OPENNESS IN ADOPTION NARRATIVES TOLD TO THE SECOND GENERATION

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OPENNESS IN ADOPTION NARRATIVES TOLD TO THE SECOND GENERATION

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Thesis

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

No one can accurately say how many adoptions have occurred in the United States in the last century. Herman (2011) provides a history of adoption, explaining that statistics on such a private event were gathered only haphazardly. (The Census Bureau did not include adoption as a kinship category until the 2000 Census.) For decades, adoption had been shrouded in secrecy. Adoptions were confidential, and records were sealed. Children were matched with adoptive families based on physical resemblance so that the child could pass as a biological child. Indeed, even the adoptee might not ever be told that he or she was adopted. The secrecy was often an effort to prevent shame: a child born out-of-wedlock prior to World War II would have been labeled illegitimate, a stigma that could even result in shunning. The prevailing wisdom of the time was to pretend that the adoption had never occurred; certainly, adoption was not freely discussed.

Today, adoption makes the front cover of national newspapers and magazines as celebrities like Angelina Jolie and Rosie O’Donnell promote adoption and have each adopted multiple children. The profile for adoptive parents was once infertile heterosexual married couples; now the eligibility also includes single parents,
homosexual couples, and parents who enjoy adding to their family, which may be a mix of biological and adoptive children (Herman, 2011). Adoption has become even more visible in recent times because of the increase in transracial and international adoptions. In the 1990’s, the number of foreign adopted children doubled (Population Reference Bureau, 2009). China is the number one sending country; in a single decade, 33,823 Chinese children were adopted into American homes (Cao, 2011).

Every year in the United States, approximately 127,000 children are adopted, which equates to 2% of the nation’s children being adopted (Child Welfare League of America, 2011). That means that every time there are 50 children gathered, it is likely that one of those children is adopted. Moreover, almost half of Americans report being personally affected by adoption, as measured by 47% of 1,660 survey respondents indicating that they are adopted, they have adopted, or they have someone in their family or among their close friends who is adopted (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2007).

With adoption personally affecting so many people, researchers from fields such as psychology and sociology have been eager to study adoption, particularly adjustment issues, nature versus nurture causalities, foster care policies, and the trend towards open adoptions where contact is kept with the birth family. Communication researchers have only recently engaged in scholarship on adoption. The opportunities for communication research are ripe for two reasons. First, adoption experts now consider adoption not an event but a lifetime process (Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998). Across the lifespan, adoptees encounter developmental milestones with added challenges. For example, when
adoptees are ready to become parents themselves, the desire to know their medical history may spark them to conduct a search for their blood relatives. Second, each milestone involves communication. That communication can be life-changing. Consider just a few examples: an older cousin whispers to a child at the family barbecue, “My mom told me that you are adopted, but we’re not supposed to tell you”; a couple longing for a child writes a letter to try to persuade a pregnant teen that they would be the ideal family to raise the child she intends to place for adoption; a man receives a phone call from the sibling he was separated from 40 years before.

While the adoption journey involves many consequential communicative experiences, this prospectus will focus on the one that first forms an individual’s adoption identity and shapes his or her self-concept throughout life. The story that an adoptee is told about why and how they were adopted is powerful. This truth, which we will see is documented in the literature, became seared in my consciousness when a woman told me her story as part of another project I was working on. When Cheryl—all names have been changed to protect privacy—was a child, her parents kept her adoption a secret. When Cheryl’s parents were out of the house one day, she discovered a document hidden in her mother’s bedroom that revealed that Cheryl had once had a different name. The shock and sense of betrayal were devastating. Cheryl’s adoptive mom found a shell-shocked Cheryl with the document in her hand. Cheryl related what happened next: “My mom told me not to tell anyone, so I felt like it was a horrible thing.” The combination of trauma and shame led to Cheryl slitting her wrists in a suicide attempt.
While Cheryl’s story is obviously dramatic, I found that even adoptees who have more common stories can have experiences that raise thought-provoking questions. Tara’s situation provides an example of this. Tara’s parents were open in talking about her adoption as she was growing up, and she says that as a result, her adoption “was never a big deal.” As a child and still today, Tara has little curiosity about visiting her birth country or researching her biological parents.\(^1\) While Tara is not interested in conducting a search, her son is quite curious about his heritage. He asks many questions and wants to visit Vietnam. Tara told me, “He says someday we're both going to go. And I said, ‘Ok, we'll do that. We'll put that on our bucket list.’” While Tara is not driven to visit her native homeland or research her birth family, she is willing to support her son’s quest. What happens, though, when adoptees decidedly do not want that chapter of their life opened? Sometimes opening a search can be opening the proverbial can of worms and, as Tara warns, the story you learn could be “bad.” For example, adoptees may have been conceived through rape or may have a mother who sold them for drug money. Until fairly recently, adoptees who were not interested in opening a search for whatever reason could leave that chapter of their lives closed, but two advances in

\(^1\) Tara acknowledges that this may be in part because she was adopted from an orphanage in Vietnam during wartime, so it may not be worth going to a lot of effort to find her biological family because the chances that there were adequate records of her birth then or that those records have been preserved until now is quite low. Plus, her parents may not have survived the war.
technology have now changed that. No longer do searchers have to obtain a birth
certificate. Now the adoptee’s relatives can find each other—even if the adoptee does not
want them to—through the plethora of adoption registries on the Internet and the
availability of DNA testing. Even the tiniest bit of information “baby boy born in Dallas
in the summer of 1970” can lead to two people agreeing to having the inside of their
mouths cotton-swabbed to see if there is a genetic relationship. The communication
implications are intriguing: At what point do the reunited relatives tell the adoptee?
How does the adoptee handle the situation? Do the two families then remain in contact?
What communicative consequences unfold? Research has focused on entrance narratives
told to adoptees by their parents but now it is possible that the entrance narrative will be
told to the adoptee by the adoptee’s own child! Imagine this communication and its
consequences: “Dad, I learned who your birth family is and the real reason that you were
placed for adoption.”

The impact of a parent’s adoption on the second generation is interesting to
consider, yet the effect of adoption on the second generation has received little attention
from researchers. As a student of communication and as a life-long lover of stories, I am
captivated by the role and impact of stories in adoptive families. Therefore, my literature
review will focus on narrative theory research, explicitly focusing on what the
communication literature has to say about openness in adoptive family narratives. I will
then propose a research study to extend this line of research by examining the
transmission and impact of adoption narratives on the second generation.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Communication

Family communication became a distinct academic domain within the communication studies discipline in 1989 when the National Communication Association accepted the founding of the Commission on Family Communication, now known as the Family Communication Division (Family Communication Association, 2002). Baxter and Braitwaite (2006) conducted an empirical study of the family communication research that followed. They reviewed the 21 academic journals most likely to include family research. For the time period of 1990-2003, they found 289 research articles about family communication written by communication scholars. Among the 20 theories most often used in these articles, relational dialectics theory was the most frequent and narrative theory was the fourth most frequent. Thus, there is a solid scholarly foundation for using these two theories to explore the dynamics of family communication. Through the literature review, we will see that narrative theory is particularly salient for families formed through adoption and that relational dialectics theory describes the unique communicative challenge that adoptive parents face.
Narrative Theory

Storytelling is a universal experience: stories have been told since humans first walked the face of the Earth and continue to be told on all inhabited parts of the globe. Hearing, sharing, and telling narratives is such a fundamental part of being human that Fisher (1987) refers to the human species as “homo narrans” (p. 59).

