An autoethnography of an adoptee's search for, and reunion with, her birth family while pursuing higher education

by

Amy Elizabeth Sellers

B.A., Truman State University, 2009
M.A.E., Truman State University, 2010

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Affairs
College of Education

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Abstract

Adoption has been an important way to create families over the years. While there has been a shift in recent years to encourage open adoptions, where the biological and adoptive families stay in contact after the adoption, many adoptees are coming from closed adoptions, where there is no contact or information shared about the biological family until the adoptees reach the appropriate age to search (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association [IFAPA], 2014). These adoptees often come of legal age to search while pursuing higher education, and while there is significant research on adopted children, specific research on adopted college students who have searched, or are searching, for their biological families is lacking.

In this qualitative study, I investigated my experience of searching for my biological family while pursuing higher education in both undergraduate and graduate school. This research is grounded in several methodological frameworks, including Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood theory, Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, and Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory. I utilized autoethnography as the methodology for this study. I, the researcher, am also the primary participant in and focus of this study, and I utilized data from my own personal journal entries, documentation, publications, and photographs. Through my research, I found three themes that describe my search and reunion process: adoptee search letdown, adoptee search benefit, and adoptee search identity. This research is pertinent to higher education professionals because there will be adopted college students on every campus who will need to be supported as they might experience adoptee search letdown and adoptee search benefit. Adopted college students are experiencing identity development with an added layer of not knowing their biological family, and when the search for that biological family happens in

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Approved by:

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Dr. Christy Craft

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Dedication

Since my research is about my adoption story, I would like to dedicate my dissertation to all members of my family: my adoptive family, my birth family, and my chosen family. To my birth mom, for making the best decision you knew to make for a child you did not know. To her sister, for answering questions and supporting me along this journey with stories, pictures, and family treasures. To her daughter, for making that first step in reaching out to get to know me, and for continuing our communication today.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

This chapter focuses on the relevant literature and history behind adoption, followed by the rationale for this research. While there is a lot of research on adopted children and the effects of being adopted based on one's identity, there is a gap in the literature on adopted college students and the lived experiences of adopted students who search for their biological families during their pursuit of higher education. In this research, I utilized Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood theory, Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality to frame the study. This study is important for higher education personnel because, while only 2% of children are adopted in the United States, 60% of United States citizens have a personal connection to adoption and may be affected by an adoption search during college as a sibling, friend, or an adoptee themselves (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association [IFAPA], 2014). Therefore, higher education practitioners would be well-served to better understand the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students who have been adopted, especially those searching for their birth families at the same time that they are pursuing higher education, in order to provide necessary support to them.

Brief Overview of Adoption

While adoption is not a new concept, it is important to differentiate between the types of adoption. There are two basic types of adoption: closed and open adoptions. Closed adoptions do not allow contact between the birth parents and the adoptive parents until the adoptee is of legal age; whereas, open adoptions do allow some form of contact, ranging from "picture and letter sharing, to phone calls, to contact through an intermediary, to open contact" between the birth parents, adoptee and the adoptive family (IFAPA, 2014, p. 22). Before the 1970s, the idea of a closed adoption helped protect the secrecy and illegitimacy of unwed mothers, shelter the

adoptees, and shield the adoptive parents from the interference of birth parents. After the 1970s, however, a shift occurred allowing open adoptions and encouraging adoptees to search for their birth families when they reached the appropriate age to do so. Since this phenomenon of open adoptions is fairly recent, there is not much research regarding the impact adoption searches have on the development of the adoption triad: the adoptee, the birth family, and the adoptive family (Ge et al., 2008). The adoption triad will be affected whether it is a closed or open adoption, meaning there can be contact or communication between some of the triad, if not all three (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). For instance, communication could be just between the adoptive parents and the birth parents until age 18, when the adoptee has legal rights to know their biological family. While proponents of open adoptions say that such adoptions could lessen the voids of unknown answers, opponents of open adoption say it could be more confusing for the child because they were given up, while members of their birth family keep trying to be a part of their lives.

While open adoptions are a growing trend to keep communication alive between the adoption triad, this research will focus on my lived experiences as an adoptee in a closed adoption. Adopted students and their stories are important to higher education professionals because it is during their pursuit of higher education that an adoptee might first have the freedom or motivation to search for their biological family. For the most part, many college students have turned 18, the legal age to begin opening their sealed adoption record. Often, it is the first time they are away from their adoptive family, which might spark interest in searching for their birth family or at least seeking out answers to questions about their medical history or their birth story. "People can't escape the fact of being adopted any more than they can avoid the fact of being blond or introverted or raised by a single mother. It is part of their personal history; it helped

make them who they are" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 21). Our personal stories tell of change, of letting go, and of what matters the most to us (Jones, 2011). What has mattered the most to me throughout my life is my continuously-evolving adoption story. By investigating my own lived experiences through this autoethnography, I showcased the salience and nuances of my own search process for, and reunion process with, my biological family during my pursuit of higher education.

Statement of the Problem

In higher education today, there are many studies on different college student identities, like race, religion, gender, sexuality, or the intersectionality between many identities (Wilson, 2011). Being adopted is a salient identity for many adoptees, and becomes evident in their college years when they are learning about many other aspects of their identity at the same time. Theories of adoptive identity development answer the following questions: "What does being adopted mean to me, and how does this fit into my understanding of myself, relationships, family and culture" (Grotevant et al., 2017, p. 2196)? For adoptees in a closed adoption, college is the first time they can legally search for their biological family. However, there is a lack of research on the lived experiences of adopted college students who choose to search for their biological family while in college. While only about 2% of children are adopted, many more are affected by adoption through means of being an adoptive sibling, a biological sibling, a grandchild, or a friend to an adopted person (Nickman et al., 2005). The general problem is that there is not extensive research when it comes to adopted college students who have searched for their biological family, leaving higher education practitioners to wonder how to best work with adopted college students who are going through that process. While Grotevant et al. (2017) have

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studied adoptive identity and adjustment from adolescence through emerging adulthood, they did not specifically study adoptees in this life stage who are searching for their biological families.

Moreover, there is even less research focused on adopted college students who have searched, or who are searching, for their biological families during their pursuit of higher education. While an adoptee might have different reasons to search, the motivation behind the search is always to find some semblance of answers. Not knowing answers to simple questions about medical history, their own birth story, or who they look like often ignites the spark of an adoptee to start such a search, oftentimes during young adulthood while pursuing higher education (Brodzinsky et al., 1993).

Significance and Purpose of the Study

College is a time for tremendous growth, development, and identity formation for students (Arnett, 2000). In this study, I, as an adoptee, delved further into my search for, and reunion with, my biological family during my undergraduate and graduate years. Through journals, emails, adoption documents, and personal publications, I researched my own experiences as an adoptee throughout my pursuit of higher education.

Much of the existing research on adopted children focuses on childhood development (Neil, 2009); communication between the adoption triad: birth family, adoptee, and adoptive family (Ge et al., 2008); and transracial and trans-ethnic acculturation for adopted children into a family of different race (Brocious, 2014). However, there is little research on the lived experiences of adopted students in college, a crucial time period and the start of their emerging adulthood. College is already a time of developing one's independence, deciding career goals, and learning how to live alone (Arnett, 2000). For students who are in a closed adoption and who can legally begin to search for their birth families at age 18, college is both the first time they can

search for their birth families and the first time they are living away from their adoptive families (IFAPA, 2014). Whether or not their adoptive families are supportive of the search for adoptees' birth families can help or hinder their decision to begin searching in college (Ge et al., 2008). Being adopted is a characteristic not immediately apparent to the outside world, and searching for one's biological family can be an insular process dependent on who the adoptee decides to involve.

My research was conducted as autoethnography, as I sought to understand and describe my search process through a deep and thorough analysis of my lived experiences (Bhattacharya, 2013). The theoretical frameworks that I used were emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000), transition theory (Schlossberg, 2011); and research on liminality (Turner, 1969). My research can help inform researchers and scholars in the adoption arena, as well as help start discussions on why adoption research is important to higher education personnel. My research started with the acknowledgement of my own subjectivities: my opinion on adoption, my assumptions with regard to my search process, my lived experiences as a transracial adoptee, and my expectations from my research. These subjectivities helped me to guide, to develop, and to dig deeper into my research questions about my own adoption story in college. I also utilized triangulation of data, member checks, and peer debriefing in order to add credibility to my research.

In my autoethnographic research, I dug deeper into my own experiences and highlighted how the identity of being adopted never goes away. There are times when it is more prevalent and a more salient part of my identity, and there are times when I do not think about it at all. Higher education, both the undergraduate and the graduate years, can be a time where its salience comes forward as adoptees seek to answer questions like, "Who am I?" and "Where did I come from?" These questions could prompt the desire to search for one's biological family.

Searching can both mean active searching and passive searching, dependent on many factors in their life, such financial, emotional, and familial support (Brodzinsky et al., 1993).

The purpose of this study was to explore my search process for, and my reunion with, my birth family throughout my undergraduate and graduate school years. The research question that guided this qualitative study was: What was the lived experience of one adopted student who searched for her biological family during her undergraduate and graduate higher education?

Definition of Terms

Adopted college student— A student in college who was adopted and raised by a family
other than their biological family

Adoptee – A person who joins a family through adoption (IFAPA, 2014)

Adoption – The legal process of becoming a parent to a non-biological child (IFAPA, 2014)

Adoption triad – The birth family, the adoptive family, and the adoptee (Brodzinsky et al., 1993)

Adoptive Family – The family into which one is adopted (IFAPA, 2014)

Adoptive Identity Development – How an adoptee can "reflect on the meaning of adoption or
actively engage in a process of gathering information or decision-making about what
adoption means in his or her life" (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011, p. 394)

Biological or Birth Family – The family into which one was born (IFAPA, 2014)

Closed Adoption – An adoption where there is no contact between the birth parents and the
adoptive parents (IFAPA, 2014)

Foster Family – A family with whom one lives temporarily (IFAPA, 2014)

Liminality – The sense of belonging and not belonging; when someone is betwixt and between
two major life events (Turner, 1969)

Multidimension Identity Model (MIM) – An identity development model that focuses on

integrating one's identities, rather than the intersection of one's identities (Pope & Reynolds, 2017)

Open Adoption – An adoption that allows some form of association between the birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents. This can range from picture and letter sharing, phone calls, contact through an intermediary, to open contact between the parties themselves (IFAPA, 2014).

Transracial Adoptee – Someone who is adopted into a family of a different race (Baden, 2002).

Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the background to the adoption process and how adoption has become a more acceptable way to create a family in recent years. The rationale behind this study is the fact that much of the current research about adoption focuses on childhood development (Neil, 2009) and communication between the adoption triad: birth family, adoptee, and adoptive family (Ge et al., 2008). Transracial and trans-ethnic acculturation for adopted children into a family of different race is also a major focus in today's adoption research (Brocious, 2014). However, there is little research on the lived experiences of adopted college students pursuing higher education, which is a crucial time period and the start of their emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

As an adoptee who went through the birth family search process during college, I had the resources, from my journals, email exchanges, and adoption paperwork, to conduct an in-depth autoethnographic, qualitative study to reveal insights into my own experiences searching for my biological family during my undergraduate and graduate school years. The research was conducted as I analyzed my email communication, personal publications, and familial relationships and interactions with both my birth and adoptive families. This research is

important in higher education today as adoptees gain access to search for their biological families when they turn 18 as they begin their college journey. The next chapter dives into the history of adoption, the empirical literature on the adoption triad as well as adoptees who choose to search for their biological family, and adoptive identity through marginalization and transracial adoption.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The following sections provide an overview of the current literature on adoption as it relates to this research. In the first section, I reviewed literature written on the search process for adoptees, which provides insights about the typical searcher, the search process, the adoption triad through the lenses of attachment and adjustment, the idea of the family romance fantasy, and the attributes of control and resiliency throughout the search process. In the next section, I reviewed literature written on adoptee identity through the ideas of mattering and marginality, followed by the impact that physical appearance has on adoptees. Finally, in the last section, I reviewed literature written on transracial adoptees through the lenses of liminality and the sense of loss that comes along with being adopted as well as how the Multidimension Identity Model plays into an adoptee's search process (Pope & Reynolds, 2017).

Historical Background

Adoption has been an important form of family creation for centuries. The philosophies behind it have varied throughout the years, and while it used to cause shame and embarrassment to both the biological parents and the infertile adoptive parents, it has now become a public and admirable way to create a family (Ge et al., 2008). Thanks to advocates like Governor Michael Dukakis and Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, legislative acts have been put into place that advocate for adoption at a national level and for transracial adoption at both a national and international level (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994). Over the years, there has been much research on adopted children and youth through the lens of adjustment, attachment, and now, transracial adoption, but there is a notable gap on research of adopted college students who were adopted and raised by another family other than their biological family (Grotevant et al., 2017). In this chapter, I will address some of that literature.

