

Attachment refers to an enduring affective bond between particular individuals, and an individual's attachment style refers to the way he or she processes, interprets, and reacts to others’ behavior. (Bartholemew, 1990). Bowlby (1982) describes attachment in the following way: “to say of a child that he...has an attachment to someone means that he is strongly disposed to seek proximity to and contact with a specific figure and do so in certain situations, notably when he is frightened, tired, or ill.” Each individual has a unique attachment style that falls in one of the following categories: secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissive (Buren & Cooley, 2002). Each style involves a positive or negative

view of the self, as well as a positive or negative view of others. Securely attached people see themselves favorable and believe other people will be responsive to them.

Preoccupied individuals (also referred to as anxious-ambivalent) have a positive view of others and negative view of the self, and often “obtain a sense of self by being valued by other people.” Fearful individuals have both negative views of the self and negative views of others. They typically do not feel loveable and assume others are not trustworthy or will reject them. Dismissive individuals have a positive self-view, a negative view of others, and typically do not value or seek relationships (Buren & Cooley, 2002).

Because adoptees are at risk for difficulties in attachment, (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010) it is important to measure attachment in order to understand this outcome in adult adoptees. As Buren & Cooley (2002) state: “there are several reasons to expect less attachment security in adopted children, as these children all experience separation from, and loss of their birth parents and other caregivers.” Attachment theory posits that these losses negatively influence the development of attachment in later relationships (Bowlby, 1982). Previous research on adult adoptee attachment has linked insecure attachment style to less frequent birth family contact and greater desire to know about biological origins (Irhammar & Bengtsson, 2004). Adoptees also report greater attachment insecurity than non-adoptees in close relationships (Feeney et al., 2007). Farr, Grant-Marsney & Grotevant’s (2014) study on attachment in emerging adult adoptees in open adoptions revealed the following: adoptees reported positive communication and positive perceptions of attachment with adoptive mothers and fathers, positive communication with adoptive mothers was associated with greater satisfaction with

contact with birth mothers and fathers, and satisfaction with birth father contact was “significantly, but moderately positively associated with adult adoptees’ perceptions of attachment to both adoptive mothers and fathers.” Additionally, satisfaction with birth mother contact and birth father contact was predicted by the presence of these family members.

A meta-analysis of adoptee attachment research revealed that adoptees showed fewer secure attachment styles and more disorganized attachment styles compared to non-adopted children. Additionally, age at adoption placement moderated attachment security. Children who were adopted before 12 months of age exhibited secure attachments as often as non-adopted children, and those adopted after 12 months showed less attachment security than non-adopted children (Buren & Cooley, 2002).

Thus, I am predicting the following:

**H7:** High degrees of relationship uncertainty are associated with insecure attachment styles.

## Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used in order to gain a better understanding of the complex experiences of adult adoptees' communication with birth and adoptive families. Specifically, an exploratory sequential mixed methods (ESMM) design was implemented (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). ESMM can be "undertaken when a researcher intends to conduct a primarily quantitative study, but it needs to begin with initial qualitative data collection so as to identify or narrow the focus of the possible variables." (Creswell, J. W., Plano Clark, V. L., Gutmann, M. L., & Hanson, W. E., 2003). This design contains two phases: first, qualitative data is collected and analyzed, in which themes serve to inform the selection of measures for a quantitative data collection and analysis (Phase 1) (Creswell). Second, results from the qualitative portion informed the instruments and measures as well as quantitative design considerations for Phase 2.

In this study the goal of Phase 1 was to explore the emotions adult adoptees experienced when communicating and navigating relationships with their adoptive and birth families. The goal of Phase 2 was to further explore the salient themes from Phase 1, to see how the experiences of adult adoptees in open adoptions has an impact on their interpersonal communication with both adoptive and birth families. In contrast to more traditional surveys or interviews, the online forum provided access to discourse that was motivated and facilitated by adopted individuals rather than guided by the researcher's agenda. Thus, these online conversations provided insight into issues and experiences that are especially salient to adult adoptees. The following sections describe the procedures and techniques used in the mixed methods design.

## Methods

### **Phase 1: Exploring the Experienced Emotions of Adult Adoptees in Navigating Relationships with Birth Families and Adoptive Families**

#### **Data Collection**

After searching through several online support groups and making considerations about the amount and variety of content, *Adult Adoptee Support* forum was chosen for analysis for Phase 1 as a result of containing rich, relevant data and a large, consistent amount of recent posts, in addition to a large and active membership. As of January 14, 2019, the site had 1,488 members and 52, 207 posts. The forum says it “was created by adoptees, and is owned, administrated, and moderated by adoptees,” and also says “membership is for adoptees only.” Its mission is “to provide adoptees a safe, secure and private place to share experiences, thoughts and feelings around adoption.”

Members of Adult Adoptee Support can view and post freely to some boards, while other boards require that the member makes a certain amount of posts before accessing (typically 10). Members are able to begin new threads/posts, “like” and comment on other member’s posts, and privately message members. They can also “follow” and be “followed” by other members, which will alert the follower when the followed member has posted. Each member has a profile that displays their username, date the member registered, frequency of their posting, how many posts they have made total, when they were last online and gender information if they choose to have it displayed. It also allows them to post a status, which can be anything the user wants to say about themselves, adoption, etc. You can view who the member is following and who

their followers are, which groups they are members of, as well as their activity, which includes each post, like, and interaction the member makes.

During data collection for Phase 1, posts were chosen from the “General Adoption Discussion Board,” which was open for anyone to view. The board states: “you can talk about anything adoption related here.” Other boards were on more specific topics such as “adoption art & writing,” and “legislation.” Some required that you participate in the board by posting in order to access the posts, therefore these were not chosen as part of the analysis.

Each post contained the person’s username on the site, their gender if they chose to have this appear in their profile, the post title, and the date and time it was posted to the forum. Demographic information was limited as most users preferred to remain anonymous, which is typical of most online forums (Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012).

As of September 12, 2019, at 12:01 pm, the General Adoption Discussion Board had 1,360 individual threads and a total 19,838 posts. Unfortunately, as gender was not required as part of a profile, the gender of each participant was not able to be determined. Of the posts in analysis, 31 participants identified as female (46%) and 7 identified as male (10%). The remaining 43% did not disclose any gender information. To ensure anonymity of participants, each post’s author is referred to with their username only, which contains no clear identifying information about any of the individual members of the forum. Any post that contained someone disclosing their name or other identifying information was edited to reflect a different name, further protecting anonymity of the members.

## Data Reduction

In order to be included for analysis, posts were required to have the following criteria: 1) posts were the original posts in the thread, not a comment or response, 2) the adoption circumstance discussed must be related to relinquishment, not a step-parent/step-child adoption, and 3) the post dealt with an adoption-related communication issue between the adoptee and either the biological family or adoptive family, not simply an interpersonal issue that could occur with a friend, partner, etc. For example, a post saying “my adoptive mom continues to make chicken for dinner even though she knows I do not like chicken” would be excluded as it is not an adoption focused communication issue, while “my adoptive mom gets mad at me when I express an interest in finding my birth parents” would be included. The posts were read in the order of posting beginning on September 12th, 2019, with the first included post from Wednesday, September 11, 2019. As of September 12, 2019, at 12:01 pm, the General Adoption Discussion Board had 1,360 individual threads and a total 19,838 posts. Each post was read, then rejected or included based on the criteria previously mentioned. Posts continued to be collected until saturation was reached and new ideas were no longer emerging (n = 71).

Posts were read and collected until preliminary analysis determined that saturation was reached and new ideas were no longer emerging (n = 71) (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). Fifty-seven unique forum members’ posts were included in the analysis after data reduction after applying the inclusion criteria, garnering a total of 67 analyzed posts after data reduction of the original 71 (some users had more than one of their posts included). Before analysis, username, gender (where possible), post title, and date and time of

posted to along with the post content, was copied and pasted into a document, keeping each participant's individual language, punctuation etc.

### **Data Analysis**

After data reduction, each forum post was initially analyzed by determining if the post mainly dealt with an adoptive family concern or a biological family concern. This was done in order to distinguish between the emotions adoptees experienced when managing issues with their adoptive families compared to the experiences of managing issues with their biological families, which allowed me to analyze both research questions. If both adoptive and biological concerns were included in the post then it was included in both categories.