Narrative theory’s roots go back to antiquity with Aristotle, who discussed the form and plot structure of narratives, though he did not use the term narrative (De Jong, 2008). The study of stories became formalized in 1928 with the publication of Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, which analyzed the structure of 100 Russian fairy tales (Nells, 2008). Building on the work of Propp and other Russian formalists, French scholars in the mid-1960’s developed structuralist theories of narratives (Herman, 2008). In 1969, Tzvetan Todorov coined the French term *narratologie* to signify the “study of narrative” (Herman, 2008, p. 576). The study of narratives took place within the confines of literary analysis, but that single-discipline focus was about to change.

Todorov’s compatriot Roland Barthes had been arguing for a cross-disciplinary approach to studying narratives (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2008). Researchers from other disciplines began heeding that call, no longer just studying the attributes of a play, for example, but examining “exactly what a story is, where it occurs, how it works, and for whom” (Kreisworth, 2008, p. 378.) Scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, such as anthropology and medicine, became interested in “storied forms of knowledge” (Kreisworth, 2008, p. 380). This shift to other disciplines, known as the “narrative turn”
(Kreisworth, 2008, p.377), gained momentum and “now, narrative is everywhere” (Richardson, 2000).

In communication studies, narrative theory holds that meaning is communicated through stories; narratives are a communicative process for sensemaking (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). Sensemaking, the “meaning we place on events in our lives,” is a social process (Davis, 2008, p. 12). Narratives are social constructions; rather than describing actual events, narratives provide a way for people to retroactively organize their lives through conversation. Conversation plays a critical role in the collaborative process of sensemaking. As Poulos (2009) describes, “It is in and through our dialogical movements. . . that the meanings of our experiences begin to clarify, to resonate, to shimmer with meaning” (p. 30-31). A story does not form in a vacuum but is the “response to previous stories; each story is a link in a chain of story-utterances (Poulos, 2009, p.135). These stories link one after another until a phenomenon develops that Poulos (2009) calls a “narrative conscience,” i.e. “a knowing together” (p. 134).

Narratives are both collaborative and transformative. Bruner (2004) posits that “in the end, we become the autobiographical narratives. . .we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 694). This ending is inevitable because “narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (Bruner, 2004, p. 692). The collaborative nature of sensemaking and the transformative power of narrative occur most profoundly in the family, the earliest and most intimate form of community (Davis, 2008).
Family Narratives

Families tell stories for a variety of reasons: to socialize children, to transfer life lessons, and to develop and shape identity (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Both familial and individual identities are constructed through stories. Identity is indeed “narratively configured” (Thompson et al., 2009, p. 109). Family stories substantially impact an individual family member’s self-concept (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; McAdmas, 1993; Schechtman, 1996; Stone, 1988; Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999). People “often grow into the stories until they fit as tight and are as unnoticeable as a layer of skin” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 254). Thus, narratives told in the family context have pervasive and long-lasting consequences (Davis, 2008), including influencing well-being and identity development through adulthood (McAdams, 1993; Stone, 1988).

The foundational story for identity formation is the birth story (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Children are naturally curious about their origins. They ask questions about how their parents met, where babies come from, and what they were like when they were born. Not all families are formed through birth, though. For adoptive parents, it can be challenging to answer a child’s question, “Where did I come from?”

Adoptive Family Narratives

Because adoptive children enter a family through law rather than through birth, adoptive families are “discourse dependent” (Galvin, 2010, p. 326). Adoptive families create and maintain identity through discourse. One of the primary ways to do this is through family storytelling. The story of a child’s adoption is called an entrance narrative in the literature. Entrance narratives help answer the questions adoptees often
ask: “Where did I come from? Who were my birthparents? Why was I placed for adoption? Do my birthparents think of me now? Do I have birth siblings? What does adoption mean in my life?” (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004, p. 147). The entrance narrative serves several purposes: “offering children positive reinforcement, building familiarity with adoption-related talk, conveying a complete history, and attempting to help children avoid fantasy” (Harrigan, 2010, p. 26).

While entrance narratives serve multiple important purposes, forming one is fraught with challenges. The information available about the birth family and their circumstances may be limited; in the case of an international adoption, the information may be quite scant. Whether the information is scarce or abundant, it may be unpleasant, even horrific. As the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011) matter-of-factly states, “Adoption involves loss” (para. 1). Often there are many losses: the loss of parents, of siblings, of innocence, of security. Sometimes there are additional losses: language, culture, and country. Always, “these stories begin with loss. They are conceived in abandonment . . . . Lack and grief become birthmarks” (Jones, 2005, p. 135).

When stories of origin contain elements of abandonment, neglect, and/or abuse, parents must “discursively manage this complex story for their children” (Krusieicicz & Wood, 2001, p. 789). They can frame the loss as “your birthmother abandoned you” or “your birthmother loved you so much that she wanted you to have a better life than she could provide.” The negative or positive construction of entrance narratives has dramatic implications for a child’s self-concept (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). The stories that
parents tell their adopted children about how and why they entered the family “can be extraordinarily important in mending, further rupturing, or otherwise modifying the children’s sense of place, history, identity, and value” (Krusieicz & Wood, 2001, p. 786). Because these stories have such serious ramifications, parents may not only carefully think about how to construct the entrance narrative, but they may also rehearse it (Cao, 2011).

Openness in Adoptive Family Narratives

When telling entrance narratives, parents encounter the realities described by relational dialectics theory, a communication theory which states that individuals in interpersonal relationships express opposing desires (Baxter, 2004). Adoptive parents, especially, experience the dialectical tensions of openness and closedness. Adoptive parents experience the contradiction of wanting to disclose information about the child’s history while wanting to protect their children from that information (Wilson, 2004). Some adoptive parents talk frequently about the adoption, share all known information, and help the child maintain a relationship with the birth family. Other adoptive parents intend to keep the adoption a secret, never telling the children that they are not related by blood. Most families fall somewhere in between on the continuum. An example of an adoptive mother managing the dialectical tension is the woman who chose openness with her adoptive daughter by telling her that she was abandoned but who chose closedness by not telling her daughter that she had been left on a garbage heap. Openness in entrance narratives can vary along a continuum and over time, e.g. the story may remain consistent but the parent adds more details as the child grows older (Harrigan, 2009).
While a parent may be tempted toward closedness in order to protect the child from hearing a painful reality, social workers warn that that this is not a wise approach. A child whose birth father has relinquished his parental rights and is frequently in jail needs to know the truth; otherwise, he may spend years hoping his lost but idealized father will re-connect with him and take him to his movie-star mansion. This fantasy does nothing to help the child attach to his new family (Harrigan, 2010). An adoptee who does not discover that she is adopted until she is an adult can experience serious identity issues, as well as deep bitterness towards her adopted parents for their deception. Adoptive parents must be willing to be open with the child—sharing the child’s origins and the reasons for the adoption. Though the reasons are likely to be painful, adoptive parents can help their child face their past, discuss their grief, make sense of their life story, and form a coherent and whole identity (Harrigan, 2010).

Research studies corroborate social workers anecdotal evidence that openness is beneficial, even vital. The seminal work in this line of research is Kirk’s (1964) *Shared Fate: A Theory and Method of Adoptive Relationships*, which was based on a decade of research on 2,000 adoptive families. Written during the era of matching, i.e. when infants were placed with infertile couples based on matching physical appearances (Herman, 2011), Kirk argued that adoptive parents should not try to pass the child as biological but should instead acknowledge the difference. Kirk maintained, “Families that are not regulated by tradition must depend on the interpersonal skills of their members for their internal order. In the situation of adoption, these skills imply empathic and ideational communication with the child about his background” (p. 181). Parents
who try to pretend their family is no different than biological families, on the other hand, tend to engage in activities that “make for poor communication with subsequent disruptive results for the adoptive relationship” (p. 181).