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Adoption Laws

For many people, the month of November signifies fall, football, and food. Along with being a time to celebrate friends and family, it is also time to celebrate everyone touched by adoption because, in 1995, November became National Adoption Month (Clinton, 1995). This adoption advocacy started long before then; in 1976, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis announced the need to promote awareness of children in foster care through an adoption week (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Following his declaration, President Ronald Reagan enacted Proclamation 5280, in which he declared November 19-25, 1984 as National Adoption Week (Reagan, 1984). Over a decade later, President Bill Clinton followed suit by enacting Proclamation 6846 as National Adoption Month in order to encourage people to participate in programs that help find permanent homes for every American child in foster care. Along with being an adoption advocate and an adoptee himself, President Clinton also signed the Multiethnic Placement Act into law in October 1994, which helped to facilitate adoption for all children and families, regardless of their race or ethnic origin (Clinton, 1995). The goal of this act was to eliminate the barriers keeping children of certain races and abilities from being adopted. It was also meant to eliminate the barriers preventing parents of certain races or sexualities from adopting or becoming foster parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994).

Racism has permeated our society through many facets, and the adoption process is no exception. In the 1940s and 1950s, children who were Hispanic, Black, or biracial, along with children who had physical or psychological disabilities were deemed "unadoptable" because they did not fit the profile of the "ideal" child (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 184). Therefore, agencies in the 1960s who struggled to have these children adopted deemed them "hard to place"

(Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 184). Today, those same "hard to place" children, who have AIDS, whose mothers were drug addicts, or who are refugees from war-torn countries are called "special needs" children (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 184). Thanks to the adoption advocacy efforts of Presidents Reagan and Clinton, today's adoption system prohibits discrimination based on race or ethnicity, allowing more children and parents to become family. Now, single women and men, gay couples, biracial couples, and people over thirty-five have more support in the adoption process than they have in the past.

Since the enactment of National Adoption Week and National Adoption Month, adoption advocate Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's, has helped found National Adoption Day, the Saturday before Thanksgiving in November, through the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. This is a day to raise national "awareness of the more than 110,000 children in foster care waiting to find permanent, loving families" (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2018b). Dave Thomas was urged to become a national spokesperson for adoption by President H.W. Bush in the 1990s, as he was a prominent public figure and an adoptee himself. Since its inception in 1999, National Adoption Day has helped nearly 75,000 children find their forever home in over 400 cities nationwide (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2018a). These changes in advocacy and law have helped encourage adoption among all races, which has increased the amount of international and transracial adoption threefold from the 1970s to the 2000s (Lee et al., 2006). This increase in adoptions affects the growing rate of college students that come from adopted families (Grotevant et al., 2017).

Not only has there been a push for awareness of adoption and foster care through various proclamations from Presidents Reagan and Clinton, there is also need for adoption law reform for adoptees' rights. For a long time, adoptees were legally denied access to their own biological

records. As these adoption issues become more prevalent, there is a growing number of adult

adoptees who express a desire to gain information about their biological parents. They claim

their human rights are being violated and that it is an affront to human dignity to impede their

deep-felt desire to fulfill their search and learn about their origins. Whether the law should

protect the rights of the biological mother versus the rights of the adoptee is a continued public

debate. However, laws like the 1998 Measure 58 in Oregon, which allowed adult adoptees access

to their original biological certificate without exception, became a "milestone in the history of

the adoption reform movement" (Carp & Wegar, 2002, p. 454). There is now more public

support for adult adoptees in Kansas, Alaska, and Alabama, the only states who never allowed

sealed adoption records, that also allow unconditional access for adoptees to their biological

records (Strauss, 1994). Allowing measures like these to pass have been instrumental to the

adoption reform movement.

As evidenced by the research on adoptees during their emerging adulthood period,

college is a time when adoptees first gain the legal freedom to search for their biological family.

For many, this period of emerging adulthood directly correlates with their higher education

experience (Arnett, 2000). Although, most traditional-aged students (18-24 years old) experience

identity development during college, adopted college students have the added pressure of not

knowing their biological story, their biology, or who they look like. As Krueger and Hanna

(1997) pointed out, "[all] adoptees search for their roots, even if it is only at a psychological

level [by way of attempting] to ground oneself in the reality of one's origins and form a

conceptualization from which one can construct one's own reality-based adoptions story" (p.

197). Higher education professionals should realize that more than half their students will be

touched by adoption in some way. Therefore, it is imperative that they know how to support college students who are touched by adoption (Carp & Wegar, 2002).

Adoption Research

The following sections outline much of the existing research about adoption and how that research focuses on adopted children and transracially-adopted children (Brocious, 2014). This review of the literature will demonstrate where more research is needed. Due to the ease in proximity of finding and following children who have been recently adopted, there are more studies on young children and transracially-adopted children than there are on college-aged students, about whom there is a noticeable gap in the literature.

Children

Approximately 2% of children, birth through 18 years old, in the United States are adopted. About 67% of those children are placed in homes of biologically unrelated parents, while the remaining children are adopted to stepparents or relatives (Nickman et al., 2005). Since adopted children are more easily identifiable through adoption agencies, social workers, and more up-to-date records than adopted adults, there is extensive research available on effects of attachment and adjustment on adopted children (Brodzinsky et al., 1984). Research shows that it is best that preschool-aged adopted children know about their adoption to show how their separateness of being adopted makes them unique; in early childhood, their adoption story is generally told with emphasis on the happiness the adoption brought to the adoptive parents. It is after this period, during the primary school years, that children begin to understand that in order to have been chosen, they had to have been first given away. Those children then begin to grieve for the loss of the birth parents (Brodzinsky et al., 1993).

The adolescent adoptee then not only grieves for the loss of the birth parents but for the loss of a sense of self, when the ego identity takes over during this developmental period. During this time of rapid growth, the adolescent must face the problem of genealogical bewilderment (Sobol et al., 1994). This unknown genealogy and biology can entice adoptees to begin the search for their biological family in order to find answers to those life-long questions of physical characteristics, genetic history, and birth stories (Lifton, 1979). As young adult adoptees set free to leave home, they must decide whether or not the psychological bond of their adoptive family is strong enough to hold that family together, as the search for their biological family affects the whole adoption triad: the adoptee, the biological family, and the adoptive family.

These stages of growth for the adopted child bring problems that many adopted children face, like attachment problems or developmental delays. The physical aspect of their birth, such as low birth weight, poor prenatal care, or chronic malnutrition, can address some of those problems while others can stem from the emotional well-being of the adopted child. The emotional trauma of adoptees can result from being placed in a home with non-adopted siblings versus biological siblings, going through many different foster homes, and the age at the time of the official adoption. Some studies have shown that these factors can have a negative impact on the child's development, while others demonstrate that adopted children have certain strengths such as "a higher score in prosocial behavior" and "fewer social problems and withdrawn behavior as compared with norms" (Nickman et al., 2005, p. 991). It is with both these positive and negative factors that an adopted child can have a successful developmental process.

Unfortunately, there are many other physical factors that can affect development. For example, while many adopted children experience trauma from being taken from their biological caregiver, other adopted children face physical and psychological traumas by being born with

AIDS, being born addicted to drugs, or having fetal-alcohol syndrome. Many of these "special needs" children are placed with non-traditional families such as single women and men, couples who already have biological children, or gay couples (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 182). While these children often experience adjustment and attachment issues due to the foster care drift, being placed with nontraditional families can often offer more flexibility and understanding with these "special needs" children (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 184). The hardest time for these children to be adopted is between six months and three years, because it is during this time that the child establishes trust and security with their caretakers. However, if they are taken away during this age, they lack the physical, social, and linguistic development to express the sadness and anger that they might be experiencing. While it is true that very young children struggle during the adoption process, research suggests that transracial and international adoption can add another layer of complexity for the adoptee.

Transracial Adoption

A growing topic of interest is transracial and international adoption, where there is research on adjustment of internationally adopted children into the United States. While the terms transracial adoption and international adoption are sometimes used interchangeably, the two terms have different meanings. Transracial adoption is adoption of a child of another race, while international adoption is adoption of a child from another country. Due to the changes within the adoption system that helped to eliminate discrimination, there has been "some evidence for an upward trend in [transracial adoption]" (Zhang & Lee, 2011, p. 76). Much of the current research on transracial adoption focuses on Korean international adoption (Huh & Reid, 2000) or Black children being placed in White homes (McRoy, 1989). In the 1990s, the United Nations claimed that if a child could not be best cared for in their home country, "intercountry

adoption may be considered as an alternative means of providing the children with a family"
(Huh & Reid, 2000). However, some research does not support intercountry or transracial
adoption, stating an emphasis on the specific cultural needs of Black children, thus creating a
need for within-race adoption (McRoy, 1989). Adoption agencies must instill organizational
change in order to best serve children being adopted transracially and internationally. Transracial
adoptees, people who are adopted and raised by a family of a different race, might struggle with
their own identity development during college as they grapple with the unknown of both these
intersecting circles: their race and their biological familial background (Burrow & Finley, 2004).
Since this phenomenon is fairly recent, there is not a lot of research regarding the impact that
being transracially adopted has on an adoptee's willingness to search for their biological family
while in college.

However, Godon et al. (2014) state that transracial adoptees "who are usually
conspicuously different from their adoptive parents may have particularly strong motivations to
search" (p. 2). Because physical characteristics help people define themselves and make
connections with others, "[adopted] children, especially those adopted across racial lines, often
feel that they are different from the rest of their families because of how they look" (Brodzinsky
et al., 1993, p. 59). This feeling of difference in physical characteristics can make an adoptee
yearn to find someone who looks like them, and oftentimes they can do this by meeting members
of their biological family. This feeling of difference is also known as race dissonance, which is
"the extent of expressed preference, by children of ethnic minority groups, for items, such as
dolls, which are of a different color from themselves. Is race dissonance greater for transracially-
adopted children and does that difference vary with age?" (Hollingsworth, 2008, p. 104). The
feeling of an identity imbalance often occurs around eight to ten years of age for transracial

adoptees, which can account from a "nonfit, or imbalance between personal identity (i.e., the self-concept) and group identity (i.e., cultural values, beliefs)" (Hollingsworth, 2008, p. 105). This imbalance stems from the difference of a transracial adoptee's physical characteristics versus their environment and culture.

In addition to the longing to find someone who looks like them, adoptees can also struggle because they may not look like their adoptive family, which can make adoptees feel like they do not belong to the only family they have known. Adolescence is a time when teenagers begin to spend more and more time thinking about their appearance; therefore, adoptees can be especially troubled during this time as they are developing their own self-image and self-esteem but do not know their own biological family history. Transracial adoptees have the added layer of identity development because not only are they physically different from their adoptive family, they are culturally different and might struggle with "the conflict between the child's ethnicity and the [adoptive] family's [ethnicity]" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 99). Family-making today no longer consists of just one mom, one dad, and a couple of biological children. Because of divorce, re-marriage, and adoption, families today can consist of stepparents, adopted children, biological children, foster children, and more.

Adoptive Identity

One theory of adoptive identity outlines three dimensions within one's adoptive identity: the depth of adoptive identity exploration, the internal consistency of the narrative, and the flexibility of the narrative. The depth of the adoption exploration refers to the "participant's ability to reflect on the meaning of adoption or actively engage in a process of gathering information or decision-making about what adoption means in his or her life" (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011, p. 394). The next aspect of this theory, internal consistency of the narrative,

considers one's narrative as a self-theory that reflects how well the different pieces of that theory fit together. The last part of this theory refers to the flexibility of the narrative in one's ability to see issues from another perspective. Since each adoptee's unique answers are the basis of this theory's foundation, it will help to shape the way that I make meaning of my own search process, which is the focus of this study.

Since there is a reported self-identity gap among adoptees, more so than in their non-adopted counterparts, it is important to review Von Korff and Grotevant's work with adoptee identity within my research of the adoption search process during the college years. Identity can be defined as how one identifies within a historical context, socially constructed by the societies and cultures within which an individual lives, a sense of coherence in personality, as well as a person's sense of self over time in linking their past, present, and future (Wong, 2009). Part of an adoptee's quest to understand the past lies in learning about their adoption history. Adoptees within the emerging adulthood period have a strong desire to know about their personal adoption history as well as "a strong desire to know the health and medical histories of their birth relatives" (Wrobel et al., 2013, p. 441). The research on adolescent adoptees shows that, as adoptees reach emerging adulthood, they become more curious about their birth parents; adolescent females "were more curious about their birth mothers, whereas males were equally curious about their birth mothers and fathers" (Wrobel et al., 2013, p. 442). This latter finding could stem from females entering a childbearing age and being similar in age to their biological mother when she placed them up for adoption. As college students grow into adulthood and begin to create their own families, some adoptees will seek information about their biological families in order to close the information gap about their medical history, if not for themselves, for their future families.

Even if adoptees are able to answer questions pertaining to their past, the one thing that does not change with this discovery is the fact that they are adopted. Adoption is an underlying, hidden characteristic of all adoptees that will remain even after being reunited with one's biological family (Collishaw et al., 1998). As DeGroot (2003) found in her study, "[adjustment] to adoption is a lifelong process with each life cycle bringing new challenges for adoptees" (p. 17). One's adopted identity never goes away; adoptees think of it in college as they search for their identity; in early adulthood, as they become parents themselves and finally have someone that looks like them; and in late adulthood, as their adoptive parents grow old or pass away. The social role that adoption plays in one's self-assurance is a part of their identity development, as they have that added role of "adoptee" among their other roles as daughter, father, teacher, or supervisor (Levy-Shiff, 2001).