I then conducted a thematic analysis, immersing myself in the data for each research question. Thematic approaches allow important experiences to become thematic aspects of the narratives (Riessman, 2008). Data immersion involves engaging in entire breadth of the data by reading and rereading posts and thinking about ideas that are important to participants (Creswell). Subsequently, I engaged in the qualitative coding process of initial coding, which involves examining the data and assigning words and phrases which capture their essence. Each post was then reviewed twice, and re-coded, to better reflect the most appropriate code. Upon completion of initial coding I engaged in second level coding, in which patterns of recurring codes and ideas began to emerge, and these were then categorized and combined. An inductive thematic approach was used to garner themes from the codes. As this process of coding, recoding, and continued analysis took place, codes were examined for salience. Salient themes were determined by recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Recurrence addresses the

number of members who mention a theme, repetition involves how often they discussed certain themes, and forcefulness examines the salience or significance of these issues when they are mentioned. For results of Phase 1, see page 30.

### **How Phase 1 Results Informed Phase 2**

After salient themes were uncovered in Phase 1 and research questions were explored, some of the issues that adoptees face in birth and adoptive family communication became clearer. As a result, I was able to form several constructs to measure in Phase 2. For example, adoptees expressed particularly salient emotions surrounding uncertainty in their relationships with both their birth families and their adoptive families. To address this, Phase 2 includes the Relationship Uncertainty Measure (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) which adoptees are asked to take twice, the first time considering their adoptive family and the second time considering their birth family.

In addition, Phase 1 analysis informed my quantitative design. For example, a theme that emerged from thematic analysis was that adoptee's birth family communication may change over time. As a result, I asked participants in Phase 2 if they felt their birth family communication changed over time, including questions about frequency of contact and if they felt the relationship improved or did not improve over time. Overall, Phase 1 clarified the salient emotions adoptees are experiencing and informed the quantitative design of Phase 2.

## **Phase 2: Exploring Qualitative Themes of Adoptee Emotions Through a Quantitative Survey Design**

In Phase 2, I measured the salient themes created by Phase 1 by surveying participant's shared family identity, relational distancing, relationship uncertainty, and attachment style. This was done using a survey distributed on Qualtrics over 4 weeks.

### **Sample**

The sample satisfied the following conditions: 1) an adult adoptee over the age of 18, 2) the adoptee was adopted out of a relinquishment circumstance, not a step-family circumstance, and 3) the adoptee is in an open adoption relationship, in which they have some level of contact with a birth parent(s).

### **Participants**

Participants from Phase 1 were not included in Phase 2. As Creswell (2009) writes, a qualitative sample cannot be the same as a quantitative sample because typically qualitative samples are much smaller, however, "a good procedure is to draw both samples from the same population but make sure that the individuals for both samples are not the same." However, it is unknown if there may have been overlap in the two samples. The sample included 71 adult adoptees (8 men, 63 women) who completed a questionnaire on Qualtrics survey software. The survey was conducted and distributed online, with participants located in various places throughout the United States including states such as California and Indiana. The sample's ages ranged from 26 to 68 years old ( $M = 47.29$ ,  $SD = 9.97$ ). Participants described themselves as White (89.20%), Asian (6.7%), Other (2.7%), and Hispanic or Latino (1.4%). Concerning relationship status, 63.5% of participants reported they are married, 13.5% reported they are divorced, 10.8%

reported they are in a committed relationship, 9.5% reported they are single, 1.4% reported they are a widow, and 1.4% reported they are separated.

### **Procedure**

Participants were asked to complete a 124-item questionnaire on Qualtrics. They were recruited via Facebook post or online adoption forum post. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions (age, sex, ethnicity, etc.) followed by questions to determine the nature of their adoption and level of openness (such as “Which birth parent are you in contact with?”). They were given four instruments in addition to the demographic questions: The Shared Family Identity Scale, the Relational Distance Index, the Relationship Uncertainty Measure, and the Attachment Style Measure. Each participant completed the first three scales first thinking about an adoptive parent, then thinking about a birth parent, and lastly the attachment measure thinking about themselves. If participants were in contact with both birth parents, they were asked to consider the one they communicate with more frequently.

### **Measures**

**Open adoption contact.** In order to understand the level of openness within each adoption, participants were asked to answer questions regarding the level of openness in their adoption and how frequently they communicate with their birth parent(s). They were asked to report the level of openness in their adoptions by indicating if they were in *an open adoption, a closed adoption, or a closed adoption but had later reached out when able*. They were also asked how frequently they contact their birth parent(s) as well as what channels they use for communication. Participants were asked: “What channels do you use to communicate with a birth parent(s)? Responses included: *adoption agency*

or other professional mediator, telephone, texting, social media, email, postal mail, face-to-face visits, and other (please explain). They were also asked: “How frequently do you communicate with your birth parent(s)?” Adoptees reported the frequency of contact by selection one of the following: *never, once a year, 2-3 times a year, once a month, 2-3 times a month, once a week, 2-3 times a week, or daily.*

**Shared Family Identity Scale.** The Shared Family Identity Scale (Soliz & Harwood, 2006) was used to determine which family the adoptee more closely identified with, the adoptive family or the birth family. The instrument is a six-item self-report questionnaire anchored by a 7-point Likert response format (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Examples of questions include: “My shared family membership with this [family member] is not that important to me.” and “I feel as if we are members of separate groups.” The scores were averaged to form a measure of family identity for both adoptive families ( $M = 4.77$ ,  $SD = 10.62$   $\alpha = .90$ ) and birth families ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 8.90$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Relational Distancing.** The Relational Distance Index (Hess, 2003) was used to measure participants' levels of relational distancing behaviors in their communication with their birth parents and adoptive parents. The instrument is a seventeen-item self-report questionnaire anchored by a 7-point Likert frequency response format (1 = *I never did this*, 2 = *I rarely did this*, 3 = *I did this periodically, but it wasn't the norms* 4 = *I did this a moderate number of times* 5 = *I did this often* 6 = *I did this almost every time possible* 7 = *I did this every time possible.*) Each question asks the participant to rate how frequently they did things. Examples of questions include “Changed my behavior to

avoid encountering this person whenever possible” Scores were averaged for subscales of avoidance ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = 8.44$ ,  $a = .94$ ), disengagement ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = 10.98$ ,  $a = .93$ ), and cognitive dissociation for adoptive families ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 6.21$ ,  $a = .87$ ). Scores were also averaged for the subscales of avoidance ( $M = 2.12$ ,  $SD = 9.51$ ,  $a = .94$ ), disengagement ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 12.79$ ,  $a = .95$ ), and cognitive dissociation for birth families ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = 8.54$ ,  $a = .93$ ).

**Relational Uncertainty.** The Relationship Uncertainty Measure (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) was used to measure participants levels of relational uncertainty in their relationships with an adoptive parent and a birth parent. The instrument is a 16-item self-report questionnaire. Some questions were modified to reflect a birth parent relationship rather than a romantic partner. For example, item 13 asks “how certain are you whether or not you and your partner will stay together?” This was changed to say, “how certain are you about whether or not you and your adoptive/birth parent will maintain this relationship?” Item 12, “how certain are you whether or not this is a romantic or platonic relationship?” was removed. The response options are a 6-item Likert (1 = *completely or almost completely uncertain*, 2 = *mostly uncertain*, 3 = *slightly more uncertain than certain*, 4 = *slightly more certain than uncertain*, 5 = *mostly certain*, and 6 = *completely or almost completely certain*.) Examples of questions include “how certain are you about the future of the relationship?” and “how certain are you about the boundaries of appropriate and/or inappropriate behavior in this relationship?” Items were averaged to form subscales of behavioral norms ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 4.39$ ,  $a = .93$ ), mutuality ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 4.63$ ,  $a = .94$ ), definition ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 3.41$ ,  $a = .93$ ), and future for adoptive families ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 4.46$ ,  $a = .97$ ). Scores were also averaged for the subscales of

behavioral norms ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 4.54$ ,  $a = .89$ ), mutuality ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 5.20$ ,  $a = .96$ ), definition ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 4.11$ ,  $a = .96$ ) and future for birth families ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 5.84$ ,  $a = .97$ ).

**Attachment.** The Attachment Style Measure (Guerrero, 1996) was used to measure participants' attachment styles. It is separated into five dimensions: General Avoidance (avoid intimacy), Lack of Confidence (anxiety), Preoccupation (craving excessive intimacy), Fearful Avoidance (fear intimacy) and Relationships as Secondary (relationships are not the primary focus of an individual's life). The instrument is a 30-item self-report questionnaire anchored by a 7-item Likert response (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, 7 = *strongly agree*.) Examples of questions include "I find it easy to trust others." and "I put more time and energy into my relationships than I put into other activities." Scores were averaged for subscales of general avoidance ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 10.50$ ,  $a = .92$ ), lack of confidence ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 6.37$ ,  $a = .88$ ), preoccupation ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 8.29$ ,  $a = .74$ ), and fearful avoidance ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 9.34$ ,  $a = .82$ ).