Since Kirk’s foundational work, the scholarship on adoption communication openness—while not abundant—has been consistent in its findings that communicative openness is best. Brodzinsky (2006) performed a quantitative study that found that adoption communication openness is a significant predictor of the child’s adjustment. Higher openness was positively correlated with the child reporting higher self-esteem and the parents reporting fewer behavior problems. Not surprisingly, other studies have found that children are more likely to rate their adoptive experience positively when their parents openly discuss their adoption (Harrigan, 2010; Howe & Feast, 2003). Further, researchers have found that it is essential for adoptees to integrate their adoptive identity into their personal identity in order to have psychological wellness later in life (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004).

The literature is clear that openness in adoption narratives is vital for strong interpersonal relationships, solid identity formation, and future mental health. Further, the research shows that not only is the content of the entrance narrative important but also how that content is presented. An empirical study showed that when entrance narratives included a “chosen child” theme, the child’s self-esteem increased (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Adoptive parents who provide honest information about their children’s history, talk openly about the adoption, and reassure their children that they are special because...
they were chosen help the child establish positive adoptive, personal, and family identities.

Openness in Adoptive Family Narratives with the Second Generation

Goodall (2005) suggests that individuals understand their identity through the stories of their parents and grandparents; these collections of stories become a person’s “narrative inheritance” (p. 494). People make sense of events and their lives through the stories of their predecessors.

When a story is told across generations, it becomes a legacy. Thompson et al. (2009) performed a study to determine how the “intergenerational transmission of family legacy stories both enables and constrains individual family members’ sense of their own identities” (p. 121). Legacies can be positive or negative. While past events shape individuals, they do not cast people out of a mold. Individuals play an active role in developing their identities. Thus, it is interesting to investigate in what ways individuals reject or embrace the family identity that is passed down through family legacy stories. The results of the study showed that people reject or embrace their family legacies on a continuum. Further, not only may individuals accept their family identity wholly or partially, they may do so situationally. While most choose to embrace the positive and reject the negative, some choose to do the opposite. The study was useful for illustrating how family legacies are fluid. While the authors satisfactorily described how the study participants rejected or embraced their family legacy stories, much more research is needed because 1) this study was the first to examine how individuals respond to their
family legacy stories, and 2) there were only 17 participants, all of whom were college students. The family legacy stories study did not explore families touched by adoption.

Only one article exists in the literature about how a subsequent generation reacts to an entrance narrative. Ballard and Ballard (2011) wrote an autoethnographic article as a married couple describing the stories their family tells. These stories are situated in the past, present, and future. The first author, the father, is ethnically Vietnamese and was adopted by Caucasian parents; the second author, the mother, is Caucasian. Thus, the children can visibly tell that their father is different from most of the family. One of the children’s favorite requests is, “Daddy, tell us again how you were adopted” (p. 69).

While the children are interested in being entertained and hearing about their parents, the authors argue that this curiosity about origins and this desire to bond with family is critical to their family identity formation. Storytelling helps the “children make sense of their unique identity and culture” (p. 72). This particular family had just recently adopted a child internationally; while preparing for the process, they were frequently asked by community members, “Why are you adopting?” The parents answered with a story. They anticipate that when their infant son is older, he will ask, “What do you remember about my orphanage?” The family will answer this question with a story too. Thus, the narrative of the past provides momentum for the narrative of the future. The authors state, “We are a family with international adoption as a narrative inheritance, a family that has chosen to carry on that family legacy” (p. 83).

Ballard and Ballard allow readers to peer into their lives. They certainly have a fascinating story to tell. It is only one family’s story, though. Other families who have
adopted internationally may have different responses based on their personalities and life experiences. Further, adoption of an infant from Vietnam is just one scenario. There are a multitude of possible situations. Adoptees may have been adopted domestically or internationally; at birth, as a young child, or as an adolescent; through an open or closed adoption; by their foster parents, by relatives, or by strangers. Thus, there is a gap in the literature, which calls for researchers to explore the legacy stories in additional adoptive families, including families which represent diverse adoption experiences.

Entrance narratives and their impact is an area of communication research that is just beginning. I intend to extend this line of research by examining the entrance narratives told to adoptees’ children. This exploratory study will answer three research questions:

RQ 1: How do adoptees construct the entrance narrative about their adoption?

RQ 2: How do adoptees share their entrance narratives with their own children?

RQ 3: How do the children of adoptees respond to their parent’s entrance narrative?
CHAPTER III

METHOD

To answer the research questions, I conducted a qualitative research study. This study involved in-depth interviews of nine participants. The following sections will describe the participants, the data collection process, and the data analysis method.

Participants

To recruit study participants, I e-mailed contacts in in my various networks, e.g. friends, family, church, school, etc., and requested referrals. The e-mail briefly described the study, described the criteria I was seeking in participants, and included the consent form. All participants needed to be 1) at least 18 years old and 2) an adoptee with at least one child or the adult child of an adoptee. This criterion sampling recruited eight participants and then snowball sampling enlisted an additional participant for a total of nine participants. All of the participants ended up being adoptees, although one of the adoptees is also the adult child of an adoptee, so she was able to offer the perspective of the second generation as well. To maintain participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms are used.
Demographics

Because adoption has changed so much over the years, the range of ages represented in this study was beneficial. The participants represented five different decades of life with the youngest participant at 30 and the oldest at 72. The research participants hailed from six states. Five were women; four were men. (This nearly even split of genders was a boon because in most adoption-related studies, the vast majority or all of the participants have been female.) All participants were White and had been adopted by White parents through a domestic adoption. Four were adopted within 10 days of being born, two were adopted when they were a couple months old, one was adopted at two and half years old, and one was adopted at eight years old. The adoptees’ knowledge of their birth families varied greatly. One person’s knowledge of his birth family was a single sentence. (As he stated about those handful of words, “That right there is literally all the information that I have.”) Some, on the other hand, have had contact with multiple members of their birth families. Participants had been placed for adoption for a variety of reasons; the known reasons included unwanted teen pregnancy, parental mental illness, and neglect.

Data Collection Procedures

Approval to conduct research on human subjects was obtained from the University of Akron’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). All participants signed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) before data collection began. Interviews were scheduled for times convenient to participants. For the seven participants who live out of the area, the interviews were conducted over the phone. The
two local participants are married to each other and wished to be interviewed together. I interviewed them face to face. Their joint interview lasted 98 minutes. The individual interviews lasted 31 minutes to 74 minutes, with the average length being 45 minutes.

I gathered demographic information during the interview process. For some, I let much of the information come up naturally (e.g. their age at time of adoption) and then wrapped up the interview requesting any information that had not (e.g. their current age). For other interviews, I asked all the demographic questions at the front of the interview.

The bulk of the interview was focused on learning the answers to my research questions. To learn about participants’ entrance narratives, how they shared their entrance narratives with their children, and how their children responded, I used a general interview guide approach, which allows for both focus and freedom (Turner, 2010). The interview guide (see Appendix C) was used as a springboard, not as a straightjacket. This allowed adoptees to share the issues that were salient to them.

Interviews were audio recorded using a hand-held digital recorder. (Participants had agreed to this in the Informed Consent Form and were reminded before the record button was pushed.) The audio recordings were then transcribed.