Since college is a time of tremendous growth and development for most students, it is important for higher education professionals to remember that adopted college students might be experiencing an added kind of development with the search and discovery of their biological families. A way to aid adopted college students in this journey is to understand their search process within the theoretical frameworks of Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood, Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality.

Adoption Search Literature

Since this study focuses on my adoption search process, the majority of this review of literature is on the many aspects of the adoption search process. It will highlight key sections regarding the typical searcher, how attachment and adjustment are affected by adoption, the family romance fantasy, and control and resilience. Many of these concepts behind the search process stem from questioning one's identity, which often happens in one's collegiate years. For

that reason, the other portion of this literature review will highlight the identity aspect of the adoption search process. Through my review of the literature, I will share important characteristics behind the search process, such as one's adoption status, one's sense of loss, and one's physical characteristics.

Search

As emerging adulthood coincides with the beginning years of college independence alongside the initial years that an adoptee can legally search for their biological family, it makes sense that emerging adulthood would be the time in which adoptees are initially interested in searching. In a study of adopted college students, Kryder (1999) found that the stage of emerging adulthood is crucial in any family, but is especially crucial to families with adopted children, as it is the first time those adoptees might be living away from home, discovering who or what they want to be, and searching for their identity. Adjusting to college is already a challenge to many first-time freshmen, but for adoptees, adjusting to this life away from their adoptive parents can be the first time they start to really question their identity and begin their search for identity, and in turn, their search for themselves (Krueger & Hanna, 1997). In recognizing these traits, adoptees are taking the first steps to healing potential wounds of adoption through attachment issues, feelings of loss, or issues with trust.

For many people, the search for identity involves what career they want, who their true friends are, and what comes next after high school. However, for adoptees, the search for identity and answering the typical question of "Who am I?" presents problems, as they are left with a large gap in the answer to that question (Lifton, 1994). Individuals in the identity formation stage of adolescence should be assessing their own attributes and matching those attributes to interests, hobbies, and work; when persons are "unable to manage this developmental task, role confusion

occurs" (Sokol, 2009, p. 142). As adoptees are not able to assess attributes of their past, like their biological history, genealogy, and birth story, many adoptees seek out that information by attempting to contact their biological families. The "desire to search for one's biological roots has been reported throughout history as a characteristic of adoptees" (Krueger & Hanna, 1997, p. 201). However, this desire to search does not always mean the adoptee will go through with the process. Existential anxiety can often cause hesitation since "the quest for one's own personal truth is fraught with anxieties that resonate at the very core of each individual's being" (Krueger & Hanna, 1997, p. 198). Even though many children are adopted during infancy, psychological trauma can remain due to the lack of stability among caretakers within the first few months or years of life (Brocious, 2014). This psychological trauma can cause the adoptees to feel marginalized, as they often feel unwanted, unloved, or like a burden to both their biological and adoptive families.

The psychological trauma that some adoptees might face from the early years of life can be compounded by "cumulative adoption trauma," which begins when adoptees are separated from their birth mother, continues into childhood when adoptees realize they are not biologically related to their adoptive mother and father, and compounds in adulthood when they choose to search for their biological family. Closed adoption, in and of itself, is a form of trauma because adoptees "grow up feeling like anonymous people cut off from the genetic and social heritage that gives everyone else roots" (Lifton, 1994, p. 8). In order to find those roots, adoptees must search for their biological families in order to close that information gap. However, the search for oneself is universal and ongoing because adoptees "don't wake up one day finished with thinking about adoption" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 4). Even if an adoptee never chooses to search, or does search and finds their biological family, adoptees may continue to experience the

trauma of being adopted throughout various life events, such as marriage, becoming parents, or experiencing a family death.

The "Typical" Searcher

Even though adoptees experience the same trauma of being taken from their biological families and forced to live with another family, there is not one particular trait that all adoptees who search for their biological families have other than the yearning of self-discovery. *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self* illustrates the impact of adoption throughout an adoptee's entire life from the viewpoint of over 100 adoptees over the years to piece together this book that

> …is not a how-to book, nor is it a parenting book. It is not a book about searching for birth parents, or talking to children about being adopted, or changing society's attitudes towards adoption. […it] is a way to share our model of normal adjustment to being adopted as it occurs throughout the life span. (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 1)

Research has shown that searchers "represent all age cohorts, socioeconomic status positions, educational levels, and degrees of satisfaction with the adoption outcome" (March, 1995, p. 1). While there is no one particular trait that all adoptees have, the Adoption Curiosity Pathway (ACP) model tests the effect that curiosity has on one's desire to seek out information from biological parents during the emerging adulthood period of life, which is typically right after college around, 25 years old (Wrobel et al., 2013). According to this Adoption Curiosity Pathway model, curiosity is equally common among male and female adoptees, but females are more likely to act on that curiosity and actively search for their biological families when they are emerging adults. This curiosity, equal among both male and female adoptees, illustrates why higher education professionals need to be ready to advocate for and support adopted students in the search for their biological family.

While there is no such thing as a typical adoption story, a typical adoptee, or a typical searcher, most researchers agree that even if an adoptee does not actively search for their biological families, "inside every searcher is a nonsearcher, and inside every nonsearcher is a searcher" (Lifton, 1994, p. 129). Even if adoptees do not actively search, they could psychologically search by exploring what their adoption means to them, investigating their possible biological culture, or even traveling to the city or nation where they were born. A successful search does not always have to end in reunion; a successful search can just be learning more about the place of one's birth. While some researchers would say 100% of adoptees search intrinsically, approximately 15% of adoptees actively search for their biological families (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). The average age of the searcher is 29, in young adulthood, typically married with stable middle-income jobs, while up to 80% of searchers are female (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). Oftentimes, a significant life event, such as marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a parent, triggers the search. And while adoptive families sometimes view the search process as the adoptee wanting to find their "real parents," adoptees oftentimes search to look for "a relation, not a relationship; he [or she] already has a mother and a father" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 141). Searchers are not necessarily looking to undo the past, but rather, to gain information to help their future.

The Search Process

According to Brodzinsky's adoption search theory, there are six universal themes to the adoption search process: loss and mourning, envy, sexual identity, consolidation of identity, cognitive dissonance, and body image (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). The first theme encompasses loss, which leads to mourning. Adoptees experience many losses throughout their lifetime, including loss of their birth parents, the loss of the relationship to their biological family

members, and the loss of the status of a normal person who has just one mother and one father. These losses often lead to the natural feeling of grief, and sometimes the search is initiated by mourning over the loss of an adoptive parent. When an adoptive parent dies, an adoptee will oftentimes begin the search for the biological parent for many reasons (Strauss, 1994). Since the adoptive parent has passed, an adoptee's search can no longer hurt the adoptive parent. An adoptive parent's death can also remind the adoptee of the fleeting time left on earth, and if their biological parents were similar in age to their adoptive parents, this fact might encourage them to begin their search in order to find their biological parents before that parent, too, passes away.

The second universal theme is envy and jealousy of a non-adoptees' experiences throughout their lifetime (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). Non-adoptees surround adoptees by way of cousins, friends, and classmates who oftentimes have physical similarities to their siblings and parents to which an adoptee cannot relate. When non-adopted friends complain about their family members, adoptees can become jealous and envious of those friends who at least know their biological history, medical history, and genetic relations. These feelings of jealousy and envy can be another reason to search.

Sexual identity is the next theme of the search process. As adoptees reach adolescence and young adulthood, they can develop complex feelings as they enter the age when their birth mom possibly gave them up for adoption. As adoptees reach adolescence where sex is becoming more and more prevalent among their peer group, adoptees might think of sex very differently, knowing that they could have been the product of a one night stand, an unhealthy relationship, or a sexual assault. Adoptees might shy "away even from healthy sexual experimentation because they are so aware of where that landed their birth mothers" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 111). Intimacy takes on a different level for an adoptee as they harness their birth parents' decisions in

helping guide their own: "True intimacy requires a strong sense of identity" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 131). For an adoptee, that identity achievement can come from this birth family search. The first theme of loss and mourning can inhibit an adoptee from establishing a secure trust, which is a vital component of intimacy because committing to a relationship means taking a chance that your partner will reject your feelings, your ideas, or your overall self.

In order for a person to establish a committed relationship, they must have developed a whole sense of self, which can be fractured by the next universal theme of search: consolidation of identity. Consolidation of identity shows how an adoptee might have a dual identity conflict of a "false" sense of being an adoptee versus their "real" self in relation to their biological family (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 145). An adoptee might feel like an imposter to their adoptive family, while feeling like their "real" self is out there belonging to their biological family. But when this biological family is unknown, an adoptee cannot acknowledge this idea of their "real" self in relation to their biological family because that "real" self is also unknown. This is another reason adoptees might be apt to search for their biological families.

The next theme relates to another sense of mixed messages by adoptees dealing with the theme of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance happens when someone hears one thing but experiences another. For instance, adoptees in early childhood might hear how they were chosen or picked or brought to their adoptive family, making them special (Lifton, 1994). However, when those same children enter the pre-teen years, they realize that in order to for their adoptive families to have chosen them as their child, their birth families had to have given them up in the first place. This cognitive dissonance could lead an adoptee to seek out answers to many questions that compel adoptees to search (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 140):

1. Who am I?

2. Why was I given up for adoption?

3. Am I wanting to reassure my birth mother that they made the right decision in relinquishing me, or to prove to them that they made the wrong decision?

4. Am I hoping to ease my frustrations and disappointments and undo a sense of rejection?

5. Am I hoping to find new parents, or just find someone who looks, feels, laughs, and talks the way I do?

6. Am I looking for physical resemblance and/or character traits from my birth family?

The last question about physical resemblance relates to one's searching for physical resemblance from birth family members as a reason to look for one's biological family. This final theme of the adoption search is a focal point for many adoptees' feelings of isolation because they have grown up in a household where they do not look like any of their family members. In contrast to their non-adoptee friends and family, adoptees have no idea where they get certain physical characteristics or certain genetic traits because that medical history is hidden from them. From a young age, when a doctor asks an adoptee about any family medical history, the adoptee's answer is unknown. Seeking these answers to their own medical history and family resemblance is oftentimes not to find a new family but rather gain answers to questions about what will guide the adoptee in making their own family.

These six universal themes of adoption encompass the various areas of growth for searchers. As mental health professionals and adoption researchers work with adoptees that might be deciding whether to search or not, the ultimate decision lies with the adoptee themselves. While there are court cases and controversies now about whose rights are more important within the adoption triad, most researchers would agree that it should be up to the adoptee, "not up to the whims of adoption agencies or state legislatures or record clerks, whether

information about [his or her] past becomes available" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 140). It is important for today's adoption agencies to report on a child's past and keep the most up-to-date records in order to help the child learn and deal with their past through accountable birth records of things like pregnancy details, birth details, and Apgar score.

While some advocates of birth parents would disagree because they say the birth parents have the right to remain anonymous, most adoption advocates would say that adoptees have the right to know their medical records and family history. In a closed adoption search, the birth parent still has the right to refuse to be contacted, as well as the right to refuse to release identifying information. However, the adoptee could still be given answers and medical records with identifying information like names and dates kept hidden. The adoption search may seem like an independent process, but there are many pieces to the search puzzle, and the search affects everyone in the adoption triad: the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the adoptee themselves (Carp & Wegar, 2002).

Adoption Triad

Just as there is not one typical adoption search process, there is not one typical adoption triad. While all triads have the same components of the birth family, the adoptive family, and the adoptee, no two situations are the same. Sometimes, a search process can result in a reunion that is beneficial to all sides of the triad. Another search process can bring the adoptee and adoptive parents closer together. And sometimes, the search process could lead to a reunion that does not go as the adoptee had hoped, ending with either a deceased parent or rejection from the birth family. In all cases, the adoption triad plays a role in supporting one another through this process. In order to ensure healthy relationships for all parts of the triad, everyone must make a conscious decision to grow psychologically, and to accommodate for all aspects of the triad

(Lifton, 1994). Adoptive parents must realize that "[adoption] is not identical with producing one's own child […] it is raising and integrating another's biological child into one's family […] adopting a baby is vastly different from giving birth to a baby" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 29). Whether adoptive parents have children biological and adopted children, or just adopted children, it is important that adoptive parents address adoption openly and as an important factor in their adopted child's life. Adoptees realize they have had two sets of parents: their adoptive parents, who are raising them and also their birth parents, who conceived them.

Even though birth parents are the subgroup of the adoption triad that have been least studied, they are more than likely the most diverse group of the three. Birth parents are the more unknown group and hardest to come across due to aspects like anonymity, closed adoptions, and sealed records. While some may believe that most birth parents are poor people from the streets, birth parents "have tended to be disproportionately white, from relatively advantaged backgrounds, and from intact families that are supportive of the placement decision" (Fisher, 2003, p. 341). Women are more likely to place a child for adoption if their futures are more promising and if they have that support from home that they need to relinquish a child.