## Results

A total of 67 adoptee's posts were analyzed and 71 adoptees took the online survey. While it is unclear if there was participant overlap in the samples, participants from Phase 1 were not directly recruited to participate in Phase 2.

### Qualitative results, Phase 1: RQ1

RQ1 asked: What emotions have adoptees experienced when either communicating or seeking communication with their biological families? The following themes were emotions that characterized communication experiences with birth families: (1) Fears of abandonment and rejection from birth families, (2) emotional reactions to perceived abandonment and rejection from birth families, (3) disconnection and lack of belonging stemming from unfulfilling interactions with birth family, (4) sense of relational closeness stemming from interactions with birth family that demonstrate commitment or similarity, (5) guilt surrounding birth and adoptive family needs and expectations and (6) feelings towards birth family change over time.

**Fear of birth family rejection.** Adoptees described fears that their birth families would abandon or reject them. They experienced *anxiety about being emotionally vulnerable* during interactions with birth families, and avoided them as a result:

The main fear is...being abandoned again after finding bio parents...there is so much fear and guilt that it is just easier for me to push EVERYONE away than to deal with it...My biological dad is coming to visit in two days and I am just not emotionally ready to even talk to him.

Others were *hesitant to initiate contact because they felt uncertain about their birth families wants*:

I'm hesitant when it comes to reaching out to my b-aunt because I feel like I'm trying to get something from my b-family that I'm not getting from my a-family...I'm also wondering if I'd want to meet my b-parents. And whether or not they'd want to meet me or have a relationship with me...

Similarly, others were *hesitant to reach out based on birth parent preferences*. One user explains:

I haven't contacted anyone on my bmom's side...yet. I don't think she wouldn't be open to a reunion for me for reasons I've talked about before, but who knows...As far as I can tell I'm a secret to her family and she wants nothing to do with me at any time in the future...I'm eager to meet my siblings but not ready for more rejection....

Some had *fears of rejection that were magnified by uncertainties about their birth family's communication behaviors*. One user said:

In the past 6 months I feel that my birth mother has become less communicative...we meet up when I go home and she's met my family. I just feel the rejection and abandonment feelings creeping up again...it feels like the honeymoon is over and makes me sad as I want a close relationship with my BM.

**Emotional reactions to abandonment and rejection.** There was a range of negatively valenced emotions for adoptees who had experienced *interactions with birth families that resulted in perceived abandonment or rejection*, including disappointment and depression.

For example, one user writes:

I'm very disappointed that my biological family tearfully proclaimed "you have 2 families now," put me [sic] pictures up with the rest of the family, pledged to be there for me if I ever needed anything, had a lovely time with me in the Bahamas, and then dumped me. I suspect it's because I'm disabled...the loss hurts deeply.

Another writes:

I reunited with my birth parents 33 years ago They [sic] married after giving me up for adoption and had 3 more kids. Just recently I was told that I'm not in the will and that they don't feel the same as they do their other kids. This has sent me into depression. I feel abandoned all over again. I feel stupid that I let them come into my life at all. I consider this abuse.

**Disconnection with birth family.** Adoptees *felt disconnected or expressed a lack of belonging* stemming from unfulfilling interactions with their birth families.

Some felt they had *no connection to their birth families* at all:

I honestly felt when I contacted my state's reunion registry to conduct the actual search for my birth mother I was ready, prepared, and had no expectations.....NOT! One thing I wanted was that golden bond I saw between my friend and her mother all those years ago. My birth mother and I have been reunited for 10 years and there is no bond between us.

Others thought that *personality differences contributed to a lack of belonging between themselves and their birth parents*:

So I just met my biological mother after 29 years. She has very low self esteem and was fishing for reassurance. We have nothing in common and to be quite honest I don't like the woman one bit...I am happy I met her and now I am done.

Some experienced painful interactions because of personality differences:

My birthmom I believe has narcissistic [sic] personality disorder or a personality disorder. Knowing the person that gave you up could be so mean to you...has turned all her other relatives against you telling them half truths, has been very painful.

**Relational closeness after interactions.** Other adoptees described more positively valent experiences in which they *felt connection to their birth families after spending time with them.*

One user writes about her birth father's actions:

It's almost been 1 yr [sic] since I've been in reunion with dad. And this year has been amazing...He got a tattoo of the lion king and in my heart I knew this was my tattoo (he also told me)...It hurts to know we were apart for the years we were, but for me to have a special place on him now just makes me feel more connected.

Another adoptee describes the *connections felt from perceiving their birth parents to be similar to them:*

I met my birth parents (brents) just over a month ago, and have had lots of time to process our meeting. I really enjoyed spending time with people who are just like me...After meeting my brents, I feel more out of place with my aparents.

**Guilt from navigating expectations.** Adoptees felt torn between their adoptive and birth families and had difficulty managing expectations from both.

Adoptees expressed *guilt when having to decide which family to spend time with*:

It's my first Father's Day with b-dad. I know he wants to see me and I wanna see him. Now I have plans with a-dad for morning and afternoon so was suppose to see [sic] dad in the evening for dinner...Now a-mom's fam wants to do a party and also celebrate my grandfather on the same day during the hours I would be with my dad (b-dad). I hate choosing...Like wtf you are leading me and guiltting me.

Some *adoptees did not want the two families to interact*:

Well now that I'm pregnant again my b-dad wants to be there. I need my a-mom there so I can't just say no one come. My a-parents and b-dad have never met and I don't want my delivery to be when they meet...I actually never want them to meet.

Adoptees also faced *challenges with their families on social media*:

Today I straight up asked my a-mom to defriend [sic] b-dad and she did...I am finally free of guilt and social media competition between a-fam and b-dad...I just want to please both families and I can't...I feel torn in half..

**Feelings towards birth family change over time.** Finally, adoptees expressed that their feelings, communication, and relationship with birth families changed over time after reunion.

One adoptee discusses *feeling uncertainty about emotions concerning the reunion* with various members of their birth family. They write:

Anyway, dad texted me to say he doesn't talk on the phone or text but he wants to meet for coffee next month...Last year I was on such a high but with this I feel...Underwhelmed? I guess the reaction hasn't been quite so 'YAAAAAY!!!' as it was last year...I was deeply hurt by my brother's pull-back earlier this year and maybe if this goes badly I could get hurt all the more...Do I only want answers? Do I want a lasting relationship?

Another adoptee expresses hurt turning into acceptance over time as they *become more distant from their birth family*.

I guess I should be thankful that my birth parents acknowledged me, but it hurts deeply that they won't let me into their lives. I think for the most part I have reached a stage of acceptance with BM...She will not engage in regular communication with me. BF-not even close...It's only been 6 months since I found him, but I am just so tired of the disappointment.

Overall, adoptees seemed to experience a range of emotions when communicating with their birth families, including negatively valenced emotions such as feeling disconnected and out of place, or nervous and hesitant to reach out to a birth family member. Others experienced positively valenced emotions in which they were able to feel connectedness with a birth parent. While RQ1 was focused on exploring the emotions adoptees experienced surrounding contact with birth families, RQ2 focused on adoptees emotions concerning adoptive family communication.

### **Qualitative Results: RQ2**

RQ2 asked: What emotions have adoptees experienced when either communicating or seeking communication with their adoptive families? Three themes

emerged from analysis: (1) challenges in interactions between adoptive and birth families, (2) distress from feeling adoptees do not belong in adoptive family, and (3) birth family interactions cause an appreciation for adoptive family.

**Challenging interactions between adoptive and birth families.** Similarly to theme 5 from RQ1, adoptees in RQ2 analysis expressed finding *difficulty in meeting both adoptive and birth family needs and expectations*. This often led to guilt.

One adoptee describes frustration navigating the relationships:

My bio dad added my adoptive parents on Facebook without asking me. Well there was a radio interview online that my parents didn't know about and my bio dad posted on his wall about my adoption...no now my mom is upset with me and hurt. I asked my bio dad not to post about me anymore. He agreed but was sad...this is all so new. It's very hard for me.

Another adoptee discusses tension between their adoptive mom and birth mom because *the adoptive parent is secretive about the birth parent*:

She (birth mother) doesn't know the truth about how my adoptive parents lied so much. When she speaks of the it is always with respect. When I was born confidentiality was of paramount importance...I was told she was dead and it was extremely clear I was never to ask about or search for her.

Finally, an adoptee explains that often their *adoptive parent does not discuss their birth family*:

So my mom suggested we could do something to remember my bio mom, which was surprising because she usually can't stand talking about her. Maybe it's to get me to stop talking about my bio.mom [sic] but I'll buy it.

**Distress resulting from lack of belonging in adoptive family.** Adoptees felt confusion concerning their belonging within their adoptive family.