Data Analysis

I read through all the transcripts as a whole before beginning to code in order to gain a holistic view of the data. Then I began to mine the data to answer the research questions and to explore additional noteworthy themes that emerged. I analyzed inductively, using Owen’s (1984) thematic analysis technique to see what themes emerged. Themes were identified based on instances of repetition (use of the same
words), recurrence (use of different words but having the same meaning), and
forcefulness (participant signals an emphasis). Salient and surprising themes will be
discussed in the findings section.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

Two theories provided the framework for this study: relational dialectics theory and narrative theory. Relational dialectics theory acknowledges the reality that individuals experience opposing desires (Baxter, 2004). The present study focused on the tension between openness and closedness. Managing the relational dialectics of openness and closedness is a complex, ongoing process for adoptive parents. Participants’ descriptions of their parents’ actions and attitudes reveal that adoptive parents’ openness can vary along a continuum and over time. David’s parents exemplify this complexity. David’s parents did not tell him that he was adopted until he was 12 or 13 years old, which is significantly older than all the other participants were when they learned that they were adopted. It would be overly simplistic, though, to label David’s parents as having chosen a closed communication style when dealing with his adoption, for when they did finally tell him that he was adopted, they also informed him that they would support him if he ever chose to do a search for his biological relatives. David did decide to do a search in his adult years. As a result of that search, his adoptive mother and biological mother have met. David said that they were “both happy to have met,” that they had a “really nice” time together, and that both wanted to thank the other.
Adoptive parents are not the only ones who must manage the relational dialectics of openness and closedness. Adoptees must also manage this tension as they choose with whom and how to share their entrance narratives. This study’s second research question explored how adoptees share their entrance narrative with their own children. This study found that participants chose to be open with their own children that the parent was adopted. Interestingly, this openness was sometimes indirect, i.e. rather than the children being sat down and told directly by the parent, the children learned about the adoption as they listened to their parent openly talking with others.

Narrative theory provided the other theoretical framework for this study. In explaining narrative theory, Herman (2005) points out the etymology of the word “narrative.” Narrative’s Latin root is a verb meaning “to know” (p. 345). Indeed, narratives are a powerful vehicle for passing on knowledge. Narratives “shape and preserve memories” (Herman, 2005, p. 345); this is especially true in families. Adoptive families, in particular, shape identity through narrative because adoptive families are “discourse dependent” (Galvin, 2010, p. 326) in a way that families formed through birth are not. This study’s first research question sought to examine how adoptees construct the entrance narrative about their adoption. Participants’ reflections on that narrative confirm the literature that entrance narratives contain immense power for shaping identity (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011; Krusiecicz & Wood, 2001). The third research question sought to extend the literature by determining how the children of adoptees respond to their parent’s entrance narrative.
Adoptees’ Entrance Narratives

Three participants recalled the specific instance when their adoptive parents first told the entrance narrative; up to that moment, these adoptees did not know that they were adopted. Matthew said that he was five or six when “they stopped me in the kitchen and tell me this big news.” When David was 12 or 13, his parents told him, “We have something to discuss.” Melinda said that she was four or five, “Our neighbor was having a baby. And I must have been intrigued about it or something and was asking questions. [My mom] told me, ‘You didn't come from my belly like he did.’” For the other four participants who were adopted as infants, they could not recall the first instance when they were told their entrance narrative. When Debbie was asked how she first learned that she was adopted, she answered, “I can't tell you that because... I just always knew it.” These participants described their parents as being intentional about informing them that they were adopted and about starting to do so even before the child could remember those first conversations. Meredith said, “I don't ever remember a time I didn't know that I was adopted. My mother had told me right from the beginning, so I can't think when the time was or anything because I just always knew.”

Jason is one of the participants who said that he has “always known” that he is adopted. It is interesting to note what else he said that he has always known: “There's never been a time when I didn't know that I was special and adopted.” In telling their entrance narratives, several adoptees noted that their adoptive parents portrayed the adoptee as special. This went beyond the adoptive couple saying “they wanted a baby very much,” as Jason remembers his parents telling him. This specialness was not only
that the child was wanted but also that the child was chosen. Meredith recalled that her adoptive mother “told me that she went to the hospital, and she picked me out. There was a bunch of babies in there, and she picked me. I was a special one, and that the one she took was the special one that was in the nursery.” Melinda remembers her adoptive parents telling her, “We adopted you. We chose you. Out of all the babies in the world, we chose you.” Kranstuber and Kellas (2011) found that when entrance narratives included a “chosen child” theme, the child’s self-esteem increased. Those findings from an empirical study would not surprise Debbie, who said she “never had any negative feelings” about being adopted. Debbie related:

My parents said my brother picked me, picked me out. So I had this picture in my mind: a big room with lots of little white bassinettes with babies and them walking through and my brother walking around and picking me.

Debbie said that because she was adopted, “I felt more special. . . .[My adoptive parents] really wanted a baby, and God gave me to them and they were so lucky. . . So I was made to feel very special about it.” For Debbie, the combination of always knowing that she was adopted and of being told that she was special because she was adopted had a particularly positive effect: “I was glowing, feeling all special from day one.”

After telling their adoption story for this study, participants then described how they shared their adoption story with their children and how their children responded. Five themes emerged from the data: adoption stories are situated in time, open but indirect communication, “no big deal,” children of adoptees learn more about their parent’s adoption story as the adoptee does, and medical history: missing part of identity.
First Theme: Adoption Stories are Situated in Time

The first theme, adoption stories are situated in time, is consistent with the literature on narrative theory. In the classic *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Bal (2009) describes not just characters and space as key aspects of a story but also time as a key aspect. Bute and Jensen (2011) note that “narratives take shape in particular historical moments” (p. 216). Indeed, there is a larger narrative “in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history” (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 61).

In this study, when participants shared their adoption stories, they felt it was important to situate their story in time. In fact, Donald began his story by saying, “First of all, you have to remember in the late 40's, um, things were...” Participants frequently referred to how adoption used to be “back then” and “in those days.” In some cases, the time period the baby was born in necessitated the adoption. Meredith said, “My [unwed birth] mom wanted to keep me, but there was just no way back in those days for that to happen, so I was put up for adoption.” The time period when the adoption took place also determined how much information was available about the birth family. Melinda said, “Whenever I would ask a question, [my adoptive parents] would just tell me what they knew, which really was not a whole lot because I was born prior to 1980 when, in our state, everything was closed.” The time period of the adoption also determined if there was a stigma about being adopted. Meredith shared her recollections:

You know back in those days, you don't hear it so much nowadays, but I do remember this, back in those days, I used to hear people say adopted kids get bad blood, they disappoint their parents, they're dysfunctional, they don't have feelings, they're dumb, they don't know how to love. Well, I'll tell you what: that's not true [chuckles].
With such stigmatization, it is not surprising then that adoption was hush hush. Meredith said of adoption, “In those days--this was 72 years ago--they didn't talk much about it.” In fact, adoptions could be so secretive that some children may never have been told they were adopted. Tom recounted that in the geographic area where he grew up, the county’s adoption records were stolen, so the police called him, along with other adoptees from that area, trying to get a lead. Tom said, “A lot of people were finding out they were adopted I'm sure that didn't know. [Laughs] That goes back to that period of time, you know, fifties, sixties.”

Participants situated their adoption stories as taking place “in those days,” but obviously the telling of their story occurs in the present day. That makes for an interesting communicative dynamic when adoptees share their adoption stories with their children because their contexts are so different. The speaker and the listener have experienced starkly different adoption eras. Melinda and her children illustrate this contrast well. Melinda said, “Growing up. . . .I knew very few people that were adopted. I was the only one in my school that I knew of.” In comparison, her children have multiple friends who are adopted. Further, Melinda’s adoption was closed, and she has no idea who her birth parents are. Her children’s friends, however, have regular contact with both their adoptive and birth families. Thus, Melinda’s children find it puzzling that she does not know who her birth parents are. She described a conversation with her children:

It's so different now than what it was back then, so I don't think they really understand why we don't know who [my birth parents] are. Because, like they know, well that's [friend’s] birth mom and then that's their adopted mom, and they see them both. “Who's your birth mom?”
Thus, a parent’s adoption story can cause cognitive dissonance for a child because there is such a difference in adoption attitudes and laws today versus “back then.”