> [Young women] who had placed their children for adoption (26% of the sample of 113
> unmarried adolescent birth mothers) had completed more schooling, were more likely to
> be employed, were less likely to be on public assistance, and were less likely to have
> borne another child than those young women who had kept their children. (Fisher, 2003,
> p. 341)

While these women proved to be more successful in their work life, there were still many psychological effects, like short- and long-term trauma and severe separation anxiety, which was reported to plague these women for years. The attachment that the birth mother feels with the

child throughout the pregnancy can make giving up that child difficult. Both groups of women, those that did give up a child versus those that kept their child, felt that they made the right decision and "78% said that they would make the same decision again" (Fisher, 2003). This shows that no matter how hard the decision, these women could look past the psychological effects of their decisions and believe they made the right choice.

One aspect that has made the adoption process easier for birth mothers is the option for an open adoption. The birth mothers who gave up their children said in a study by Fisher (2003) that relinquishing them was "made worse by the secrecy of traditional, confidential adoptions," and open adoption seemed to be the answer to those quandaries (p. 342). Open adoption—when birth parents have visitation rights to the child, so that the child's birth parents can stay in close contact with the adoptive family—provides the birth parents with knowledge about the home in which their child is being raised, while also providing the child with more answers regarding their adoption. This option allows the birth parents to be recognized as part of an "extended family" and can take some stress off the questions to the adoptive parents from the adoptee about their adoption (Lifton, 1994).

While the birth parents have a high importance in the adoption triad, a heavy responsibility falls on the adoptive parents to ensure the best upbringing of the adoptee. Since adoptive parents are usually more mature than biological parents and can offer more stability in their home life, such as marriage and being more financially secure, adoptive parents are often more adept to coping with stress (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). Even though the criticism of adoption can weigh heavily on the birth parents, some adoptive parents feel inadequate because, for example, they are unable to have biological children or because they doubt the fairness in raising their biological children with an adoptive child (Lifton, 1994). Adoptive parents have many

decisions to make regarding the adoption. Some complications may arise because "tension exists in trying to balance an adopted individual's need for information and continuity with the past, the birth parents' privacy rights, and the adoptive parents' right to raise their child as they see fit" (Nickman et al., 2005, p. 989). All these tensions need to be addressed in order to provide a healthy upbringing for the child. Nickman et al. (2005) states that the "most successful [adoptive] parents tended to be older and more pragmatic, with large families and strong religious beliefs" (p. 992). Because of the support that religion offers families, in addition to the fact that parents of large families are more apt to know how children will behave, these types of parents tend to be more successful. This means that the adoptive parents will have some idea of appropriate developmental stages of children.

While no two adoptive families are alike, there is one common belief among adoption researchers and clinicians in regards to the third group of the adoption triad, the adoptee: adopted children should be told they are adopted from the beginning. Clinicians believe that adopted children should know they are adopted and that one of the most important tasks for adoptive parents is to tell the adoption story during the preschool years (Sobol et al., 1994). This can be a hard topic to discuss, according to Nickman et al. (2005), considering that adoption can bring about such emotions like "feelings of worthlessness, fear of abandonment, special aspects of transference and countertransference, and confusion about origins, loyalty, and personal narrative" (p. 993). These emotions can result in a feeling of a loss of attachment towards everyone close to the adoptee and must be addressed by the adoptive parents. If an adoptee is in a family where their adoption is not openly discussed, that adoptee might feel guilty in wanting to talk about their adoption and their past, leading to feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment

surrounding their adoptive family (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). These feelings of shame and guilt and greatly affect proper attachment.

Attachment

Just as adoptees yearns to form an attachment with their adoptive family, they are also grieving the loss of their birth parents. Whether they were with their birth families for a few days, weeks, or months before being placed for adoption, infants establish bonds and a sense of security from the very beginning of their lives. When this bond is broken, it is imperative that the adoptive family recognize that loss and help their adopted child grieve and work through their own loss of security while building up the bond and attachment to their new family. However, it is important for adoptive families to recognize the time and dedication it takes because "true attachment [...] grows slowly, over weeks, months, and even years of loving interaction, and it can grow just as well between a parent and infant who are not biologically connected as between a parent and infant who are" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 32). While bonding is said to happen in the first few hours or days of life, attachment is an emotional relationship that develops gradually; it can take weeks and months of daily interaction and caregiving in order for true attachment to occur. Parents can make this period easier for their adopted children if they can "be available to their children, listen to them, help them clarify their emotions, and accept whatever feelings they are expressing. By their nonjudgmental responses, parents can show their children that these ups and downs are normal, real, acceptable-and temporary" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 91). With the appropriate attachment established between caregiver and child, an adopted child can better adjust to this new life and family.

Even though some adoptive parents are scared about the attachment issues still lingering from the birth parents to the adoptee, that step has to be overcome in order to work on the bonds

forming between them and the adoptee. Adoptive parents need to realize that bonding "is the process by which a parent and a child (whether an infant or an older child) become emotionally linked, whereas 'attachment' describes the link that exists once bonding has occurred" (Adesman & Adamec, 2004, p. 70). Attachment involves many deciding factors, such as the age of the child, the number of siblings involved, and the temperament of the adoptive parents and family. Some advice for building a strong bond is to consistently meet the child's needs, to encourage eye contact, to talk to the child frequently, to hold the child, and to cuddle and tickle the child in order to build a physical connection (Nickman et al., 2005). These acts of physical bonding can help ease the sense of loss that the adoptee may feel. Justin Call, a University of California at Irvine psychiatrist, created the infant adjustment chart (Table 2.1) to illustrate the adjustment an infant makes when moving to a new home within the first year of life:

Table 2.1 Responses to a New Home (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 37)

Birth to Four Weeks	Little distress seen; newborns are focused on having body needs met, not attentive to surroundings
Four to Twelve Weeks	Much distress seen; infants can respond to new stimuli in the environment, cannot shut it out when it becomes too much
Twelve to Twenty-Four Weeks	Little distress seen; babies can respond to more complex stimuli, modify it as needed, adjust better to changes in diet and environment
Six to Twelve Months	Much distress seen; babies are grieving for loss of the primary caretaker, to whom attachment is intense at this age

With the knowledge presented in Table 2.1, it is important for adoptive parents and caregivers of adopted children to recognize the distress that adopted infants might be experiencing at these varying times, depending upon when they were placed into foster care or adoption. Because many infant adoptions are not legally finalized for at least six months or longer, adoptive families might have more barriers like time, distance away from their adoptive child, and difficulties with bonding due to the delays within the adoption legal system (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). Not only do young children have difficulty adjusting to their new families, adoptees of all ages struggle with adjustment at varying times, like moving schools or attending college.

Identity

Many students come to college looking to meet new friends, to enjoy college sports, and hopefully to learn something along the way. However, so much development and growth happens to young adults in college by way of time management, academic career choice, and social networking. Identity development goes one layer deeper for adopted college students as they might also be in the midst of re-shaping themselves, not only as a college student but also as an *adopted* college student. There are three nonrelative types of adoptions prevalent throughout the United States: domestic adoption through private agencies, domestic adoption through the public child welfare system, and international adoption. While these different types of adoptees will experience different types of identity development, all adoptees will have disruptions of their identity development due to possible information gaps, such as lack of medical history, lack of familial background, or lack of birth story (Grotevant et al., 2017). Types of identity dimensions such as race and contextual influences such as family background can intersect to influence one's life experiences (Duran & Jones, 2019). A major part of adopted college students' development is finding their identity within their collegiate atmosphere so they feel as

though they belong, rather than feeling marginalized. From a campus club to a classroom, there are many areas where an adoptee could find a sense of home and belonging within their own higher education setting.

As adolescent youth are already struggling with an identity crisis by asking questions such as, "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?," adopted adolescents take that a step further by having to dig deeper because their identity formation "stresses the importance of one's past in the service of one's future" (Lifton, 1994, p. 9). As most youth experience this identity crisis, adoptees' search for self becomes more complicated as adoptees "always [have] a phantom biological family from which they must pull away" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 18). In order to fully understand themselves as an adopted person, adoptees must incorporate "adoptee" into their own broader sense of themselves as they further explore the meaning and implications of their own adoption.

Adoptee Student Growth and Development

Kryder's (1999) publication, *Self and Alma Mater: A Study of Adopted College Students,* gives great insight into college adoptees and their experiences in college. Kryder studied the process of leaving home and adjusting to college life among 16 students ranging from 18 to 21 years old from four colleges; twelve were female and four were male. Through personal interviews, she developed four main categories of growth and development for the adopted college students, which she called *In the Beginning*, *The Question Mark*, *Alma Mater*, and *Interracial Adoptions*. These different categories helped to describe the general identity development stages of the college students.

In the Beginning allows the adoptees to discuss their own adoption story, and Kryder (1999) found many adoptees telling their life story as starting when they were adopted. This first

stage of adoption encompasses when they were told they were adopted, how they were told they were adopted, and how they reacted to finding out this information. The experiences ranged from always knowing to remembering finding out and being angry about it. Kryder found that the impact of being told "largely connected with the match between the child's cognitive development and the ability of the parent to be attuned to the child's readiness to receive the information" (Kryder, 1999, p. 359). In other words, the impact was somewhat less of a blow if the child was developmentally ready to be able to handle the new, life-changing information.

The first stage of finding out about their adoption is then followed by Question Mark, which is a pertinent text for college-aged adoptees because it revolves around thinking of their biological mothers and fathers as a huge question mark in their lives (Kryder, 1999). Many students talked about not considering searching for their biological families in high school. But when they went to college, it was a time they were broadening their learning experiences, "meeting other students who were adopted, and being free from a life organized around high school activities, [which] expanded [their] interest in knowing more about [their] biological mother[s]" (Kryder, 1999, p. 360). They viewed college as a time to search for their identity by finding their biological family members, starting with the biological mother. Whereas the biological father could not know about them, the biological mother gave birth to them so there is an automatic deeper connection to the birth mother than the birth father. However, Kryder (1999) found out if they did find their birth mother, the adoptees would be more interested in then continuing to search for their birth fathers than if they had not found their birth mom. Since college is often one's first time away from home, it also became evident through Kryder's research that students in this stage were interested in finding out medical and biological histories as well as finding their actual birth families. The Question Mark phase, coupled with an

adoptee's growing independence and search for self, can prompt an adoptee to begin searching for answers to their questions about their history and their biological family.

College is oftentimes the first time an adoptee is living away from home, creating their own schedule, and making their own friends. The next stage, the Alma Mater stage, has a lot to do with identity development and finding their family within the college setting of their alma mater (Kryder, 1999). These adoptees discussed growing more independent away from their adoptive families, while also searching for their biological identity within their own race or ethnicity or their adopted identity among fellow adopted students. For some, it was difficult to express their desire to search for their identities through outlets like student clubs because of the close-minded attitudes of their adoptive parents towards their adoption story. In terms of their academic experience, some students thought their adoption influenced their academic and career journey. For some adoptees, it was easy to figure out that their personal or educational interests came from their adoptive families. For instance, one student chose to study biology in hopes of becoming a geneticist because they grew up not knowing their genetic history and always wondered how that could have affected them. Another student pursued social work in order to help children in foster care. It is evident that adoption can strongly affect an adoptee's collegiate journey in their relationship-building, academic careers, as well as their racial and ethnic identity exploration.

The final stage of collegiate exploration is "interracial adoption," which is also called transracial adoption (Kryder, 1999). Those students who identify as being adopted into a family that is a different race than they are can identify as an interracial or transracial adoptee (Burrow & Finley, 2004). Typically, this refers to a person of color being raised by a white family (Godon et al., 2014). These interracially adopted students talked about how being a transracial adoptee

added another layer to their adoption identity development than adoptees raised in a family of the same race. These adoptees always knew they were adopted because they looked different from their adoptive family; however, college was the first time for many of these adoptees to find and spend time with members of their same racial identity. For some, they felt like outsiders of this racial community that they did not grow up around, but for others, it was the first opportunity for them to delve into and own their racial identity. Each of these four stages plays an important role in the adoptee's search for self.

Adoption Status

Adoptees can have an existential crisis when they think about what it means to be adopted. Their birth mom gave birth to them but also gave them up to be raised by someone else. They were loved enough to be given life, but also loved enough to be given away and raised by someone else. They mattered enough to their adoptive parents to be raised by them, but they also were literally bought. The adoptee has a price tag and if they have the paperwork, they can see for how much they were "bought" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 78). As one adoptee put it, "It isn't fair that they could buy me because they have more money […] Kids should be with their real parents. I'm not a toy or something you just decide to buy" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 79). While the laws have changed and less discrimination should be involved in the adoption process, research exists that shows that American couples have an ideal baby: blond and blue-eyed (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). There are price tags on babies, and the less desirable babies are less expensive, which shows why the theory of mattering and marginality permeates an adoptee's life. Brocious (2014) defined marginality theory as "when persons are viewed as relatively different from the norm or as cast out to varying degrees from the societal 'center' to the periphery" (p. 849). This theory of marginality, coupled with mattering, relates to adoptees, and

more specifically to transracial adoptees, because they often feel a sense of belonging and not belonging in a group at the same time: belonging because they grew up around the ethnicity, but not belonging because they are a different race. A feeling of marginality leads about 15% of adoptees to actively search for their biological families, even though "[every] adoptee carries on an intrapsychic search, involving fantasies and curiosity about their birth parents and the reasons for [their] relinquishment" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 140). Adoptees might utilize the family romance fantasy as a means of coping with their adoption loss.