Users were *frustrated with their adoptive families for not understanding their adoption experiences:*

I still live at home with my adoptive parents. I'm in this situation right now where by I've previously given them letters in which I explain grief I have over being relinquished (something I now know they never before considered) how uncomfortable I feel and out of place I feel in this family, upset they didn't create a space where I could express my pain...

*Others feel more of a connection with their birth family, making them feel more out of place with their adoptive family:*

I guess I have this expectation that since they're my parents, we should connect easily and so on. I like them...but I don't miss them. Since meeting my birth parents, I feel more like water than blood (still really really loved water, but still water.

**Birth family interaction causes appreciation for adoptive family.** Negative experiences surrounding birth family interactions resulted in users expressing appreciation and gratefulness for their adoptive families.

For example, one adoptee writes:

...I finally told my birthmom I never wanted to see her for the rest of my life...After 18 years, I came to a painful realization I could take a divorce and any bad relationships I've ever had and roll them together and they wouldn't make a dent on how hurtful this one was. I had the most loving mother and thank god I was given up.

*Adoptees felt grateful to be raised in their adoptive families after meeting members of their birth family:*

I suppose I'm fairly privileged and had opportunities that I never would have had had I not been adopted, but more than that, my adoptive parents are educated, calm, sensible, traditional, rational, well mannered, skilled in dealing with children...I love my mum but I resent her, I suppose for not having the parenting skills that would allow her to keep me & my other siblings...

*Additionally, rejection from birth families made adoptees feel grateful to not have a birth parent in their lives.*

I wanted to let out some of my frustration towards my bmom's rejection...this level of cruelty you conveyed makes me eternally grateful you were never apart [sic] of my life beyond your womb. The beauty of this is all the amazing family I have been in contact with. Their acceptance, support and love are cherished.

Adoptees discussed adoptive parent communication less frequently on the forum than birth family communication. There was again a range of valanced emotions for adoptees, ranging from frustration in having to meet both adoptive and birth parent needs to gratefulness at being raised by their adoptive family.

## **Quantitative Results: Phase 2**

### *Preliminary Analyses*

I completed bivariate correlations on each study variable (see Table 1).

### *Open Adoption Contact*

Out of the 71 participants, 7 reported they were in open adoptions (9.5%), 2 reported they were in closed adoptions (2.7%), and 38 reported their adoptions were

closed but they reached out to their birth families once able (51.4%). Twenty-seven participants did not respond to the question. Sixty three participants (85.1%) reported they were adopted before 12 months of age, 5 reported being adopted between 1-3 years of age (6.7%) , 3 reported between 3-5 years of age (4.1%) and 3 reported between 5-10 years of age (4.1%). No participants reported being adopted after 10 years of age.

Each participant indicated they currently have contact with a birth parent and were asked which birth parent they were in contact with. Twenty-seven participants were in contact with their birth mother (37%), 17 were in contact with their birth father (23%) and 30 were in contact with both birth parents (41%). Those who had indicated they communicate with both birth parents were asked which birth parent they contact more frequently. Thirty (41%) participants indicated they contact both birth parents equally as often, 21 participants contacted their birth mother more frequently (28.4%) and 9 contacted their birth father more frequently (12.2%). Participants were also asked how often they contact the birth parent that they contact more frequently. Fifteen participants indicated they contact their birth parent 2-3 times a month (20.3%), 13 participants indicated 2-3 times a year (17.6%), 11 indicated once a month (14.9%), 10 indicated once a week (13.5%), 10 more indicated daily (13.5%), 8 indicated once a year (10.8%) and 7 indicated 2-3 times a week (9.5%).

Most participants have had contact with their birth parents for several years. Forty-five participants in the sample had been in contact with their birth parents for four or more years (60.8%). The rest had been in contact for either 2 years (10.8%), less than one year (10.8%), 3 years (9.5%) or one year (8.1%). Participants were asked to select what communication channels they used to communicate with their birth parents, and

could select as many as they wanted. The most popular response was face-to-face visits (64.9%), followed by telephone calls (62.2%) and texting or other messaging apps (59.5%). Participants were also given the option to select “other”, then write in their own response. The participants who chose this option reported that they contact their birth parents in a variety of ways: one participant wrote they communicate with their biological mother through their siblings, another wrote that the birth sister translates their communication to the birth parent, and another indicated they live with their birth mother.

Participants were also asked how the frequency of contact with their birth parents and the nature of the relationship had changed over time. Thirty-one participants indicated that birth parent contact frequency has remained the same (41.9%), 27 participants reported contact has decreased over time (36.5%), and 15 participants indicated contact has increased (20.3%). Participants also reported on the nature of their relationships with their birth parents. Twenty-seven participants indicated their relationship has remained the same (36.5%). The rest indicated it had become much better (24.3%), slightly better (18.9%), much worse (10.8%), and slightly worse (9.5%).

### *Connection and Belonging*

Adoptees were asked to indicate if they feel more strongly connected to their birth family or adoptive family. Thirty-six participants reported a stronger connection with their adoptive families (48.6%) and 30 participants reported a stronger connection with their birth families (40.5%). Eight participants did not respond to the question. Adoptees were also asked to agree or disagree with two statements: “I feel a sense of belonging in my adoptive family,” and “I feel a sense of belonging in my birth family.” Twenty-two

participants strongly agreed they feel a sense of belonging in their adoptive families (29.7%), twenty-two somewhat agreed (29.7), 4 neither agreed nor disagreed (5.4%), 8 somewhat disagreed (10.8%), and 17 strongly disagreed (23%). Twenty-three participants strongly agreed they feel a sense of belonging in their birth families (31.1%), 26 somewhat agreed (35.1%), 7 neither agreed nor disagreed (9.5%), 9 somewhat disagreed (12.2%) and 9 strongly disagreed (12.2%). A paired sample t-test was run on these belonging variables. There were no significant differences in sense of belonging between adoptive ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) and birth ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) families ( $t = -1.26$ ;  $p = .21$ ).

### **Tests of Hypotheses**

H1 through H4 were tested with a paired samples t-test, and all were nonsignificant. For a table of these results, please see Table X. For details, please see the following paragraphs.

H1 predicted that adoptees report greater family identity within their adoptive families than their birth families. I tested H1 by running a paired samples t-test on adoptive family identity and birth family identity variables. Results showed there were not significant differences in family identity for adoptive ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) and birth ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) families  $t(73) = -1.30$ ;  $p = .20$ . A repeated measure ANOVA was run controlling for sex. The differences between the means when controlling for sex were not statistically significant  $F(1, 72) = .152$ ,  $p = .698$ . H1 was not supported.

H2 predicted that adoptees experience higher levels of avoidance, a dimension of relational distancing, with their birth families than with their adoptive families. I tested H1 by running a paired samples t-test on adoptive family avoidance and birth family

avoidance variables. Results showed there were not significant differences in levels of avoidance for adoptive families ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) and birth ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ) families  $t(72) = .74$ ;  $p = .46$ . H2 was not supported.

H3 predicted that adoptees experience higher levels of disengagement, another dimension of relational distancing, with their birth families than with their adoptive families. To test H3 I ran a paired samples t-test on the two disengagement variables. Results showed there was no significant difference in disengagement levels for adoptive families ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) and birth ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) families  $t(71) = 1.25$ ;  $p = .22$ . H3 was not supported.

H4 predicted adoptees would experience greater relational distancing with their birth families than their adoptive families. Overall this hypothesis was not supported. Paired samples t-tests were ran on the relational distancing variables for adoptive and birth families. There were no significant differences in relational distancing levels for adoptive families ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) and birth ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) families  $t(72) = .47$ ;  $p = .64$ . Additionally, there was no significant difference in the three subscales of relational distancing for adoptive and birth families. There was no significant difference between the avoidance subscale for adoptive families ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) and birth families ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ). There was no significant difference between the disengagement subscale for adoptive families ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) and birth families ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ). Finally, there was no significant difference between the cognitive dissociation subscales for adoptive families ( $M = 1.85$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) and birth families ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). H4 was not supported.

H5 predicted that adoptees would experience greater relationship uncertainty when communicating with their birth families than their adoptive families. To test this, a paired samples t-test was run on relationship uncertainty and its subscales. There were significant differences in relationship uncertainty for all subscales of relationship uncertainty except mutuality. There were significant differences between uncertainty for adoptive ( $M = 4.33, SD = 1.02$ ) and birth ( $M = 3.84, SD = 1.21$ ) families;  $t(70)=2.66; p = .01$ . There were also significant differences in behavior norms for adoptive ( $M = 4.42, SD = 1.04$ ) and birth ( $M = 3.82, SD = 1.13$ ) families;  $t(70)=3.37; p = .001$ . There were not significant differences in mutuality for adoptive ( $M = 4.17, SD = 1.17$ ) and birth ( $M = 3.94, SD = 1.30$ ) families  $t(70) = -1.13; p = .26$ . There were significant differences in definition for adoptive ( $M = 4.23, SD = 1.14$ ) and birth ( $M = 3.79, SD = 1.40$ ) families  $t(70)=2.22; p = 0.03$ . Finally, there were significant differences in future for adoptive ( $M = 4.46, SD = 1.13$ ) and birth ( $M = 3.86, SD = 1.46$ ) families;  $t(69)=2.86; p = .01$ . Overall, H5 was partially supported.