Second Theme: Open but Sometimes Indirect Communication

The second theme centers around open communication. The literature has not explored the openness of adoptees with their children, but studies have clearly shown the value of adoptive parents using open communication when discussing adoption with their adopted child. This research began with Kirk’s foundational work in 1964 and continues to today with the work of Brodzinsky (2006), Howe and Feast (2003), and Harrigan (2010). While the evidence shows that open communication is best, adoptive families can still struggle with the tension of what Baxter’s (2004) relational dialectics theory calls the opposing desires of openness and closedness. As most of the participants in this study had parents who chose communication patterns that fell on the open side of the continuum, it is not surprising that the adoptees chose to practice open communication with their own children. Even for Tom, whose parents’ chose a more closed style of communication not wanting to talk about the adoption and harboring secrets about the adoption, he intentionally chose open communication as a reaction against his parents’ closed communication. Tom is married to a fellow adoptee, but her parents used an open communication style. When asked if they had thought, prior to their daughter being born, how they wanted to tell her that both her parents were adopted, Tom said, “I don’t think. . . .either of us thought it was a question of whether we would tell her or not. . . .Because of my bad experiences and Debbie's good experiences, it was all the explanation we would
have needed to treat it as common knowledge.” Thus, participants overwhelmingly chose an open communication style when talking about their adoption with their children.

When asked how her children learned about her adoption, Linda said, “It's never been a secret,” and Rebekah similarly answered, “It was never something I was trying to keep from them.” Indeed, all the participants indicated that their children knew that one of their parents had been adopted.

Further, the adoptees indicated that their children learned this information because of the parent’s openness. Parents often described their adoption-related communication as beginning when the child was very young, as being natural, and as providing as complete a story as possible. An example of a parent describing adoption-related communication as beginning when the child was very young is Jason who said, “I told them very early.” Several others said that they told their children so early that mommy or daddy was adopted that, as Linda said about her children, “they wouldn't remember not knowing that.” Parents described this adoption-related communication as being natural—both when the child first learned that a parent was adopted “in the natural course of talking” (Matthew) and when the parent’s adoption comes up in ongoing conversations. “It's just natural in conversation sometimes” (Linda). In these conversations, parents sought to provide a complete story, rather than withholding information. Meredith said, “I just told them everything.” For many of the participants, though, this “everything” was limited because the adoptees knew so little about their birth parents or the circumstances that led to them being placed for adoption. To provide her children with all the information that she knew, Melinda withdrew from her lockbox a
letter that had been written by the adoption agency at the time of her adoption. The letter briefly describes her biological parents in a “kind of a non-specific rundown on who they were without giving too much away.” Even Donald, who was adopted at eight years old and remembers his birth family, was limited in what he was able to share about the circumstances of his adoption though he desired to be candid with his children:

As far as sitting down and talking with them, since we were a sit-down-around-the-dinner-table-and-talk-about-most-anything kind of family, yes, we would have talked about [my adoption], and I would have given them all the details that I knew, keeping in mind that there were some details that I didn't know. . . .”

All the participants in this study sought to be forthright with their children that adoption was part of their family tree.

It was surprising, however, that this forthrightness was not always direct communication between the parent and the child. Rather, a few parents described situations where they openly discussed their adoption in contexts that allowed the child to hear. For example, when Debbie and Matthew were asked if their daughter knew details about their adoptions and their birth families, Matthew said, “She knows all these things have been said in front of her. . . because we would talk about it openly like with our neighbor at a holiday dinner or something. So it was in front of her.” When Meredith, who was conceived through rape, was asked if her children knew about the assault, she answered affirmatively and added, “And the reason why I know my daughter knew it [is] because she was sitting in one time when I was giving my talk” at a social service agency.
Third Theme: “No Big Deal”

The “no big deal” theme is unique to this study as the response of the second generation to an adoption is a new research area among communication scholars.

Participants were asked how their children reacted to learning that their parent was adopted, how the child has responded to that information over time, and what the long-term impacts have been. Participants had little to say in response to these questions (even when probed). They were not being reticent; their lack of talkativeness simply pointed to the truth that the children have said little about their parent’s adoption.

Rebekah’s description of her children summarizes the situation: “They've not questioned [my adoption story] or like even mentioned it since that day we sat down and explained it. So I don’t think that they really give it a whole lot of thought either.”

Parents often described their children’s reaction to learning that mommy or daddy was adopted as mild curiosity. Jason’s daughter was “a little bit curious.” Donald’s children reacted with “childlike interest, looking at me as kind of something a little unique, you know. . . ‘well how interesting.’” David said that because having a parent who is adopted is “out of the ordinary,” his children “were surprised and then curious about the mystery.”

For some children, as soon as their initial questions were answered, they never revisited the story again. Only Linda’s child seemed troubled by the adoption story—not because his mother was adopted but because it caused him to realize that sometimes biological parents can no longer care for their children. Linda explained that her six-year-old “was worried if something would happen to us. [He] really wanted to know
what would happen to him. . . . He kept asking.” Thus, even this revisiting of adoption is not a revisiting of the parent’s entrance narrative. Jason gives a humorous suggestion of why his children have not revisited his adoption story: “At this point they've moved on to the next video game or whatever. They're more concerned about what level they're going to win on Shrek or on the Wii than they are about anything else.” Even in those families where the adoption did come up again, the participants said those conversations were “not frequent at all.”

When asked if their children were impacted by the fact that a parent is adopted, the participants generally answered no. Even for Meredith whose children are cognizant that they carry the genes of a rapist, she said “No, huh uh,” her children were not impacted. When pressed if there was any way they were impacted, her answer was the same: “No, I don’t think so.” Linda seemed to best capture the (non-existent) impact of a parent’s adoption on the child. In describing how her children have responded to her adoption, she said, “They just accept it, and it's no big deal.”

Fourth Theme: Children of Adoptees Learn More About Their Parent’s Adoption Story as the Adoptee Does

The fourth theme, children of adoptees learn more about their parent's adoption story as the adoptee does, illustrates a key principle in narrative theory: narratives are social constructions. Stores are “authored collaboratively” (Harding, 2012, p. 292), and they provide a way of “knowing together” (Poulos, 2009, p. 134). Families collaboratively construct and reconstruct their narratives.

It was striking that most of the adoptees in this study learned their adoption story
in two distinct phases. The first phase is when they were a child. Their parents told them their entrance narrative, i.e. the story of how and why they were adopted. These stories were often accurate but vague, e.g. that the birth mother “wasn’t able to take care of” the child. Adoptive parents rarely had any identifying information about the birth family. Most of the adoptees in this study believed that their adoptive parents had given them all the information that the parents had. However, since these details were scarce, some of the adoptees described themselves as having an insatiable curiosity during their growing up years. Tom said that once he learned he was adopted, “I was looking for details. I was looking for facts. Every day after that. . . always thereafter I wondered.” Meredith said, “I always wanted to know who my real mother was. Always. From the first day I found out, I wanted to find out who she was. . . I always wondered. I was always curious.” In fact, she recalled an ongoing experience that occurred when she was 14 years old: “I worked in the drugstore, and every lady that came in that store, I would wonder if that was my mom. Could that be her?”