While children of all ages experience the family romance fantasy, adopted children "live in the actuality [of] the family romance [whereas] other children live in fantasy" (Lifton, 1994, p. 61). In early childhood, when children are coping with loving and hating their parents at the same time, children often dream of having a family elsewhere with a different social standing or having superpowers. It is often during this time when children are angry with their adoptive parents for enforcing rules or becoming strict with homework and curfew that adoptees begin to fantasize about their "real" family as being better than their adoptive family (Lifton, 1994, p. 17). Adoptees may fantasize about their biological family being movie stars or war heroes because that fantasy is better than their current reality of being an adopted child. While these fantasies might take place in a lot of young children, it becomes more complicated for adoptees because they really do have family elsewhere: their birth family. These fantasies could be "an escape, even a haven, allowing them to disassociate themselves from any family unpleasantness" (Lifton, 1979, p. 29). And to an adoptee, it could be anyone; it could be the next-door neighbor, a famous talk show host, or a politician. "Adoptee fantasies serve a different purpose from those of the nonadopted: they are an attempt to repair one's broken narrative, to dream it along" (Lifton,

1994, p. 62). As a result, adoptees might become drawn to fantastical stories because they can relate to orphaned protagonists like Harry Potter or Orphan Annie.

Over time, adoptees begin to realize the reality of being given up by their birth parents, and the fantasy can turn reality into anger or betrayal from their birth parents. The sense of marginality leads adoptees to search for mattering and the feeling of belongingness by searching for and finding their biological family (Brocious, 2014). Not only do transracial adoptees already lack the sense of belonging to their family because they look different, but also their life's price tag was dictated by their skin color.

Physical Appearance

Physical appearance is something that weighs heavily on adoptees because their daily reflection is a reminder that they do not know their biological family. In adolescence and young adulthood, when college students are coming into their own, growing, and changing physically, they are constantly reminded that they do not know someone who looks like them (Godon et al., 2014). Related to this idea, Brodzinsky et al. (1993) stated that "one of the most important things to [adoptees] is to be able to look at someone's face and see [their] own features reflected. To see a real, physical, tangible connection in this way has become quite important" (p. 123). That physical connection could show the adoptee similar physical traits, and the possibility of what they could look like when they are older. Even just seeing a picture can add clarity to certain questions an adoptee might have about their own physical appearance. Adoptees might seek out answers to their physical self-awareness either in actually searching for their biological families or by seeking out clubs or people who align with their racial identity at college. For transracial adoptees, who are oftentimes people of color adopted into a white family, college can be a confusing time because a transracial adoptee might feel white ethnically, but not look white

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racially. One transracial adoptee called themselves an "Oreo" because they felt black on the outside and white on the inside (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 101). While physical appearance for transracial adoptees can be impactful on their collegiate development, it is important to keep in mind the space they are occupying as a liminal person, since college is a liminal stage in general. Whether or not adoptees are transracial, they feel a sense of loss from being given up from their birth parents.

Sense of Loss

Everyone experiences loss, but "[when] you're adopted, it's like someone didn't want you" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 96). In order to understand the psychology of adoption, one must understand that all adoptees experience a great sense of loss and grieving while searching for themselves. This loss can lead to an overwhelming feeling of alienation and disconnection from moments of crisis or change, or even from supposedly happy times such as birthdays, which can be a hard time for adoptees because adoptees often wonder if their birth mother and/or father remembers them on that day. These stages of grief and loss oftentimes cannot be manifested until adoptees change their adoption story from one of happiness because they were chosen to one of grief because they were given up.

The stages of grief are: shock, denial, protest, despair, and finally, recovery or reintegration (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 73). The initial shock might come on slowly if adoptees have known they were adopted their whole life, but if they had not known, that initial shock might come when they learn that there were adopted. Denial may set in if adoptees choose not to believe that they are adopted. On the other hand, if they do believe it, the denial may come from a place of disbelief that someone could give up a child for adoption, and that they are such a child. The protest and despair could be aimed at their parents through the anger they feel that

they were given up and/or not biologically related to their adoptive parents. Finally, through resilience and much introspection, an adoptee could experience recovery from the shock and reintegration into the society and family. Once adoptees have realized all the stages of grief, they can properly grieve, not just for the loss of the birth parents, but for who they might have been had they not been put up for adoption (Lifton, 1994).

The question of who you might have been and who you are as an adoptee persists throughout an adoptee's life. Indeed, most adoptees have a lifelong search for identity because the "struggle to understand who you are, where you fit in, and how you feel about yourself is universal" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 3). In fact, as adoptees enter adulthood, the adoptee identity comes into play in new ways as they take on new social roles, such as spouse and parent. They think about their biological parents taking on these roles and the contradiction of how they could love a child so much while also placing that child up for adoption. Adoptees wonder how their biological parents could be so strong to know a better life for their child was through adoption (Brodzinsky et al., 1984).

Control and Resiliency

The varying stages development, growth, and grief, though often beyond their control can lead to a sense of resiliency. From adoption to adolescence, adoptees possess very little control over their lives and identities. The search process can be one of the first times they feel like they are in control of their own history. Adolescence and emerging adulthood may be the first time an adoptee is able to strive toward autonomy and independence, while asking questions of identity such as, "Who am I?" and, "Who am I in relation to other people?" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 128).

Searching for their identity through a search for their biological parents enables adoptees to have a sense of control over their external world and their internal world (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). The search process can give adoptees their own sense of control because they are the one initiating, leading, and answering the search. Adoptees makes the effort to look for their records, to possibly discover their biological family, and then to determine whether they want to communicate with their biological family. The search process puts control back into the adoptee's life. While the adoptee cannot control the outcome of the search, the adoptee can control their reaction to it, and as a result, most adoptees develop a sense of resiliency and flexibility to be able to handle the outcome of their search.

The sense of resiliency can be a huge factor in the success of the identity development of adoptees. A term called "adoption child syndrome" was utilized in the 1980s, but has never been accepted into a professional community (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 10). The adoption child syndrome refers to adopted persons who might suffer from genealogical bewilderment, "adoptees' problems on individual pathology;" compulsive pregnancy, and the roaming phenomenon, or moving from place to place (Carp & Wegar, 2002, p. 435). These studies seem to suggest that most adoptees suffer from the negative aspects of adoption their entire lives, but Brodzinsky et al. (1993) found the opposite to be true as well:

 [A]vast majority of adoptees do perfectly well in all of the ways that society measures success. They grow up, they marry, they have families of their own. They relate well to their friends and their adoptive families. They hold down jobs, have hobbies, have long sweet moments of love and happiness. (p. 9)

In fact, not only have many adoptees adjusted well into adulthood, instead of being angry and feeling rejected for being given up for adoption, they are thankful for the opportunity they have

been given to be raised in a loving home (Kryder, 1999). Sometimes this gratefulness comes from their resiliency to overcome adversity, and sometimes it comes from the realization of what their life would have been like once they met their birth parents. Therefore, although adoptees may struggle with their unique identity, it is possible, and very likely, that adoptees will thrive in society because they have learned to take control over their lives and have developed a sense of resiliency that helps them be successful in life.

Theoretical Framework

There are three theories that framed this research and provided insight into age-related and transition-related experiences that tend to accompany the search process for one's biological family during the collegiate undergraduate and graduate years: Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood theory, Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality. These theories cover varying aspects of the impact the adoption search has on the college student, from the age of the student during the emerging adulthood time, to the identity development that comes from discovering one's birth family. These theories combined to shed light on the various aspects of the search process for adopted college students.

Emerging Adulthood Theory

Jeffrey Arnett (2000) stated that emerging adulthood is the period in life that encompasses identity exploration and occurs between the ages of 18 and 25. If adoptees are placed into a closed adoption, they can begin to search for their birth family at age 18, just as they are entering the emerging adulthood stage (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). Since many people choose to go to college at this age, college might be the first time and place an adoptee can search for their biological family because "[age] 18 marks a variety of legal transitions" (Arnett, 2000, p. 476). That search could be a crucial element of an adoptee's emerging adulthood growth

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period. Because searching for one's biological family can first happen when one turns 18, the emerging adulthood time period will be an important element of this research, focused on intersectionality and identity development. Arnett (2000) mentioned that emerging adulthood can be described by change and exploration of different possible life directions and that many adults consider events happening during this period to be the most significant in their lives. For many emerging adults, college is often pursued in a nonlinear way, with a combination of various types of work and dotted by periods of nonattendance.

Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood reflected research conducted with young adults from ages 18-24 years old. Because my search for my birth family occurred during this time of emerging adulthood, it was fitting to utilize this theory as a framework for understanding how the search process for my birth family interacted with my experiences while pursuing higher education. Since this research revolves around data collected from the college years, Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood was an important theoretical framework to utilize. Arnett (2000) suggested that emerging adulthood is "characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions" (p. 469) and that many adults consider events happening during this time period to be the most important of their lives.

According to Moyer and Juang (2011), emerging adults are people from 18 to 25 years old, during which time identity formation is an important task. And, since "[constructing] an identity gives an individual a sense of continuity across the past, present, and future" (p. 2), it makes sense that adoptees would take an interest in their unknown adopted past during their emerging adulthood years. Since personal development timelines vary in different cultures and countries, Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood describes middle to upper class people in first world countries, specifically the United States. Along with culture, "economic development

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makes possible a period of the independent role exploration that is at the heart of emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000, p. 478). Since this theory in emerging adulthood applies to ages 18-25, and this research ties into the higher education setting, it is assumed that these adopted students have the economic capability to attend college. Therefore, one limitation of this theory is the lack of research on adoptees not attending college. This also ties into a lack of research of some minority groups, who may be less likely to experience as much independent exploration of possible life directions due to a lower social class status than other majority groups. Since middle class young people have more opportunities to attend college and afford the economic search to look for one's biological family, it is important to note that this study is limited to adoptees from the middle class or higher.

Transition Theory

While Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood fits with the age of the participant, Schlossberg's transition theory (2011) helps to frame one's understanding of the overarching theme of transition and change; in this case, the transition that comes with searching for one's biological family. Knowing that searching, finding, and meeting new family members could demonstrate different types of transitions, this theory helped to put the feelings that come along with this search process into perspective and gave meaning to them. Schlossberg's (2011) theory states that there are three types of transitions: anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and nonevent transitions. Anticipated transitions are major life events that are expected, like graduation or a wedding. An anticipated transition would be meeting your biological family after having searched for and connected with them. Unanticipated transitions are often disruptive events that occur unexpectedly, such as finding out that you are adopted after having believed you are biologically related to your family. Nonevents are expected events that fail to occur. An

example of a nonevent would be expecting to meet your biological family and then the reunion falling through. (Schlossberg, 2011). Adoption could fit into any one of those categories, depending on the adoptee's experience and adoption story.

In addition to the three types of transitions, Schlossberg (2011) identified four major factors ("The 4 S's") that help a person cope with transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. *Situation* refers to the timing of the event and what type of situation the person is in at that time, in terms of role, timing, or stressors. *Self* refers to both personal characteristics of the person as well as the psychological state of the person coping with the transition. *Support* refers to the social support and family units during the time of transition, which could weigh heavily on adoptees if they are reuniting with their biological family, and in turn, adding a change of dynamics and family relations to their adoptive triad. *Strategies* refers to coping mechanisms used by the person to deal with the transition (Schlossberg, 2011). Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood relates well to Schlossberg's theory, as emerging adulthood is a time of great change, growth, and development.

Liminality

Schlossberg's transition theory ties well into the third theory used as part of the framework for this study: Turner's (1969) concept of liminality. According to Turner, liminality is the state of being in-between and ambiguous (Beech, 2011). Further, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) defined liminality as the space "betwixt and between social roles and/or identities" (p. 47), while Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) described it as a transitional space and the phase of a rite of passage. People experience many liminal phases throughout their lives, such as graduation, summer, engagement, pregnancy, and the whole of one's college experience. Higher education is seen "not only as a transitional space, but as being 'liminal'" (Field & Morgan-

Klein, 2010, p. 1) since one's status as a student is in a continuously transitional status. For the traditional college-aged student, college is the transitionary time between high school and the "real world." Non-traditional students in college also are experiencing liminality but have many other responsibilities to focus on like full-time jobs, transition from military to civilian life, or responsibilities as a parent.