H6 predicted that adoptee's relationship uncertainty would be associated with their levels of relational distancing behaviors. To test H6, a bivariate correlation was run. For adoptive families, relational distancing and relationship uncertainty, there was a strong negative correlation  $r(73) = -.60, p = .000$ . To further test this hypothesis, I ran partial correlations controlling for age and sex. Controlling for age, there was a strong negative correlation between relational distancing and relationship uncertainty  $r(69) = -.60, p = .000$ . Controlling for sex, there was a strong negative correlation between relational distancing and relationship uncertainty  $r(69) = -.60, p = .000$ . H6 was supported.

H7 predicted that high degrees of relationship uncertainty are associated with insecure attachment styles. To test this I ran a bivariate correlation. Relationship uncertainty for adoptive families is weakly positively associated with attachment styles  $r(72) = .28, p = .02$ . Relationship uncertainty is not correlated with attachment for birth families. These results are consistent when controlling for gender in a partial correlation. H7 was partially supported.

## Discussion

### Summary of Findings

The goal of this study was to better understand adult adoptee's adoption experiences and communication behaviors with their adoptive and birth families through a mixed methods study. Accordingly, posts on an adult adoptee forum were qualitatively analyzed to better understand themes that were occurring. The qualitative research questions asked what emotions adoptees experienced when communicating with their birth and adoptive families.

Qualitative results in Phase 1 provided a deeper understanding of several themes for adoptees including family identity, relational distancing, and relationship uncertainty. Adoptees expressed significant hurt and guilt when trying to navigate expectations between their adoptive and birth families. They also struggled with experiencing rejection and abandonment from their birth families, or were fearful of the possibility this would occur. Some adoptees also expressed positive affect towards their birth and adoptive families for a variety of reasons.

These themes informed the selection of methods and questions used in Phase 2. Phase 2 results suggest that adoptee's relationship uncertainty occurred at higher levels in birth families than in adoptive families. Results also indicated there is a strong, negative relationship between relationship uncertainty and relational distancing. Finally, there was a small relationship between insecure attachment styles and relationship uncertainty which occurred only in adoptive families, not birth families.

The following discussion begins with an exploration of how this work contributes to methodological approaches, followed by a discussion of the significance and

implications of findings, contributions to theory and possibilities for future research, and the present study's limitations.

### **Capturing Nuances Through A Mixed Methods Approach**

This research provides support for the benefits of utilizing a mixed methods approach to better understand adoption and the adoption triad. Adoption can be a sensitive, complex, even controversial topic. Additionally, each adoptive family is unique in their structure and is discourse dependent (Horstman et. al, 2018). The mixed methods approach lends itself to addressing these nuances by providing a full picture of adoptee communication from both a qualitative and quantitative lens, which incorporates adoptee perspectives in a variety of ways.

Phase 1 examined online forums, which in contrast to more traditional surveys or interviews, provided access to organic discourse that was motivated and facilitated by adopted individuals rather than guided by the researcher's agenda. Thus, these online conversations provided insight into issues and experiences that are especially salient to adult adoptees. Phase 2 allowed for further exploration of Phase 1's themes. This sequential exploratory method was beneficial for providing a framework of salient topics that were generated by adoptee discussions, which were then explored quantitatively. This method would be beneficial in particular for sensitive topics similar to adoption, as the data is participant facilitated. It is also useful for topics in which the researcher is unsure of where to begin or what the research agenda should focus on and is looking for a starting place.

### **Differing Adoptive Circumstances**

Several adoption studies have found significant variation in adoptee's emotions and experiences (Colaner et. al, 2014; Colaner & Kranstuber 2010; Powell & Afifi, 2005; Grotevant et al., 2008). The combination of quantitative data and the thematic representation of qualitative findings in the present study continue to suggest that adoptive communication is a complicated phenomenon, filled with nuances and individual differences for each adoptee and their families.

For example, In Phase 1, some adoptees expressed discontent, hurt, and confusion concerning their birth families. Others expressed satisfaction, excitement and appreciation. Some adoptees expressed feeling they did not belong in their adoptive families, others expressed the same sentiment toward their birth families. In Phase 2, 23% of the sample reported that their relationship with their birth parent had become much better over time since initiating contact, and 11% indicated it had become much worse. In addition, 37% of the sample indicated the amount of contact with their birth parent had decreased, and 20% indicated it had increased. These contradicting findings paint a picture of significant variance in the experiences of each adoptee. Despite these variations, the findings discussed below provide important and interesting insights about communication behaviors in the adoption triad.

### **Navigating Rejection & Expectations**

Phase 1 results indicate that adoptee's experienced particularly salient emotions surrounding rejection by their birth families. Either they were worried this would occur and were not reaching out to their birth families out of this fear, or they had experienced it in a variety of ways and were hurt or disappointed by their families. In Phase 2, a small portion (20%) of participants indicated their relationship with a birth parent had either

become much worse or slightly worse. While participants in Phase 2 were not asked about why the relationships had gotten worse over time, experiences of rejection by a birth parent may account for this result. Other adoptee research, such as Powell & Affifi's (2005) study on adoptees in which they conducted in-depth interviews, found similar themes of rejection and disappointment which led to distancing or avoidance behaviors. These findings demonstrate that adoptees may be struggling to make or keep connections with their birth families, and these relationships can be very fragile and fluctuant throughout time.

Adoptees also discussed having trouble navigating the expectations of their adoptive and birth families in a variety of ways, such as which family to spend time with or what was or was not appropriate to discuss. This was occurring both in person and through mediated communication such as Facebook. The salience of Phase 1 results indicates this is happening frequently in both adoptive and birth families and is resulting in significant emotions for adoptees such as guilt and frustration. Ultimately this may suggest there is discrepancy in the communication about expectations between the adoptees and their families, or that very little communication is occurring at all. It could also mean that adoptive parents and birth parents both struggle with having dual-family identities, as they want to feel they are an equal part of the adoptee's life. As a result, it is important that adoptees and their families set clear boundaries and expectations early in the relationship in order to avoid these difficulties.

### **Adoptive Identity**

Phase 1 results clearly demonstrate that adoptees found difficulty identifying as a member of their families in many different ways, occurring in particular with birth

families but also in adoptive families as well. Phase 2 participants were almost equally split in terms of which family they reported they were more connected to, with about half reporting their birth families and half reporting their adoptive families. Lack of support for H1 may be explained by the qualitative results, which suggest that adoptees struggle feeling a part of both their adoptive family and birth family in different ways. As a result, quantitative results did not indicate significant differences in identity between either group because there are nuanced identity struggles that could not be statistically identified. Together these results indicate that adoptive identity is unique to each adoptive individual and circumstance, but adoptees do struggle with belonging and connection in their relationships.

Colaner et. al's (2014) qualitative study on adoptive identity found themes of adoptees identifying with their adoptive or birth families, themes of identity gaps with adoptive and birth families, and even themes of identity struggles in adoptees who were not in contact with birth parents. They write: "these distinct experiences speak to the implications of dual family identities across an array of birth parent contact and relational quality factors and demonstrate the interdependence of adoptive and birth family relationships" (Colaner et. al, 2014, pp. 488). The present study's findings continue to support the idea that adoptees are likely to struggle with identity throughout their life, as they face "differentness" from their adoptive families and incomplete or ambiguous information about their birth families.

### **Relational Distancing and Avoidance**

Phase 1 results showed adoptees engaged in relational distancing behaviors towards birth families and adoptive families. While it would seem that this distancing

could be very harmful to relationships, it may actually be a positive finding. As Hess (2003) explains, relational distancing does not reflect an absence of closeness, and distance is just as important to relationships as closeness is. Adoptees are navigating complex relationships that are likely to result in some distancing at times as they figure out appropriate boundaries and norms for themselves and their parents.

However, Phase 2 findings did not support the idea that relational distancing behaviors would be greater towards birth families as predicted. Additionally, the averages for relational distancing were very similar for both birth and adoptive families, and they were also low (an average of 2 on a 7-point scale for both families). Overall, Phase 2 participants seemingly did not report engaging in high levels of relational distancing behaviors, which was surprising considering Phase 1 results.