At 42 years old, Meredith did meet her birth mother. Decades after Meredith learned her entrance narrative from her adoptive mother, Meredith learned the details of that adoption story from her birth mother. Meredith is an example of this phenomenon of adoptees learning their adoption story in two distinct phases. This second phase occurs during adulthood and is typically brought about as the result of one of three catalysts: an adoptive parent nearing the end of life, an adoptee conducting a search for the birth family, or the birth family conducting a search for the adoptee. Because these events occur during adulthood, the adoptee may already be a parent.
Three examples will illustrate how adoptees share their entrance narratives with their children as the adoptee learns more information about their own story in phase two. Donald said that when his adoptive mother was 90 years old, she felt that Donald “should really just know.” Donald was 67 years old at the time. He continued,

She wrote the whole thing down in a very personal letter and gave it to me and said, “I want you to put this away” and “I just felt that I wanted to really kind of give you all the background.”

Donald said that once his adoptive mother “shall we say like Paul Harvey, told the rest of the story” that he “re-discussed the details” of his adoption story with his children, who were now all over 35 years old, and “they were just as interested as if they were hearing if for the first time.”

Rebekah received a packet of information about her birth family within the past year. She was then faced with the decision whether to contact the birth family or not. She and her husband “talked about it” and “prayed about it” and then decided that she would contact her birth family. “It was at that point that we sat and explained [that I am adopted] to our boys” who are seven and six years old. “We told the boys that I was going to call this woman and her name is Betsy, and she's my biological grandmother.” Rebekah did not know how that phone call would go. She said it “was a little nerve racking” to call “this person out of the blue” and that she was “excited, but . . . scared.”

Even with these mixed emotions, Rebekah chose to bring her children into the unfolding story. This summer, Rebekah and her husband hope to take a cross-country trip to meet members of her birth family in person. She plans to take her children with her so that
they can meet members of her birth family when she does. Thus, Rebekah’s children will learn more about her entrance narrative even as she does—decades after the adoption.

David found his birth mother, Katherine, three years ago with the help of a volunteer group called the Search Angels. He has since met many members of his birth family, as have his wife and children. He does not know the identity of his birth father, however. “I haven’t asked Katherine, but I think the kids are kind of, ‘You should ask Katherine.’” This prompting illustrates the fascinating point that some children of adoptees not only witness a parent’s unfolding adoption story but also serve as the impetus for a more complete story being told.

Fifth Theme: Medical History: Missing Part of Identity

The fifth theme, medical history: missing part of identity, points to an area of research that is growing in popularity: the intersection of narrative theory and health communication. (See, for example, the collection of articles that Harter, Japp, and Beck assembled in 2005: Narratives, Health, and Healing: Communication Theory, Research, and Practice.) Much of the health communication research related to narrative theory has dealt with improving health promotions or improving interactions between health care providers and patients. Less work has been done on narrative theory and health identities. Cardillo (2010) has examined narratives as a powerful tool for helping people who grew up with chronic illness or disease to make sense of their experience and themselves. The work of Manoogian, Harter, and Denham (2010) is particularly relevant to adoption because they explored the “storied nature of health legacies” in families (p. 40). Their particular study focused on Type 2 Diabetes, which is a family disease that
can be disabling and deadly. The authors assert that “each generation becomes curators of their family legacies” (p. 50). When the curator is dealing with family health legacies, the researchers found that family members act as “intergenerational lynchpins” who change health legacies or they act as “intergenerational buffers” who silence health legacies (p.49). For adoptees who do not know their medical history, they are unwilling participants in intergenerational buffering.

Many of the participants expressed concern that because they are adoptees, their parenting is lacking in an area. Parents seemed to feel personal responsibility that they did not know their own medical histories and thus could not share this information with their children. This theme came up again and again, which is perhaps all the more surprising because none of the interview guide questions mentioned anything about health or medical histories. Clearly, this issue is salient among adoptees who are parents. In fact, one participant sat down and began discussing this issue before the interview had even officially begun!

For Matthew, medical history is an acute issue because both he and his wife are adopted. Matthew describes their unusual situation as parents:

It's interesting because when you have a child, the first thing they start asking you at the doctor's [are questions] about your family. They want to know your family background so they know what things they are looking for in this child. And, of course, both of us shrug.

While it is unusual to have both parents be adopted, it is not at all unusual for an adoptee to not have any health information on either of their birth parents, especially if the adoptee was born more than 30 years ago.
Matthew noted that there is a difference between not knowing your own health history and not being able to share that with your children:

You go to [the health care system], and they want to know family history for your medical records. Don't know. But that's a personal thing. You don't know, and you get used to not knowing. . . . but adding this other person now that you bring into the fray. . . .there is that part too where. . . I feel like, "I'm sorry, [Daughter], we weren't able to tell you these things."

When it comes to health information, Matthew is unable to perform the role of parents to be what Langellier (2006) calls the keepers of the kin, i.e. older family members who preserve family history by telling stories to subsequent generations.

Melinda echoes Matthew’s dilemma about being a parent who does not know one’s own health history: “I think that's where a lot of my questions come from. . . . not so much for me but for our kids.” Melinda further said that knowing so little of her adoption story “plagues” her. She shared poignantly about her interactions with health care providers.

And they're like, "Do you have any health history?"
"No, I don't" [laughs ruefully].
And especially, because I have three kids and actually we lost our fourth child. And they think that it was due to something autoimmune, and they were like, "If we had known, we might have been able to--"

Melinda longs to know her health history so that she can be prepared for what her children “can be up against.” Even prior to becoming a parent, Melinda wanted to know her health history and spent years conducting a search for her birth parents for this very reason. Even though on an adoption registry she indicated that she was seeking health information (as opposed to a reunion that some biological parents may not be comfortable with), her search has not been successful. This has prevented her from being
what Manoogian, Harter, and Denham (2010) call an “intergenerational lynchpin” (p. 50). These individuals actively disrupt devastating family health legacies by providing information to their at-risk family members and then working to change patterns. This intentional disruptiveness allows future generations to have “different roadmaps” and “more hope for the future” (p. 49).

For several of the participants, their children—whether hoped for or actual—served as the catalyst for the parent seeking to learn more about their own adoption story and particularly about their health history. Jason said, “I considered going to look for my birth family because I had a lot of health problems, especially as a child.” Jason’s health problems were severe for a solid decade, and he had to have brain surgery. He continued,

[I] started seeing my own mortality there for a while. I was thinking, well, if I do come out of this, I wanted to have a family someday but I need to know. . . . Is there a good chance that I’m going to be making a bunch of kids that have [medical disorder]. Because if so, I might adopt myself.

David was similarly spurred on to do a search for his children’s sake: “As far as the kids, I felt. . . you know, it's probably good to figure out some medical history at least, if there's anything we need to be aware of.” David said he is “really glad” to have met his birth mother, that she’s “really neat,” and that he hopes his relationship with her “continues to grow,” yet he also acknowledges, “If I would never had gotten married and had kids, I may very well never had taken the time or put in the effort to search.”
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This research study sought to answer three research questions. The first question examined how adoptees construct the entrance narrative about their adoption. Eight of the nine participants had been under three years old when they were adopted, so they were too young to act as “curators of their family legacies” (Manoogian, Harter, and Denham, 2010, p. 50). This curator role fell to adoptive parents who were responsible to tell the child his or her entrance narrative, i.e. the story of how and why the child was adopted. Participants constructed their entrance narrative as a re-telling of what their adoptive parents had told them as children. These stories had two components. In a typical version of an entrance narrative, the first component included a vague but accurate statement that the birth mother “wasn't able to take care of” the child. A fairly common version of the second component involved the adoptive parents’ declaring, “We adopted you. We chose you. Out of all the babies in the world, we chose you.” This communication about a child’s origins is powerful. Entrance narratives shape the child’s identity (Krusieicicz & Wood, 2001) and self-concept (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011), play a determining factor in the child’s behavior (Brodzinsky, 2006) and the quality of the
parent-child relationship (Kirk, 1964), and contribute to the child’s psychological wellbeing later in life (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004).