Liminality also relates well to adoptees in college who may be on the threshold of deciding to search for their biological families, are actively searching for their biological families, or are working through the results of a search. Liminal people are referred to as "threshold people," which fits the identity of adoptee searchers who are on the threshold of self-discovery (Turner, 1969, p. 359). According to Beech (2011), liminality typically starts with a "triggering event" (p. 287), which for adoptees could be when they turned 18 and could legally be allowed to search for their biological family, or when they started college and may be living away from their adoptive family for the first time. Because liminality can disrupt one's internal sense of self or one's place within society, liminality can be thought of as "reconstruction of identity in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted in a way that the new identity is meaningful for the identity and their community" (Beech, 2011, p. 287). Lifton (1979) called this state "Limbo Land—that state of being where one has some information and yet hesitates to contact the birth mom or anyone in the family who many have information to [their] whereabouts" (Lifton, 1979, p. 94). Adoptees might feel liminality at various times throughout their search: while making the decision to search, upon receiving information that would allow them to make contact with biological family, or even after making contact with their birth family. This state of liminality may never go away, even after finding answers about their personal history.

Identity construction can be an important part of a student's time in college, as they work to develop their self-identity, or "their own notion of who they are," alongside their social-identity, or "the notion of that person in the external discourses, institutions, and culture" (Beech, 2011, p. 285). As all college students think about the various identities and roles with which they identify, adopted college students have an added layer of questioning their identity because of their unknown history, background, or birthright. The underlying concept behind the search process for their biological families is change and transition. They might identify as an adoptee with many questions but are in the process of seeking answers, whether those answers come in the form of documents, names, or relationships. Because adoptees were put up for adoption with little to no choice in the matter, the search process for their biological family might be the very first time they felt in control of their own adoption story, and in turn, their own sense of identity (Kelly, 2019).

College is a time between the realization of one's desired career and the achievement of earning that degree to get on their career pathway. College is a time to pursue one's dreams and explore one's identity; it is a time to explore independent learning, critical thinking, identity formation, relationships, and diversity. As such, "[student] identities are thought to evolve, as participation and engagement in higher education are experienced over time" (Rutherford & Pickup, 2015, p. 705). As Erikson states, "[a] sense of identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all. Like a good conscience, it is lost and regained" (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016, p. 48). This idea that one's identity is constantly fluctuating can relate to the liminality of many college students, including adoptees. Liminality is a critical component of college life, and being adopted adds another layer to the state of being in between.

Being adopted can feel like a permanent state of liminality. Coupled with the natural feelings of liminality for every college student, this concept ties in well with emerging adulthood and transition. These theories of Turner's (1969) research on liminality, Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, and Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood all came together to frame my study. Furthermore, an autoethnographic framework, discussed next, provided methodological guidance in answering my research question regarding the search for, and reunion with, my biological family during my higher education experience.

Summary

Society is changing to be more inclusive of blended, mixed, and unique families. Nowadays, the typical family does not have to look like one another, and adoption has become more accepted in the mainstream media. Thanks to laws enacted by several governors and presidents, adoption laws are becoming more open and accepting to all types of adoptees and adoptive parents (Clinton, 1995). As adoptees reach adulthood and seek out their identity by searching for their biological families, it is important for college practitioners to understand the search process that adoptees and people touched by adoption (like siblings, parents, friends, etc.) may be going through.

Since more than half of college students will be affected by adoption (Carp & Wegar, 2002), it is important for higher education practitioners to not only understand the challenges that adoptees experience, but to also understand how to help them cope with the transitions through which they will inevitably go. Searchers have a variety of factors that tie into their search process, such as the adoption triad, the family romance fantasy, and attachment and adjustment issues. All college students experience a time of liminality and identity development at school, but adoptees who actively search for their biological families or internally search for themselves

through social networking or online resources like DNA tests should be provided a safe space within their collegiate setting in which to do so. While in school, adopted college students might be working through their status as an adoptee, feeling a sense of loss, and wondering about the importance of physical appearances as a family member.

Through theories relevant to student development and an adoptee's search for their biological families, higher education practitioners can better support adoptees experiencing this trying time of transition. Theories the emerging adulthood theory from Arnett (2000), Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality all help to pinpoint various stages of growth and development during the search process. By understanding that no two adoption search processes are alike, just as no two adoptees are alike, practitioners can better help their students by understanding the motivation and stages of transition and change that occur during the search. Whether the adoptee decides to search for personal reasons, medical reasons, or because of their own family and friends, higher education professionals should understand the change happening within these students in an effort to provide adequate support. The adoptee who wants to search for their family will experience the highs and lows that inevitably come with the process. With understanding from supportive collegiate practitioners that this search process might affect adoptees' schoolwork, take them away from campus, and might be the first step towards needing regular counseling or a support group, adoptees can navigate both their own search process alongside their college work with greater ease as they work through this strenuous and personal search.

This next chapter focuses on the qualitative methodology that I used throughout my research: autoethnography. As qualitative research is becoming increasingly used in research, autoethnography is being used to highlight the importance of people's experiences as a valid

method of research. Through narrative inquiry, a type of storytelling, I told my own adoption

story as it pertains to higher education research.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Qualitative research is gaining popularity among scholars, mainly because of the details that narratives can provide to subjects in fields like sociology, psychology, and education. Through narrative inquiry and storytelling, autoethnography is a type of qualitative research that showcases a researcher's own story through confessional-emotive writing. This type of writing allows the author to showcase their own vulnerability through the telling of their own stories and experiences, both the good and the bad. I utilized this method to research my own search for my birth family throughout my collegiate experiences, both undergraduate and graduate. To that end, I analyzed varying data sources, such as documents, personal writings, journals and photographs individually to find common codes. Then, I identified underlying themes and topics in order to compare them to other adoption and identity experiences within the field of higher education. An autoethnographic methodology enabled the disclosure of my deeply personal research in order to shed light on the gap in student identity research within the field of student affairs in higher education.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore my adoption and search process for, and reunion with, my birth family throughout my experiences in higher education. The research question that guided this qualitative study was: What was the lived experience of one adopted student who searched for, and was reunited with, her biological family during her undergraduate and graduate higher education experience?

Methodological Framework

Qualitative research is an important part of today's educational scholarship. While quantitative research focuses on numbers in its analysis, qualitative research informs by utilizing

words rather than numbers in analysis. It allows researchers to focus more on human action through interpretation rather than prediction and control (Kim, 2016). Scholars of qualitative research must be able to authenticate their data and findings by showing the validity, defined as the overall merit of one's study within their research (Freeman et al., 2007). Over the past decade, qualitative researchers have stepped up to prove the worth of qualitative research through "thorough description of design and methods in reports, adequate demonstration of the relationship of claims to data, and thoughtful consideration […] of the strengths and limitations of the study" (Freeman et al., 2007, p. 28). Through observations, interviews, and stories of humans, qualitative research can interpret human action in a scientific yet rational way. Qualitative research explores the many complex issues of what it means to be human through methods like ethnography, case study, and narrative inquiry in a way that quantitative analysis cannot display.

Narrative inquiry is the art of using stories in research. Through the overarching qualitative research lens, narrative inquiry recognizes that educational research can organize the human experience by studying the stories and experiences that make up how humans view the world. Autoethnography falls under the umbrella of narrative inquiry, as it views the researcher's personal experiences in a larger social and cultural context (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry through autoethnography is the bridge between the knowing of the researcher's story and the telling of that story to the audience.

I used autoethnography as I investigated my own lived experiences as represented in journals, letters, emails, and other forms of communication and data that I have kept over the years regarding my adoption. Autoethnography shows that "theory and story share a reciprocal, inter-animating relationship," which is what makes autoethnography so important in research

(Jones, 2016, p. 2). I used different theories throughout my research that frame my search process for my biological family during my higher education experience. As my theoretical framework became integrated into my adoption search, I used autoethnography to highlight my search and reunion experiences as my research. Autoethnography, which is a combination of an autobiography and an ethnography, can be defined as "a form of qualitative inquiry where the researcher takes a personal, reflexive journey into parts of her experiences and systematically analyzes those experiences within the cultural context where those experiences occur" (Bhattacharya, 2013, p. 29). Autoethnographic research is important today, as it documents narratives that might otherwise be absent from that area's current research literature. This type of research shows the researcher as the focal point of study, and as such, the data sources that I used in this study are my own adoptive paperwork, journals, email communication, and interviews with family regarding my adoption search process during college and graduate school.

Methodology

Autoethnography might not come up in everyday conversation, but in the world of qualitative research, it is becoming more utilized and well-respected among researchers. Chang (2008) described the meaning of the word itself: -auto which means "on self,"-ethno which means "on culture", and –graphy which is the research process (p. 48). Autoethnography is an affirmed method of ethnographic research that focuses on cultural analysis and interpretation alongside narrative details, as it demonstrates the importance of linking the self to the social, and the personal to the cultural. To put it simply, autoethnography is where the researcher(s) become the focal point of study (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). This can be illustrated when Wong (2009) stated that "I am both the researcher and the object of the research" (p. 12). Within autoethnography, scholars regard themselves as central to the study, since they are sharing their

own accounts, emotions, and relationship to the particular field of study. Pace (2012) wrote that autoethnography focuses on a single case over time that oftentimes discloses hidden and personal details of the researcher's life that highlight emotional experiences and dramatize a relationship connected to that case. Autoethnography is used to describe one's personal narratives about their own lived experiences in relationship to their cultural, social, and political contexts from which their stories derive (Wong, 2009). Autoethnography allows researchers the freedom to utilize human experience within their research (Pace, 2012).

In this study, I used autoethnography as my method to discuss my experiences as an adopted student who searched for and found my biological family during both my time as an undergraduate and graduate student. In a closed adoption, adoptees cannot search for their biological family until they turn 18, which is when many young adults are away at college. I researched both my time during my undergraduate years when I searched for and found my biological family, as well as the years after while I have been in graduate school and how my adoption has helped form my identity within my graduate school experience.

Wong used autoethnography in her study as an adoptee because autoethnography allowed her to seek a deeper understanding of a transracial adoptee's experience. It allowed her to seek a deeper understanding of how a transracial adoptee's life is intricately intertwined and influenced by cultural structures and social interactions with others in society, and she was able to seek out how meaning evolves from the social interactions with others in the life of a transracial adoptee. A transracial or interracial adoption is when "children are placed in a home with parents who are of a race that is different from their own," and the transracial adoptee experience is ever-changing in the context of the lived experiences of the people involved (Wong, 2009, p. 4). Since autoethnography entails writing one's personal life in relationship to a culture, it is fitting that

adoptees would benefit from writing about themselves and the complexities of their experiences as an adopted person. As autoethnographers explore themselves within the culture, they develop a wider understanding of the larger cultural, political, and social context (Pace, 2012). My study provided me with the opportunity to explore my own transracial adoption and search process within the larger cultural and social context of student affairs in higher education.

Autoethnography has become "a useful and powerful tool for researchers and practitioners alike who deal with human relations in multicultural settings, such as educators and social workers" (Chang, 2008, p. 51). This type of research proves beneficial for my goal of reaching higher education professionals who want to learn how to work with adoptees searching for the biological family during their college years. Autoethnography is a relevant type of research, as it offers a method that is friendly to researchers and readers alike, enhances the cultural understanding of oneself and others, evokes self-reflection and self-examination, and has the potential to motivate both the researcher and reader alike to work toward cross-cultural coalition building (Chang, 2008). Self-transformation is important within this method of research; looking into one's past experiences may bring up emotional scars, but this research may be just what researchers need to heal those scars.

Participant Information and Subjectivity

I was the participant in this autoethnographic study. While I am the only participant, I analyzed communication from some adoptive and biological family members that occurred during my search process. Though my biological mom passed away before I could meet her, I have been fortunate enough to be in contact with her sister (my biological aunt) and her eldest daughter (my biological half-sister). I utilized the email communications that I have had with them as data sources as they have been able to share details of my biological mother's life that

help explain my adoption story and the outcome of my search process. Due to the autoethnographic nature of my research, my membership role in this research is both personal and subjective, as I am both the researcher and the subject. What is so intriguing about autoethnography and my research on my adoption search process is the realization that "life is still forming for a person of my age and that no complete personal history could ever be written so early" (Chang, 2008, p. 9). Since my adoption journey is continuing, my reflections on my adoption search are ever-changing through the years.

Subjectivity

Throughout this research, I needed to remember that subjectivity operates during the entire research process. I acknowledged that my own subjectivities, beliefs, and values are persuasions of my own thought that stem from my own social class, experiences, and values that will interact with my research (Peshkin, 1988). Before I let these values related to my own adoption search process misconstrue my data and research, I had to know what my values and subjectivities are before I could move forward. An example of these privileges were my experience with easily finding my birth mother through court records. While I found that experience to be easy, since I had the records and financial support from my adoptive family to pay for the search, I cannot generalize the ease of this experience to every adoptee's search because not every adoptee will have their records on hand, easy access to court documents, or the finances to be able to search as I did.

Reflexivity

As I continued to work through acknowledging my own subjectivities, it was important to position myself within my research and to focus on my story (Pace, 2012). I intentionally was reflexive of myself as a researcher in order to understand my role as the subject of my research,

as well as my role within the context of the adoption world within the higher education setting. Self-narratives allow readers to connect to writers as "reflexive ethnographers ideally use all their senses, their bodies, feelings and their whole being" (Wong, 2009, pp. 48-49). Once I had fully delved into my own adoption search process, I could begin the important task of not just focusing on myself, but also searching for understanding of the adoption search process of others within the culture and society of the adoption world (Chang, 2008).