This may be explained by two of the qualitative themes: 1) some adoptees experience relational closeness after interactions that proved commitment from their birth families, and 2) some adoptees have experiences with their birth families that made them grateful for their adoptive families. These two themes, combined with Phase 2 results that found a strong negative relationship between avoidance and relational uncertainty, could suggest that either adoptees' appreciation for their birth or adoptive families, or attempts at uncertainty management could result in less distancing behaviors. Perhaps as adoptees become more uncertain in their relationships with either a birth or adoptive parent, they decrease relational distancing behaviors, instead drawing closer to their parent(s) in an effort to decrease uncertainty. Uncertainty Reduction Theory would support this explanation, as it posits that people seek information in order to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calebrese, 1975).

These findings could also be explained by the adoptees who expressed satisfaction with their relationships. Some adoptees in Phase 1 discussed their relationships with positive affect towards birth and adoptive families (however with less frequency than negative affect). For some it would appear they maintain closeness in their relationships, which could mean they do not experience high levels of uncertainty, or that they do not engage in the relational distancing behaviors present in the other observations, thus effecting the findings in Phase 2.

However, considering the frequency with which adoptees engaged in relational distancing behaviors in Phase 1, these findings are very important in understanding that adoptees are possibly using distancing as a way of coping with the uncertainty of their familial relationships. As one user writes: “it is easier for me to push EVERYONE away than deal with it.” Differences in Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings may also mean that adoptees are unaware they are engaging in relational distancing, as Phase 2 relied on self-report data. This construct should continue to be explored.

### **Relationship Uncertainty**

Relationship uncertainty was common for adoptees in this study. There were significant differences in three out of the four relationship uncertainty subscales for adoptive and birth families in Phase 2, and relationship uncertainty occurred frequently in Phase 1 as well. Together these findings maintain that adoptees experience uncertainty when it comes to their family behavioral norms and the future of their relationships, which could prove to be harmful for the longevity of the triad’s functioning. These findings are not surprising, as prior research has also indicated that adoptees are often faced with ambiguity about their birth situations or birth families, and about how their

adoptive parents feel about their adoptions (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Powell & Afifi, 2005; Grotevant, 1997).

There was a small correlation between relationship uncertainty and insecure attachment styles for adoptive families, but not for birth families. This finding suggests adoptees who have insecure attachment styles may experience greater relationship uncertainty surrounding their adoptive families than their birth families. In Phase 1 adoptees expressed trouble fitting in with their adoptive families, which could explain this finding. The more you feel you do not “fit in” with your family, the more uncertain about your relationships you would become. Colaner & Kranstuber (2010) discuss that adoptees often have uncertainty surrounding their adoptive parent’s feelings about their adoption, which could also contribute to this finding. Additionally, the circumstances of the adoption and the age of placement of the child upon adoption are also likely to shape the type of uncertainty and the degree of uncertainty that adoptees experience, therefore these nuances must be considered as well (Powell & Afifi, 2005).

It is overwhelmingly clear that adoptees are experiencing very significant amounts of relationship uncertainty and may be responding either with relational distancing and avoidance tactics, or managing uncertainty by attempting to gain closeness in their relationships. These findings are important in gaining understanding of how adoptees experience and manage uncertainty, and that this uncertainty surrounding their adoptions continues throughout adulthood.

### **Theoretical Implications and Future Research**

Previous research on adoptive family communication often focuses on aspects of child adjustment, family functioning, or adoptee satisfaction. Much of the research agrees

that adoptive families face changes unique to their familial situation. Because very little research thus far has directly compared adoptee's communication with their adoptive and birth families through a mixed methods methodology, this investigation contributes to multiple areas of scholarship, theory, and research agendas including online social support investigations, discourse dependent families, family identity and Social Identity Complexity Theory, adoptive relationships, Uncertainty Reduction Theory and relational distancing. Additionally, these findings inspired suggestions for future research agendas. Importantly, these findings could be beneficial for the adoption triad when applied outside of scholarship as well.

### **The Importance of Online Social Support**

Phase 1 results make it clear that adoptees are using adoption forums to seek advice and get input from other adoptees. Often they ask questions about their circumstances or directly ask for suggestions. This is not surprising, as online social support helps individuals cope with uncertainty and can decrease negative affect (Kellet, 2019). Previous research has looked at the benefits of adoptive parent support groups, which can help with issues such as relationship strain (Schwartz, Cody, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Fong, 2014), mental health challenges, and youth behavior issues (Clutter, 2014). However the support groups in these studies are in-person, not online.

There is significant support and sense making occurring in these online forums, which contributes to the existing literature on online support's benefits for users in both non-adoption and adoption-related forums (Mehta & Atreja, 2015; Miller et. al, 2019). Future research should continue to investigate these sites as places where social support is occurring and as a resource for helping adoptees cope with the rejection and

uncertainty they experience, as it seems it is unfortunately a consistently occurring phenomenon in adoption.

### **Discourse Dependent Families & Adoptive Identity**

In light of both Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings, this research contributes to the theoretical understanding of discourse dependent families, who rely on communication to establish family identity (Galvin, 2006), and family identity research as a whole including Social Identity Complexity Theory (SICT). In Phase 1, adoptees discussed feeling that they did not belong in their adoptive or birth families, and the hurt they experienced in managing the expectations of communication in both their adoptive and birth families. Discourse dependent families often use discursive strategies such as naming, discussing, telling stories and ritualizing to create and maintain family identity (Galvin & Braithewaite, 2014). Discussing involves explaining how someone is considered part of the family.

Because adoptees expressed difficulty with identity and elements of relational uncertainty, the findings may suggest there is a lack of discursive strategies being utilized within the families. Additionally, they suggest intergroup strain is occurring, which is when adoptees simultaneously identify as a member of their adoptive and birth families and experience tension as a result. This is consistent with previous adoption research findings such as Colaner, Halliwell and Guignon's 2014 study in which adoptees also reported intergroup strain. The overall findings of this study contribute to the understanding of discourse dependent families and dual family identities, and the specific challenges they have in creating family image and maintaining family identity.

### **Relationship Uncertainty**

Together, Phase 1 and Phase 2 data suggest that adoptees consistently deal with significant amounts of relationship uncertainty in their adoptive families. As discussed above, adoptees expressed highly salient emotions in Phase 1 surrounding rejection and abandonment from their birth families, and results from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 suggest significant amounts of relationship uncertainty for adoptees. These findings contribute to Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) by providing further evidence that adoptees experience significant amounts of uncertainty surrounding their adoption circumstances and their relationships. The findings support the theory's idea that individuals are motivated to reduce this uncertainty and manage it in a variety of ways.

### **Future Research**

The Phase 1 analysis of an online adoption forum allowed for salient themes to become clear. This, in conjunction with previous research on the benefits of online support groups for adoptees, indicates that researchers should continue to analyze online forums or other support groups in future research. Sense-making and processing in addition to rich conversation occur on these sites, which is beneficial for garnering participant-driven data that includes participant voices in a unique way.

While the mixed methods approach and sequential exploratory analysis were extremely beneficial in guiding this study, future research investigating this topic should consider additional qualitative methodologies, as the depth of response was limited in some parts of the qualitative portion. I believe interviews with both adoptees and their families about their communication would be extremely beneficial in understanding how triads interact with each other and how they cope with emotional responses. Additionally, a longitudinal study looking at adoption reunions would allow researchers to track

adoptivee's experiences from the beginning of the relationship and its evolution over time. Using the critical incident technique or a turning point analysis could also be helpful in allowing adoptees to process and understand their experiences. Some research has used interview techniques before, such as Colaner et. al's 2014 study on adoptive identity, but it is limited, and more research of this kind is needed. This qualitative approach would continue to allow for more in-depth themes and an opportunity to ask follow up questions and gain deeper understanding, which was not available in the analysis of an online forum. Because adoption is often a very sensitive topic for adoptees, this would allow them to share their experiences and stories in their own voices and allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the adoption experience from adoptees themselves.

Future research should focus on identity outcomes, rather than adoptive identity itself. This study was able to determine that adoptees are continuing to struggle with identity related issues as a result of their adoptive circumstances, which is consistent with other study's findings. However, moving forward it would be more beneficial to understand the long-term outcomes of adoptive identity. Does identifying with one family rather than the other predict greater adjustment for adoptees? How can adoptees overcome intergroup strain? Is it important for the adoptee and triad to manage their dual-identities in a specific way to ensure the best outcomes? If open adoptive communication has been found to be the best indicator of adoptee adjustment after placement, does this continue into adulthood? Future research should hope to address these questions with the goal of understanding how adoptees can be assisted in overcoming identity struggles.

Uncertainty was extremely salient for adoptees throughout this study, consistent with other adoption study results. Future research should continue to explore and narrow

in on this construct in order to better understand how and why this is occurring. It is important to understand how adoptees manage this uncertainty, and which management techniques are effective and ineffective in reducing uncertainty.