Because entrance narratives are so powerful, one might expect entrance narratives to be long and full of detail. Even the pilot study for this thesis showed that to be the case. That study, however, was quite limited. The study had only three participants; two of them happened to have quite dramatic entrance narratives. For example, a husband and wife from an Italian neighborhood wrote a letter to the president of Vietnam begging to adopt this child from the war-torn country. While it is a marvelous story, it does not represent the experience of most adoptees. Therefore, while the majority of participants in that study had dramatic entrance narratives, the ratio of two out of three should not be generalized. The most common situation for American adoptees who are 30-75 is that a couple wanted to have children but was infertile, so they adopted a child whose biological parents were not able to raise the child.

The reason that entrance narratives are shorter than one may expect could simply be due to the timing of when they are told. Most adoptive parents recognize the importance of telling a child that he or she is adopted at a very early age. To tell a small child about adoption in an age-appropriate way, the story must be simple and short. Thus, entrance narratives may be just a few sentences in length.

In spite of their brevity, these entrance narratives still possess richness for narrative theory scholars. One aspect of stories that narrative scholars examine is how significance is assigned through discourse. Storytellers assign significance to an element of the narrative by including greater detail about it, by devoting a greater portion of the
narrative to it, and/or by repetition and reiteration (Harding, 2012). Below are the two components of Meredith’s entrance narrative: why she was no longer with her biological family and how she came into her adoptive family. In both cases, Meredith is speaking; she is describing what her adoptive mother told her. Even a quick glance to compare the quotations will show which of the components Meredith’s mother gave more weight to.

Re: Biological family
She just said my mother was so young. She was 15. And she wasn't capable of taking care of me.

Re: Adoptive family
She told me that she went to the hospital, and she picked me out. There was a bunch of babies in there and she picked me. I was a special one, and that the one she took was the special one that was in the nursery.

By devoting more than twice as much of the narrative to the current family, Meredith’s mother allots more significance to the fact that Meredith was chosen for adoption than the fact that Meredith was given up for adoption. Further, Meredith’s mother employs greater detail and repetition to emphasize that Meredith was chosen and special.

Kranstuber and Kellas (2011) have found that when entrance narratives included a “chosen child” theme, the child’s self-esteem increased. Krusiecz and Wood (2001) have noted that adoptive parents must “discursively manage” the complex story of a child’s origin (p. 789). Meredith’s mother demonstrated deftness in the way she discursively managed Meredith’s entrance narrative to focus on the child being wanted, chosen, and special.

The second research question examined how adoptees share their entrance narratives with their own children. Participants universally chose to be open with their children that adoption was part of their family history. The participants had seen the
value of openness as a child—most participants because their adoptive parents had been open about the adoption, one participant because he was wounded through his adoptive parents’ closedness. The participants’ experience mirrors what researchers have found in several studies: openness in adoptive families correlates to a more positive experience while the child is living in the adoptive home, as well as to greater psychological wellbeing throughout life (Kirk, 1964; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Brodzinsky, 2006; Harrigan, 2010; Howe & Feast, 2003). Understandably, adoptees chose openness rather than closedness when deciding whether or not to tell their children that a parent was adopted.

The third research explored how the children of adoptees respond to their parent’s entrance narrative. Adoptees described their children’s initial reactions to learning of a parent’s adoption as mild curiosity; adoptees described the long-term effect of their adoption on their children as non-existent. In fact, the predominant theme from this study was that the children of adoptees consider their parent’s adoption “no big deal.” This can be attributed to two main reasons. The first reason is that the child is a generation removed from the major and life-transforming event of adoption. This distance allows the adoption to simply be part of the child’s family legacy. Thompson et al. (2009) found that though family stories told across generations are part of later generations’ identities, individuals choose to embrace and reject their family legacies on a continuum. This ability to reject part of one’s family legacy may explain why Meredith’s children do not seem to be affected by the fact that their biological grandfather was a rapist.
The second reason that the children of adoptees consider their parent’s adoption “no big deal” is because adoption is no longer stigmatized. This was certainly not the case decades ago. Meredith, who was the oldest participant, recalled what happened in her country school: “My cousin one day comes up to me and said, ‘YOU’RE adopted!’ I'll tell you the kids just went back and wouldn't be with me for days! They treated me like chicken pox.” Meredith was ostracized simply because she was adopted. She said that back then adoption was “pretty new to people.” In fact, she was the first adopted person in her church. Contrast that with what Linda said about the present: “There's lots of people that are adopted in our church. . . .It's almost like a fad, if I can say that.” (Linda clarified that she did not mean that negatively, just that “It's something that has caught on. . . .It's happening a lot.”) With adoption being so much more common now, the children of adoptees often know of multiple people who are adopted, not just their parent. This helps normalize adoption. When a child has multiple friends who are adopted, it is not surprising that they consider a parent’s adoption “no big deal.”

Limitations

This study had a number of limitations. Study findings should not be generalized as nine participants are not statistically significant. Further, the study had both sampling bias and self-selection bias. Sampling bias occurred because the participants do not necessarily represent a cross-section of the adoption population but rather happened to be notified of the study only if they passed through two filters: 1) they were known by someone in my networks, and 2) the people in my networks knew that these individuals were adopted. Thus, if some people keep their adoption a secret or if they consider it so
irrelevant that they never discuss it, their friends would not know they were adopted, and thus their friend who is also part of my network would not have contacted them to participate in this study. Once contacted, individuals who met the criteria then needed to agree to participate in the study and follow through in doing so. Thus, by its nature, this study included self-selection bias.

While the recruitment e-mails requested both adoptees and adult children of adoptees as participants, only one participant was an adult child of an adoptee. Thus, this study relied mostly on adoptees to describe their children’s reactions; in fact, the study reported directly from only one child of an adoptee. Interestingly, that one voice was just a lucky coincidence. She was referred to me because “she was adopted.” I do not think the person who made the referral even realized that the prospective participant was also the child of an adoptee. This makes sense given the findings of this study that, while adoptees report that the adoption affected their lives, the children of adoptees consider that adoption “no big deal.” It has so little impact on their lives that their friends may be completely unaware of it.

Another limitation of the study is that, as mentioned in the Participants section, all participants were White and were adopted by White families in domestic adoptions. Thus, the study lacks the voice of adoptees who are racial minorities, adopted cross-culturally, and/or adopted internationally. Further, all the participants were adopted by the normative adoptive family of the day: a heterosexual, married couple. Such were the standards in earlier decades that Donald could not be adopted by the 35-year-old single woman who had been caring for him for over three years, but he could be adopted by her
aging parents. Donald relates that it “was decided they would adopt me because Mom could not. She was single. And that was a hard and fast rule back then. It just could not happen.” While those plans were going forward, the woman received a marriage proposal. She was soon married, and the newlyweds adopted Donald. Hence, all the adoptees in this study were adopted by heterosexual married couples, but that is not the only type of adoptive parents today.

Future Research

While this study had limitations, it was valuable as it explored a communicative process that has received almost no investigation from researchers: how adoptees share their entrance narratives with their children. Future researchers can now extend this initial research in a number of directions, including interviewing more children of adoptees, recruiting more racially diverse participants, and seeking to give voice to those who were not adopted by the traditional adoptive family mold of an infertile heterosexual married couple seeking to adopt a newborn.