Transracial Adoption

Another example of my own subjectivity is recognizing my truth as a multiracial, transracial adoptee. I identify both as multiracial, someone identifying as having more than one race, and transracially adopted, which is someone who was adopted and raised by a family of a different race than which I identify (Zhang & Lee, 2011). As a dark-skinned, dark-haired, brown-eyed girl apart of a light-haired, blue-eyed family, I have known my whole life that I was adopted. From my looks alone, outsiders could figure out that I "didn't belong." I did not think much about these particular labels of my identity until I joined the NASPA Multiracial Knowledge Community (MRKC), which was a community among a higher education professional organization that "seeks to stimulate education, develop knowledge, and promote resources and networking opportunities related to multiracial and transracial adoptee identity" (NASPA, 2020). When I first joined this group, the definition ended with "(and transracial adoptee identity), which made it seem like transracial adoptees were an afterthought. I was happy that a knowledge community recognized that adoptees were a part of identity development within the higher education community, so I worked with the group to remove the parentheses and truly be inclusive of these members. Just recently, I was in a transracial adoptee working group that helped change the name to the Transracial Adoptee and Multiracial Knowledge

Community (TAMKC). To include transracial adoptees not just in the group, but also in the title, has been monumental for a minority affinity group like transracial adoptees. My involvement with this group has heightened my awareness of this aspect of my identity by writing articles, being a member of a panel on transracial adoption, and presenting about my transracial adoptee identity at conferences. These experiences and artifacts have helped to center my subjectivity on my transracial adoptee identity. As Chang (2008) stated with regard to autoethnography, "you enter into a research project with the pre-knowledge of your life" (p. 131). Therefore, acknowledging this subjectivity helped me better differentiate between feelings versus facts. Since my data is comprised of personal artifacts, I needed to have a set method to complete my data collection and data analysis while moving forward with my research.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, I collected my data through official documents, email communications, personal publications, journal entries, and photographs. Some of my biological family members have given me photographs and written documentation relating to my adoption story, such as photographs of my biological mom, documentation of her point of view during the adoption process, and letters written to me before I was born. I compiled and compared these various data artifacts, along with communication with my adoptive family, to triangulate the information in order to find common themes and ideas by using NVivo qualitative data management system (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

Data Inventory

As the researcher of an autoethnographic study, I was the focal point of my research. I researched my experiences as an adoptee who searched for my biological family throughout my undergraduate and graduate years. I collected data consisting of my personal journals, personal

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publications, official documents, photographs, and email communications with my biological

and adoptive families regarding my adoption search process in order to best help me answer

questions about my adoption experience. The following data inventory is an estimate of pages

that were generated as raw data during this study.

Table 3.1 Data Inventory

Source of data	Number of pages	Number of pages total
Archival documents including adoption documents, emails, letters, papers	2-5 pages of data per archival document, 4 types of data	2 x 4 = 8 pages, 5 x 4 = 20 pages 15 pages
Self-written class papers	12 papers, varying lengths	157 pages
Self-written articles/blogs	1-2 pages each	7 pages
Conference Presentations	4 different presentations	25 pages
Personal Journal Entries	Varying	10 pages
Photographs	10 photos	10 pages
	Total Pages	224 pages

Documents

The types of documents I used for analysis include letters from my biological mother,

personal email communications, and legal documents surrounding my adoption. These legal

documents were an important part of the data because "[official] documents validate significant

moments of your life" (Chang, 2008, p. 107). Documents were the first data source that I

analyzed, because they explained the timeline of my adoption through letters my biological mom

wrote to me when she was pregnant with me; the biographies my adoptive parents wrote

accompanying their adoption application; and the legal documents that show my adoptive

family's preferences, the amount of money that was spent on my adoption, and the timeline

through which my foster care and adoption took place.

Class Papers

Throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies, I wrote numerous papers about different aspects of adoption. These papers, along with my articles and blogs, were important pieces of my data because "[personally] produced texts […] preserve thoughts, emotions, and perspectives at the time of recording, untainted by your present research agenda" (Chang, 2008, p. 107). Self-written documents are quite common to utilize in autoethnography, since they present relevant and archived materials that allow the researcher to have a better contextual understanding (Bhattacharya, 2012). This section had the most amount of data because it was compiled of numerous papers that I have written about my adoption experiences throughout my higher education experience, from a psychology paper in 2006 to papers for my qualitative research classes in 2018. I have written on subjects like attachment in adoption and motivation for adoptees to search, and I have completed a case study of an adopted college student.

Articles and blogs

Through my involvement with the National Association for Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), I had the opportunity to write numerous articles and blogs about my involvement in higher education as a transracial adopted higher education professional. I had the opportunity to be published in the NASPA Annual KC Publication with the article *Intersectionality within Transracially Adopted College Students* (Sellers, 2018). These articles have documented my story of adoption and how I have related it to higher education professionals. These texts were important to use for qualitative research, because they are time-stamped and can pinpoint where I was within my adoption journey. Such texts as these blogs add historical insight to my research (Hodder, 2003).

Presentation materials

By being involved in NASPA and other higher education professional organizations, I have presented at multiple conferences around the Midwest. I gave a Student Affairs talk (similar to a TED Talk) at a NASPA IV-West conference in 2017 about my adoption experiences. Additionally, I gave presentations on working with adopted college students at TRiO conferences like the Educational Opportunity Association and the MKN Regional TRiO conference. I have also co-presented at the Michael Tilford Conference on Diversity and Multiculturalism on how to implement an adopted student club on campus. I also served on a recorded panel for a Multicultural Education Series on Transracial Adoptee Facebook Live event, which creates more data to analyze. As a result of preparing for these presentations and events, I have PowerPoints and videos that I utilized as data sources.

Journal entries

Journal entries were another source of data that showcased my own self-reflection and self-description about my adoption journey. Journals are an important part of narrative inquiry because they "'tend to be logs or records of daily growth, musings, and insights' and may feel more 'fragmentary' than memoirs" (Chang, 2008, p. 36). Journals were an integral part of my research because they were often written for the authors themselves, which makes their content less self-censored than if it were written for someone else. After coding these journal entries, I found commonalities relating to adoption themes I have been researching within my dissertation, such as adoption theories within today's adoption research.

Photographs

Photographs were an essential part of my research because they were a true visual representation of the people behind my adoption search story. This type of visual-based narrative inquiry has only become popular and well-respected as recently as the 1960s, though it has been

an integral part of all data collection for centuries (Kim, 2016). Photographs represent a type of visual literacy that "can capture details that would otherwise be forgotten or go unnoticed" (Chang, 2008, p. 109). Photographic research can help autoethnographers through observation, reasoning, and interpretation of the time, location, and details of the photo. Since the photographs I used were pictures of my birth mom before I was born, the photographs were mainly used for personal identity development as the first time seeing someone who looked like me. Because no two adoption stories are the same, being able to see photos of my biological mom and biological family helped to put meaning behind the stories as the different photographs provide rich contextual data in the forms of visual aids. The photographs of my biological mom and her family helped me to put faces with names, and photographs of me with my adoptive family members helped to contextualize how I grew up and who I grew up with.

While photographs in qualitative research are often viewed is as an art form and researched from the photographer's standpoint, I used my photographs from the social research side. I viewed photographs as records, where "photographs are thought to reproduce the reality in front of the camera's lens, yielding an unmediated and unbiased visual report" (Schwartz, 1989, p. 120). Photographs can be an important part of autoethnographic research because "[what] are captured in images are not only persons, objects and places, but also the invisible social context and personal memories that these images trigger" (Chang, 2008, p. 109). These photographs of both members of my biological family as well as my adoptive family served as qualitative data in an arts-based form to showcase such an important aspect of adoption: the physical traits and characteristics that are often taken for granted by people who are not adopted.

Since physical characteristics help people define themselves and make connections with others, it can be hard for adoptees to establish a true sense of self and identity. Oftentimes,

transracially adopted children feel different from the rest of their family because they have different skin tones, heights, eye colors, etc. than their adoptive family members. Since physical traits are one of the first ways people establish their identity, being adopted can complicate the development of an adoptee's self-image and self-esteem (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). This is one reason photographs can provide such insight to adoptees, as they can help the adoptee to identify with people who look like them. The photographs of my biological family members helped to give shape to the physical side of my identity development.

Data Analysis

The majority of my research was conducted at my home with my official documents, email communications, personal publications, journal entries, and photographs that relate to my adoption story. Many of these documents are precious to me, like personal letters from my biological mom before I was born that I did not receive until I was in college, the adoption paperwork my adoptive family had to fill out in order to get me, and email communications with both my biological mom before she passed away as well as with some of my adoptive family members. Since these items are cherished, I did not take them to public places for research; I conducted my analysis of data at my home.

Once all the aforementioned data types were collected and organized, the process of data analysis began. Data analysis is the act of dissecting the data to be used internally, which I did in the beginning stages of my research. As many of my data types are documents, document analysis or the systematic procedure for evaluating printed or electronic documents, was a large portion of my investigation (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis is another important aspect to qualitative research, since documents such as journals and photographs are used in research to offer a better understanding of the topic being studied (Bhattacharya, 2012). Document analysis

can be the most effective way to analyze data within qualitative research "when events can no longer be observed or when informants have forgotten the details" (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). Once my documents were analyzed, the process of data interpretation took place. While data analysis is the dissecting of data, data interpretation is the connecting of data to find meanings and make cultural sense of the data (Chang, 2008). Using open coding that involves identifying significant concepts within the data such as objects, events, actions, ideas, etc. of any size (phrase, sentence, or whole paragraph) was essential to help me work through analyzing my data subjectively (Pace, 2012).

The most important step of any data reflection is data organization. The way you organize data, whether physically or digitally, can be the determining factor on the outcome of how you group codes and develop themes. From hand-written letters to journal entries to photographs from the 1980s, much of my data was in physical form, making it hard to analyze in programs like NVivo. Therefore, an important first step for my research was to digitize, scan, and upload all of these to NVivo software. I had ideas of how I would organize my data from my chapter three into such file classifications as Adoption History, Conference Presentations, Email Communication, Journal Entries, NASPA Blogs, Photos, and School Papers and Assignments, as seen below:
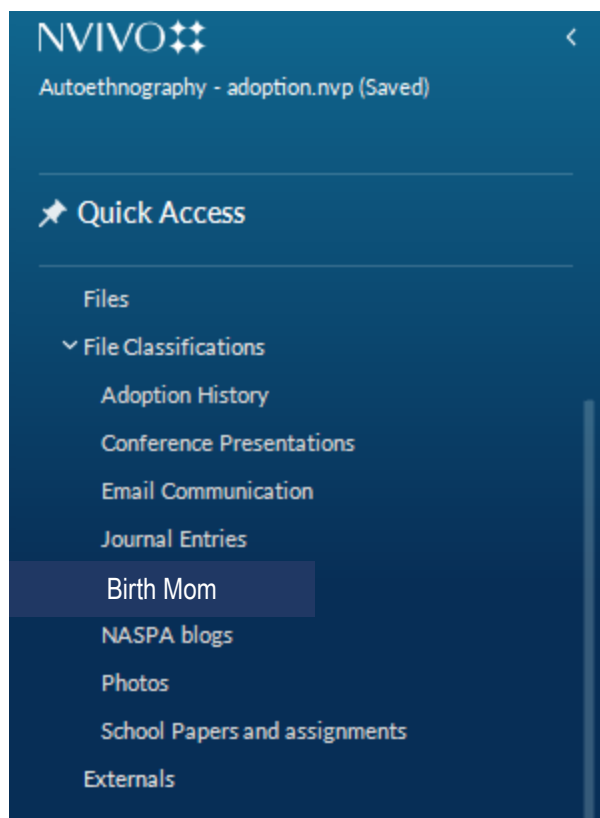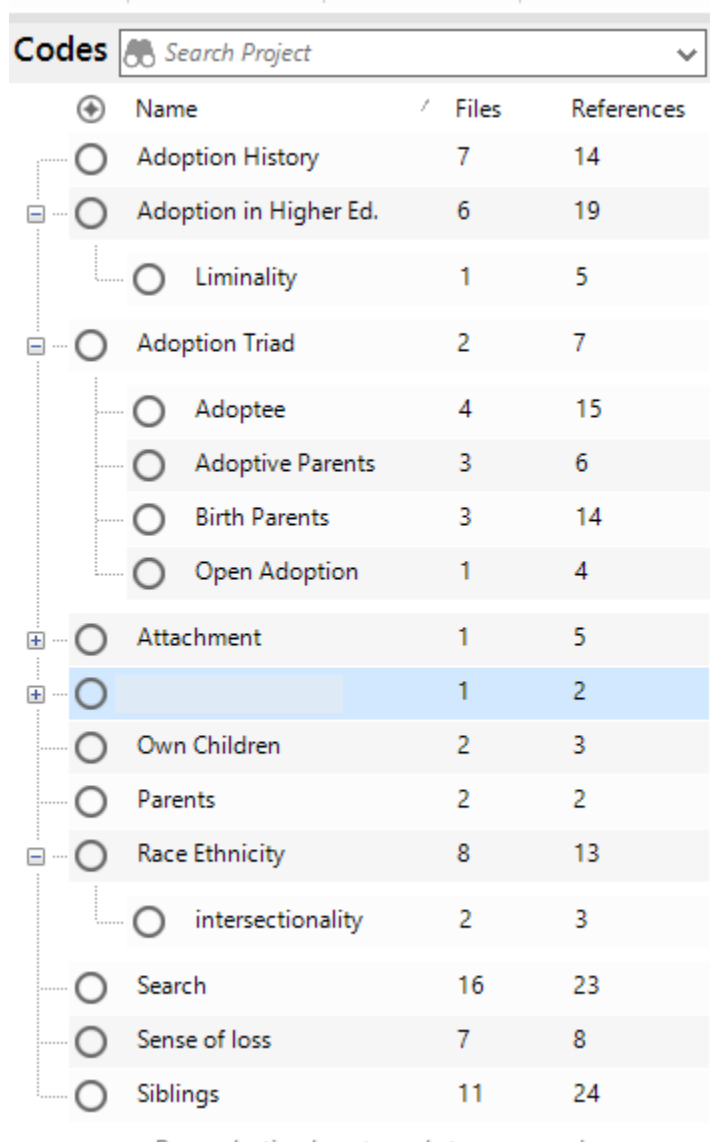
Figure 1: File Classifications. July, 2020.