Many of the themes in the results section for Phase 1 had a recurring element of time. Emotions changed over time, relationships either evolved, improved, or disintegrated over time. While Phase 2 was able to address this by asking participants about their relationships over time with a few questions in the survey, future research should focus closely on the evolution of adoptive relationships to better understand their fluctuating natures and how this affects the adoption triad throughout the lifespan.

As previously mentioned, there were discrepancies between Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings surrounding relational distancing behaviors. In light of this, future research should attempt to better understand distancing behaviors in adoptees using a variety of methods, as it may be that self-report data effected the participant's reflections of their own distancing behaviors. Perhaps in-depth interviews would be more effective in getting at this construct.

### **Translational Applications**

Finally, it is important to note that this research has applications outside the realm of research and academia. Previous studies have found that children's reports of greater adoption communicative openness in their families were associated with greater birth family contact (Brodzinsky, 2006; Niel, 2009) and greater birth family contact satisfaction for adoptees (Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrick, 1996). These findings, combined with the present study's findings on adoptee behaviors such as relationship uncertainty and relational distancing, indicate that it is critical adoption

researchers and practitioners and adoptive families continue to find ways to increase adoption communicative openness. This could help to secure positive adoption outcomes for the adoption triad.

As many adoptees expressed difficulty meeting expectations for both of their families, findings such as this suggest there is a need for communication literature or other resources to assist families in facilitating conversations and provide solutions and talking points early on in the adoptee's relationships. The variation in experiences adoptees have also warrants a need to create available resources tailored to specific kinds of adoption circumstances, rather than a "one size fits all" approach to adoption resources for families. This could happen through adoption agencies or nonprofits who create and distribute this information, or in a clinical setting with family therapy or individual therapy. Adoptees and the entire triad, including birth parents, could benefit from an understanding of all triad member's individual challenges surrounding their unique situation.

As previously discussed, adoptees use online forums to gain emotional support and to process and sense-make their experiences. Considering online support groups have been proven to have benefits for users, adoption practitioners or counselors should consider a professionally moderated support group in which users can not only interact and have conversations with other adoptees, but also be able to express their concerns to an un-biased counselor or other adoption professional would be able to respond to their posts. This could help adoptees process and seek support in a more productive, beneficial way while also having the benefits of an open forum.

## **Limitations**

Despite these implications, some potential limitations qualify the conclusions surrounding adult adoptee's family communication experiences. There are four main limitations that may have had an impact on the present study: limited Phase 1 qualitative data, the sample size for Phase 2, the demographics of the Phase 2 sample, and the possibility of selection bias.

The qualitative portion of the mixed methods study analyzed one adoption forum when gathering data. The study may have been improved or expanded on by looking at several different adoption forums and analyzing each to gather a greater amount of data. Time constraints did not allow for the observation of multiple sites for this thesis, but future research could review several adoption forums and conduct a similar analysis. In addition, the findings as presented are a result of the researcher's analysis of data based on specific research questions posed in this study. The themes are based off of the exploratory sequential analysis method and validity checks used in the analysis. However, as with most qualitative studies, different research questions or a different method would likely yield different results from the same data. Results should be interpreted within the context of this study, and future research could utilize other methods of data collection, especially qualitative methodologies including interviews or focus groups, the critical incident technique, or longitudinal designs such as journaling.

Additionally, the quantitative sample size was small, only yielding 71 participants, which may have affected statistical power or the significance of the findings. A larger sample size may have demonstrated support for some of the key hypotheses and additional research should certainly attempt to capitalize on the benefits of a larger

sample size. Though participants were recruited from Facebook adoption-focused groups online, the sample was difficult to reach, possibly because adoption is a sensitive topic for adoptees.

Gender and ethnicity demographics may also have been a limitation in this study: There were very few male participants in both Phase 1 and Phase 2, and Phase 2's sample was almost 90% white (no ethnicity information was available for Phase 1). This is consistent with current statistics that white non-Hispanics make up a majority of the percentage of both adoptees and adoptive parents (Zill, 2017). As a result, statistical tests to test hypotheses were run controlling for both gender and ethnicity. However future research should emphasize gaining a more equal sample of male and female participants and a wider range of diversity represented in the sample. Ultimately, future studies should focus on gaining a larger sample size for both the qualitative and quantitative samples, with a more equal gender and ethnicity breakdown in the samples as well. Had these limitations such as sample size not been a factor in the current study, my data analysis may have been more complex. For example, I may have been able to more closely examine the correlations between variables to determine which more advanced tests to run such as regression and interaction testing on the significant data.

It is also important to note the sampling methodology of both Phase 1 and Phase 2 samples. Participants who are a member and user of the adoption forum analyzed in Phase 1, or a member of the adoption Facebook groups used to recruit participants from Phase 2, may have been more likely to view their adoption as a significant part of their life, or to have extremely positive or negative views surrounding their own adoptions or adoption itself. Thus, there may be a self-selection bias in the samples. The data in Phase

2 is also self-report data, which can slightly affect accuracy of response as it is difficult for participants to reflect on their own experiences, emotions, etc.

Finally, while I used verification strategies throughout including peer debriefing by three scholars to reduce my personal bias of being an adoptee, there is still the possibility of researcher bias within this study. However, this study focuses on adoptee's relationships with birth families, which I do not have personal experience with as a result of being in a closed adoption circumstance. While this does not remove potential bias, I was intentional about externalizing the data during the process of researching and writing this thesis, in addition to the previously mentioned peer debriefing strategy.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the present study's limitations, these findings provide important insight into the experiences of adult adoptees maintaining relationships with a birth parent(s) in open adoptions. Ultimately, the goal of this research was met in that there is a deeper understanding of openness in adoption for adult adoptees and adoptive communication from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective. These results contribute to the existing literature on adoptive families and adoptive communication, but also show that more research is needed to understand these complex and unique family relationships. Future research should focus on continuing to investigate these complex familial relationships and the impacts these relationships have on adoptees throughout the lifespan, as well as possibilities for improving adoptee outcomes.

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	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11	V12	V13	V14	V15	V16	V17	V18	V19	V20
V1: Adoptive Family Identity	--																			
V2: Birth Family Identity	0.03	--																		
V3: Relational Distancing Adoptive Family: Avoidance	-0.71**	-0.13	--																	
V4: Relational Distancing Adoptive Family: Disengagement	-0.65**	-0.16	.89**	--																
V5: Relational Distancing Adoptive Family: Cognitive Disassociation	-0.56**	-0.21	.82**	-.89**	--															
V6: Relational Distancing Birth Family: Avoidance	-0.09	-.38**	.27*	.29*	.24*	--														
V7: Relational Distancing Birth Family: Disengagement	-0.15	-0.28	0.25	0.31	0.15	.92**	--													
V8: Relational Distancing Birth Family: Cognitive Disassociation	-0.05	-0.34**	0.14	0.24*	0.09	0.83**	0.84**	--												
V9: Relationship Uncertainty Adoptive Family: Behavioral Norms	0.57	-0.08	-0.59**	-0.51**	-0.52**	-0.15	-0.14	-0.09	--											
V10: Relationship Uncertainty Adoptive Family: Mutuality	0.65**	-0.01	-0.55**	-0.54**	-0.57**	-0.23*	-0.16	-0.15	0.71**	--										
V11: Relationship Uncertainty Adoptive Family: Definition	0.66**	0.02	-0.56**	-0.52**	-0.49**	-0.14	-0.08	-0.13	0.62**	0.85**	--									
V12: Relationship Uncertainty Adoptive Family: Future	0.60**	0.10	-0.52**	-0.46**	-0.44**	-0.17	-0.07	-0.18	0.66**	0.81**	0.84**	--								
V13: Relationship Uncertainty Birth Family: Behavioral Norms	-0.10	0.6**	-0.02	-0.04	-0.13	-0.21	-0.17	-0.15	0.03	0.01	-0.04	-0.06	--							
V14: Relationship Uncertainty Birth Family: Mutuality	0.02	0.42**	0.02	0.01	-0.09	0.02	0.09	-0.04	0.07	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.65**	--						
V15: Relationship Uncertainty Birth Family: Definition	-0.03	0.45**	-0.03	-0.04	-0.13	-0.10	-0.02	-0.01	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.00	0.70**	0.91**	--					
V16: Relationship Uncertainty Birth Family: Future	0.11	0.34**	-0.13	-0.13	-0.19	-0.17	-0.15	-0.16	0.06	0.14	0.15	0.10	0.63**	0.79**	0.89**	--				
V17: Attachment: General Avoidance	0.43**	-0.02	-0.41**	-0.44	-0.35**	0.16	-0.30*	-0.19	0.38**	0.36**	0.26*	0.22	0.07	0.09	0.05	0.08	--			
V18: Attachment: Lack of Confidence	0.34**	0.02	-0.33**	-0.35**	-0.24*	-0.07	-0.13	-0.10	0.30**	0.21	0.21	0.18	0.21	0.23	0.22	0.24**	0.63**	--		
V19: Attachment: Preoccupation	-0.02	0.09	0.04	-0.04	0.01	0.05	0.00	0.06	-0.04	-0.04	0.11	-0.06	0.23	0.21	0.27	0.30*	0.24*	0.00	--	
V20: Attachment: Fearful Avoidance	0.40**	-0.02	-0.42**	-0.45**	-0.40**	-0.05	-0.17	-0.09	0.30*	0.27*	0.20	0.17	0.11	0.18	0.08	0.14	0.82**	0.50**	0.07	--
<b>Table 1. Correlations among study variables.</b>																				
* $p < .05$ . ** $p < .01$ . *** $p < .001$ .																				