The changes in adoption laws and trends have not only changed the demographic of adoptive parents but they have also changed the dynamics between the birth family and the adoptive family. Prior to 30 years ago, unless it was a kinship adoption (e.g. a child being adopted by a grandparent), the norm for adoptions was that an agency acted as intermediary between the birth family and the adoptive family ensuring that the two parties would never find out the identity of the other. Beginning in the 1980s, these closed adoptions were no longer the only option. Having an open adoption was now a
possibility. This trend grew, and today the majority of adoptions are open; in fact, only 5% of current adoptions are closed (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Last year, The Wall Street Journal began an article about open adoptions with this lead:

As Susan Edwards and Scott Cargle last month held their adopted newborn daughter Lydia in the hospital in Greenbrae, Calif., like all parents, they wondered what her future would hold. But some things they knew for certain: With an open adoption, they will visit with their daughter's birth mother at least once a year, phone her at least twice a year and exchange a minimum of two emails a year with photos and updates. They will also take a group picture every time they meet. (Stein, 2012, para. 1-2)

The article then went on to explain that in about half of the states in America, birth and adoptive families can opt to enter an enforceable contractual agreement about the two families’ level of communication with each other and the adoptee. Should a problem arise, the contract dispute can be settled through mediation or, if need be, the courts.

While open adoptions are now ubiquitous and sometimes legally clear-cut, the long-term effects of these open adoptions are not known, especially for the second generation. Children adopted through open adoption are just now becoming old enough to have their own children. The stories these adoptees tell their children will be completely different than the stories my participants told their children. My participants, born during the closed adoptions era, told their children something like, “My biological mother couldn’t take care of me, so she put me up for adoption.” Adoptees born during this new open adoptions era may add something like, “Twice a year, we'll all visit with my birth mother.” Researchers have never before had the opportunity to explore the impact of open adoptions on the second generation. For Communication scholars
especially, this area is full of possibilities. Family communication scholars now have the opportunity to study the (legally-binding) communicative events between biological and adoptive families over multiple generations.
REFERENCES


Richardson, B. (2000). Recent concepts of narrative and the narratives of narrative theory. Style 34, 168–175.


APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

December 14, 2012

Heather Rule
6739 Aferhust Trace
Middletown Heights, Ohio 44130

From: Sharon McWhorter, IRB Administrator

Re: IRB Number 20121210 "Openness in Adoption Narratives Told to the Second Generation"

Thank you for submitting your IRB Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects for the referenced project. Your application was approved on December 13, 2012. Your protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and matches the following federal category for exemption:

☐ Exemption 1 – Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.

☐ Exemption 2 – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior.

☐ Exemption 3 – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, but subjects are not harmed or are not involved in activities that do not fall within the approved exemption categories.

☐ Exemption 4 – Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.

☐ Exemption 5 – Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.

☐ Exemption 6 – Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study’s design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects or include activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, please contact me to discuss whether or not a new application must be submitted. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. This office will hold your exemption application for a period of three years from the approval date. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit another Exemption Request. If the research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Cc: Kathleen D. Clark - Advisor
Cc: Valerie Cisselnan – IRB Chair

Approved consent form is enclosed
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent to Participate in a Research Study:
Openness in Adoption Narratives Told to the Second Generation

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Heather Rule, a graduate student in the School of Communication at The University of Akron. The purpose of this study is to learn more about adoption as a lifelong experience. The study will focus on how adoptees communicate their adoption story to the second generation.

There will be eight to ten study participants. Participants must be 1) at least 18 years old and 2) an adoptee with at least one child or the adult child of an adoptee. Participants will be interviewed for approximately one hour. Questions will focus on adoptees’ adoption stories, how adoptees shared their story with their child(ren), and how their child(ren) responded. Interviews will be audio taped.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study, but your participation may help us better understand adoption. There are no known risks. If participants feel emotional discomfort during the interview, they will be given the option to postpone or stop the interview.

Your signed consent form will be kept in a separate file so that no one will be able to link your interview responses to you. Only the researcher, faculty advisor, and transcriber will have access to the audio tapes or transcripts. Once the interviews are transcribed, the audio files will be deleted. In any publication or presentation of the research results, pseudonyms will be used, and any identifying information will be replaced.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Heather Rule at hr16@zips.uakron.edu or Dr. Clark at 330.972.7485. This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Akron Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the IRB at 330.972-7666.
Please indicate your agreement to participate in this study as explained above by signing below:

____________________________________                                ____________________
Participant Signature                                      Date
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDES

ADOPTEES

We’ll start with your adoption story.

1) Tell me about how you first learned of your adoption.
   [Make sure to find out their age at the time of the story, who told them the story, and what they were told.]

2) How did you make sense of your adoption story? Were there parts that you liked or disliked or that you thought were confusing?

3) Did you learn more over time about your adoption? Was this new information consistent with the original story that you were told?

4) What do you think about the way that your adoptive parents communicated with you about your adoption?

5) What else would you like to tell me about your adoption story?

Let’s transition to your children.

6) How did your children learn that you were adopted?
7) Is that how you planned for them to learn about your adoption?
    • If not, what had your plan been?
8) Would you have done anything differently?
9) How did you decide how much detail to share about why you were placed for adoption?
10) What was their reaction to learning that you were adopted?
11) What parts resonated with them?
12) What were they curious about?
13) How were they emotionally affected?
14) Have they wanted to revisit that story?
15) What prompts that conversation?
16) What happens in the re-telling of the story?
17) Do you think your children were impacted by learning about your adoption?
    • How so?
    • What are the long-term impacts on your children from hearing your adoption story?
18) Has anything surprised you about how they reacted or how they are impacted?
19) Have your children wanted more information about your birth family than you knew at the time?
20) How have you handled this?
21) Do your children have contact with anyone in your birth family?
22) How would you describe those relationships?
23) Have your children discussed your adoption story with your biological family?
24) Have your children discussed your adoption story with your adoptive parents?
25) What else would you like to tell me about the impact of your adoption on your children?

A couple last questions as we wrap up...

26) Few studies have been done about adoptees’ children. Do you know what experience other adoptees have had sharing their adoption story with their children?
27) What else do you think I should know about adoption stories and the second generation?
1) Tell me about how you first learned that one of your parents was adopted.

   [Make sure to find out their age at the time of the story, who told them the story, and what they were told.]

2) What was your reaction to learning that your parent was adopted?

3) What parts of the story resonated with you?

4) Are there parts of the story that surprised you?

5) What were you curious about?

6) How were you emotionally affected?

7) What do you think it was like for your parent to tell you their adoption story?

8) How do you think your parent planned for you to find out about the adoption?

9) How does that compare with what did happen?

10) How do you wish that he/she had done things?

11) Do you think that the story you were told is the same story that your parent was told?

   ● If not, how do you think it was different?

   ● Why did your parent choose to tell it differently?

12) Do you think that your parent has withheld any details about the adoption from you?

   ● Why do you think he/she made that decision?

13) Have you wanted to revisit the adoption story?

14) What prompts that conversation?

15) What happens in the re-telling of the story?
16) How do you think you are impacted by your parent’s adoption story?

- What about long-term impacts?

17) Have you been surprised by your own reactions or feelings about the adoption?

18) Do you think your parent expected you to respond to the story in a certain way?

- How did your response match or differ from that?

19) Have you wanted more information about your biological grandparents than your parent knows?

20) How have you handled this?

21) Do you have contact with anyone in your parent’s biological family?

- How would you describe those relationships?

- Have you discussed your parent’s adoption story with his/her biological family?

22) Have you discussed your parent’s adoption story with his/her adoptive parents (your grandparents)?

23) What else would you like to tell me about the impact of your parent’s adoption story on you?

A couple last questions as we wrap up…

24) Few studies have been done about adoptees’ children. Do you know what experience other children of adoptees have had with a parent’s adoption story?

25) What else do you think I should know about adoption stories and the second generation?