Table I. Correlations among study variables.

	<i>M</i> <i>adoptive</i>	<i>SD</i> <i>adoptive</i>	<i>M birth</i>	<i>SD birth</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
<b>H1</b>	4.78	1.75	5.13	1.48	-1.30	0.20
<b>H2</b>	2.38	1.68	2.19	2.18	0.74	0.46
<b>H3</b>	2.47	1.56	2.17	1.83	1.25	0.22
<b>H4</b>	2.25	1.43	2.15	1.80	0.47	0.64

Table II. *Results, H1-H4.*

## Curriculum Vitae

### KRISTEN HABERKORN

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY [HABEKA18@WFLU.EDU](mailto:HABEKA18@WFLU.EDU) (573) 837-9308

**Professional Profile:** Highly accomplished student with a wide range of experience and knowledge teaching and working with students. Currently finishing graduate school (M.A. Communication) and seeking teaching opportunities.

#### EDUCATION

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- |           |  |                               |
|-----------|--|-------------------------------|
| <b>MA</b> | Wake Forest University, Communication  | Expected Graduation: May 2020 |
| <b>BS</b> | Winthrop University, Integrated Marketing Communication<br>Graduated Cum Laude | May 2018                      |

#### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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Wake Forest provided me with a teaching assistantship opportunity for the two years of my Masters program. I have taught an introduction to public speaking course and an empirical research methods course to undergraduate students.

**Wake Forest University**, Winston-Salem, N.C.

**Aug 2018 - Present**

**Teaching Assistant**, Department of Communication

*Public Speaking (COM110) (Aug 2018-May 2019)*

- Taught COM110 Public Speaking labs, an undergraduate course with 20 students per semester, covering the following topics: public speaking skills including delivery, content, outline writing, group speeches, visual aids, and persuasion
- Developed engaging lab activities and lesson planned course content
- Graded speeches and outlines based on provided or created rubrics

- Provided student feedback on assignments emphasizing skills that can be transferable to other classes or professional positions
- Coordinated with a team of 4 teaching assistants and 2 instructors of record
- Worked with diverse populations including international students and first-generation college students

*Empirical Research Methods (COM220) (Aug 2019-May 2020)*

- Teach COM220 Empirical Research Methods, an undergraduate course with 25 students each semester, covering the following topics: social science research, hypotheses, validity and reliability, questionnaires and experiments, Qualtrics & SPSS, writing research reports, critical thinking, and how to read social science research
- Lesson planned for engaging lab activities and in-class discussions
- Graded worksheets, papers, tests, and activities based on rubrics and expectations
- Provided feedback on student assignments focusing on how to critically think about research as a systematic, ongoing, evolving process
- Met with students one-on-one to discuss assignments, feedback, and general help with course material.
- Worked with diverse populations including international students and first-generation college students

## **TEACHING INTERESTS**

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Public speaking, empirical research methods, interpersonal and family communication, intercultural and international communication, marketing communication, public relations.

## **PROFESSIONAL & RELEVANT EXPERIENCE**

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**SciKidz Science Camp, Louisville, KY  
2019**

**May 2019-August**

### **Camp Instructor**

- Lead lessons about a variety of science topics for several levels of campers
- Instructed children from ages 4-15 with about 10 campers per class
- Created activities and lessons when needed
- Provided feedback and encouragement on camper's work
- Worked with campers with visible and invisible disabilities such as ADHD
- Communicated with parents about children's specific needs and accommodations
- Kept track of camper's allergies and sensitive medical information each week
- Worked with team of other instructors to collaborate on activities
- Reported inventory of necessary supplies to supervisor each week
- Oversaw recess, lunch, free time, and time in between lessons
- Helped supervisor run day-camps with small groups

**Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC  
2018**

**August 2016-May**

**Study Abroad Peer Mentor**

- Marketed study abroad programs to Winthrop University students and faculty
- Met with students regularly to provide them information about the study abroad process
- Supported marketing efforts with research, budgeting, paperwork processing, one-on-one meetings and group meetings with students or faculty
- Hosted information sessions and events
- Plan and lead events such as pre-departure orientation, study abroad fair, international center events for holidays, cultural events, and classroom presentations.

**Girl Scouts of Eastern SC, Charleston, SC  
2017**

**May 2017-August**

**Marketing Communications Intern**

- Created content for and edited GSESC website on Adobe Experience Manager
- Assisted in the execution of marketing campaigns
- Wrote blog posts, articles, press releases and the summer newsletter
- Reported directly to the Director of Marketing Communications

**RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

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**Wake Forest University 2018-2020**

During my graduate program I have worked on several publications and am currently completing a mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) thesis. I also conducted research abroad in London, England with a classmate.

- **Publication:** Lapierre, M. A., Krcmar, M., Choi, E., Haberkorn, K. A., & Locke, S. J. (In Press) Take a deep breath: The effects of television exposure and family communication on child-accompanied grocery shopping-related stress in parents. *International Journal of Advertising*.
  - Assisted in writing the rationale and edited the overall publication
  - Communicated with lead researcher and entire team to assist writing and submission of article
  - Helped communicate with reviewers on edits and feedback.
- **Publication:** Krcmar, Marina, Haberkorn, Kristen. Mental Representations. (In Press). *International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology*. Wiley: 2019.
  - Wrote and edited entire chapter's content
  - Collaborated with Dr. Krcmar to determine research focus, content, and edits.
  - Worked with Wiley editors to make changes and submit final chapter.

- **Thesis:** Adult Adoptee Communication Experiences with Birth and Adoptive Families: A Mixed Methods Investigation
  - Mixed methods sequential study in which a qualitative analysis of online adoption forums informed a quantitative survey of adult adoptees.
  - Conducted qualitative and quantitative data analysis
- **Class Paper (COM720):** Unique Units: How Adoptive Openness Informs Family Communication Patterns
  - Quantitative data collection and analysis
- **Richter Scholarship**
  - Conducted quantitative research on advertising and children's purchase requests in London, England for two weeks in December 2019 under the guidance of Dr. Marina Krcmar
  - Wrote research report upon return home which was submitted to the Richter committee
  - Collaborated with a classmate and Dr. Krcmar on the planning and execution of the project and report

### **Winthrop University, 2014-2018**

I completed undergraduate informal research on study abroad through a survey through the Mass Communication Department for my senior capstone public relations class. I wrote a final research report after gathering and analyzing the data.

### **SKILLS**

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- Lesson and curriculum planning
- Effective teaching
- Teaching to diversity
- AP Style
- APA Format
- Research & Data Analysis:
  - Qualitative -Beginner
  - Quantitative -Intermediate
- Writing:
  - Journalism
  - Press releases
  - Advertising copy
  - Research reports
  - Content for social media
  - Website copy
  - Blog posts
  - Professional documents, emails, billing statements
- Microsoft Suite
- Google Suite
- Qualtrics Survey software
- SPSS Statistical Package
- Superb and effective communicator

- Focused and driven
- Professional, consistent, and passionate
- Highly organized

## **HONORS AND AWARDS**

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### **Full scholarship and teaching assistantship**

2014-2020

Winthrop University offered me a full academic, merit-based scholarship for all four years of undergrad. Wake Forest offered me a full scholarship for graduate school in addition to a paid teaching assistantship for both years of graduate school.

### **Richter Scholarship**

Awarded the Richter Scholarship for \$4,200 to conduct research for two weeks in 2019

London, England.

### **IMC Student of the Year**

2018

Nominated as Integrated Marketing Communication student of the year by Winthrop University's Communication department faculty for the 2018 school year.

### **Rookie of the Year**

2015

Raised \$10,000 in scholarship money in my first semester of fundraising for student scholarships

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