Having this File Classifications in mind ahead of time helped me to name my data files appropriately and remind me to search out different types of data from different sources, both digital copies and hard copies. The one File Classification that I added was the "Birth Mom" folder, because, as my birth mother, I have significant data to utilize from my search since she is the one I searched for and found. Since I have a variety of data that all pertain to her that fit in the other categories, it was more helpful for me to make a folder that contained all pertinent information around her, including photos, email communication, personal letters, etc. Having already written my chapter two, I had a good idea of what codes I would be utilizing in this project, as they are many of the same sections and sub-sections of my review of literature. By utilizing my proposal, I was able to make codes and child codes even before I had reviewed all my data because I knew what themes were prevalent in my research. For instance, the first code I

made was the adoption triad, which consists of the child codes of the adoptee, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents. Another prevalent code was that of race and ethnicity within the adoption realm, which can be a large part of the child code of intersectionality of transracial adoptees.

Name	Files	References
Adoption History	7	14
Adoption in Higher Ed.	6	19
Liminality	1	5
Adoption Triad	2	7
Adoptee	4	15
Adoptive Parents	3	6
Birth Parents	3	14
Open Adoption	1	4
Attachment	1	5
	1	2
Own Children	2	3
Parents	2	2
Race Ethnicity	8	13
intersectionality	2	3
Search	16	23
Sense of loss	7	8
Siblings	11	24

Figure 2: Initial Codes. July, 2020.

Due to the nature of my doctoral degree in Student Affairs in Higher Education, it was important for me to include adoption within the higher education setting in order to show the importance of recognizing and supporting adopted college students. By knowing my theoretical

frameworks ahead of time, like Arnett's emerging adulthood theory (2000), Schlossberg's

transition theory (2011) and Turner's concept of liminality (1969), I was able to easily name and

categorize my codes ahead of time because I had many papers and articles written that utilized

these theorists. When I first started diving into the data, I thought I would have more data

regarding my birth mom and my adoptive mom, but this initial data compilation shows that I

have the most codes within the Siblings code, followed closely by the Search code. However, I

have more data files in the Search code than in the Siblings code. During my proposal defense, I

was asked: How do my family members (both biological members and adoptive members) feel

about being included in my research? I spent the most time talking about my adoptive mom

because she is alive, while my birth mom passed away before we could meet. However, I did not

expect to have so much data on my siblings, both biological siblings and adoptive siblings. This

made me realize the importance of communication with my siblings just as much as I need to be
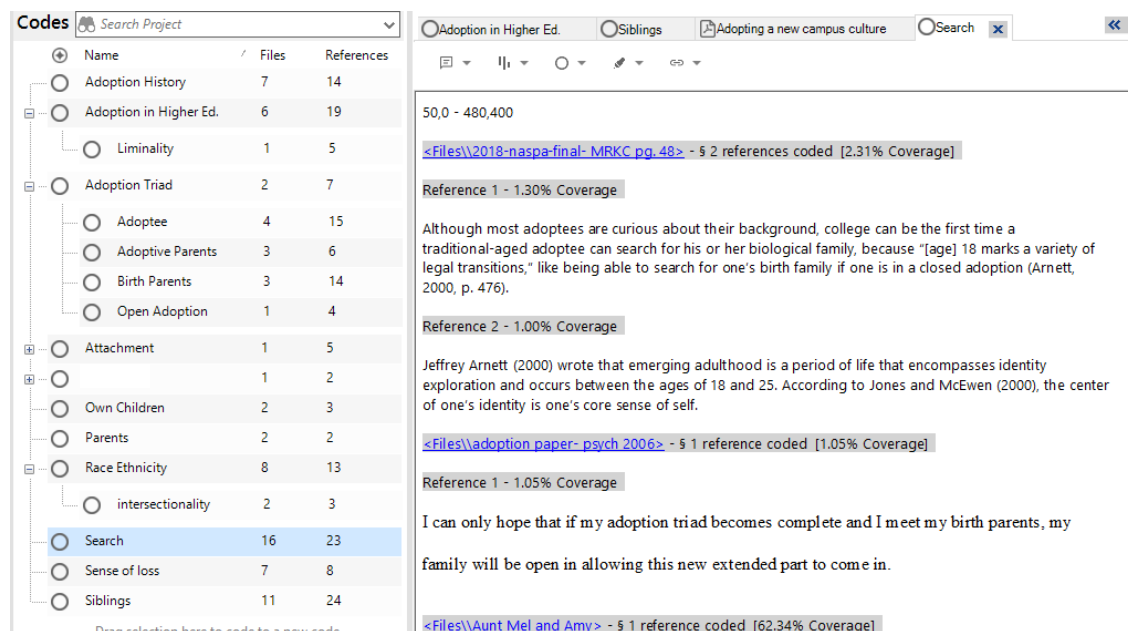
in touch with my mom.

Figure 3: Initial Codes Notes. July, 2020.

Coding was an important part of my data analysis, as it summarized, distilled, and condensed my data, not just necessarily reduce the data collected. Coding is the transitional process between one's data collection and more extensive data analysis (Saldaña, 2016). It is the fracturing and connecting of data (Chang, 2008). Researchers use codes in order to chunk data into "similar units of meaning or description or inferences together in order to analyze data and answer the research questions posed in a study" (Bhattacharya, 2012, p. 232). Codes then help researchers find patterns among the data, which typically describe a researcher's 'five R's': routines, rituals, rules, roles and relationships (Saldaña, 2016). These codes and patterns will then lead to categorizing, which leads to themes and concepts, which is how we get to more general and higher-level constructs like assertions and theories.

Some of my initial codes that I utilized related to my adoption search process were siblings, search, a sense of loss, adoption triad, communication, and race/ethnicity. When I paired those codes into clusters, I realized some overarching themes came through with the people they were associated with: interactions with my birth mother, interactions with my birth sister, and interactions with my birth aunt. This led me to utilize to utilize Flanagan's Critical Incidents methodology (1954) to best sort out my themes, which I then connected to student development within the higher education realm. This methodology states that the "critical incident technique is frequently used to collect data on observations previously made which are reported from memory" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 339). While this methodology often involves observed behavior, it can be used to simplify the usefulness in problem solving and developing broad psychological principles.

Once the prevalent themes became evident, I used Chang's (2008) ten interpretation strategies that connect the themes and codes to the research findings. Through data

interpretation, I connected the present to the past, analyzed relationships affected by my research, compared social and cultural constructs and ideas, and finally, framed my research with theories (Chang, 2008). These theories that are often used within higher education were analyzed from an adoptee point of view, in order to begin to fill this research gap within the realm of higher education. After that, I learned how to organize my data into concepts and codes based off of themes from the journals and articles that pertained to my review of literature or types of data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). For instance, I had codes such as adoption history, email communication, and conference presentations. While it was helpful to have all my data digitally organized in one place, it was not getting me to my next step of data representation.

After I coded the data and found common themes, I felt lost. Reading Bazeley and Jackson's (2013) chapters 10 and 11 have helped guide me in making the queries by asking the questions that help dive deeper into the query and visualization aspect of the Explore section of NVIVO. After reading about queries, I now know to ask questions of the data by seeking further description, comparing and contrasting, and relating the codes to what I am expecting to achieve. My autoethnographic data relates well to Goetz's (Bazely & Jackson, 2013) idea of "thick description" by helping me seek out a deeper understanding of my cultural experiences as an adoptee.

At first, I did not think the Text Search query would work well with my research because so much of my data is scanned documents and JPGs, meaning NVIVO cannot automatically scan all the words. Therefore, I needed to spend quality time coding my files and making sure I had organized each file into the appropriate codes or memos. Then, after playing with queries, I realized the power within the Text Search Criteria by selecting which types of data to pull from. In my case, I pulled from Files, Codes and Memos. I like the idea of using Annotations and

Cases, but I think Memos will be the most applicable to my autoethnographic research. After I

designed my query to search the Codes and Memos as well as my Files, I found Text Search

Query to be helpful. Since my research revolves around my search for my biological family, I

first mentioned the word "search" to see how it is used in different contexts. The Reference and

Text sections were not very helpful because, to me, it was just another way to state the data from

the Code section. However, the "Word Tree" classification helped me to see how this word is

prevalent throughout my data since I am a visual learner. What I like about this "Word Tree"

classification is that it shows both context before and after the word "search." As you can see,

search is a common theme that is often followed by my/one's/their biological/birth family. It

makes me wonder about the differences between when someone uses birth vs. using biological

because they are synonymous. While I like the "Word Tree" and would like to use it for other

words, I wish it listed the specific file from where it pulled each sentence.

Figure 4: Word Tree. July, 2020.

The next type of query I pulled was a Word Frequency Query. Similar to the Text Search Criteria, I needed to make sure I had checked the Files, Codes and Memos data to pull from so that all my documents and data types were represented within this Query. I narrowed my search to the top 50 words to show only those words that had a robust frequency. The Summary section helped to show in graph form the types of words and frequency in an organized fashion.
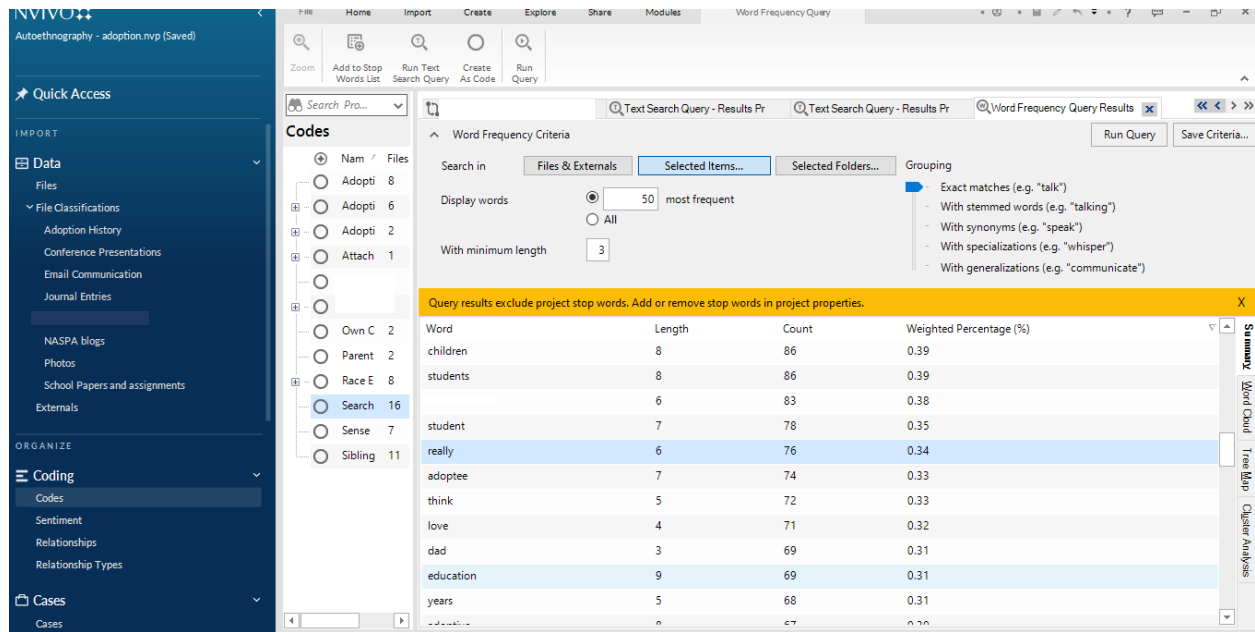
Figure 5: Word Frequency. July, 2020.

Another format I found to be helpful was the "Word Cloud" section of this Word Frequency Query. As a visual learner, it is another way to display common words throughout my data and show that my research on adoption and family is on track.
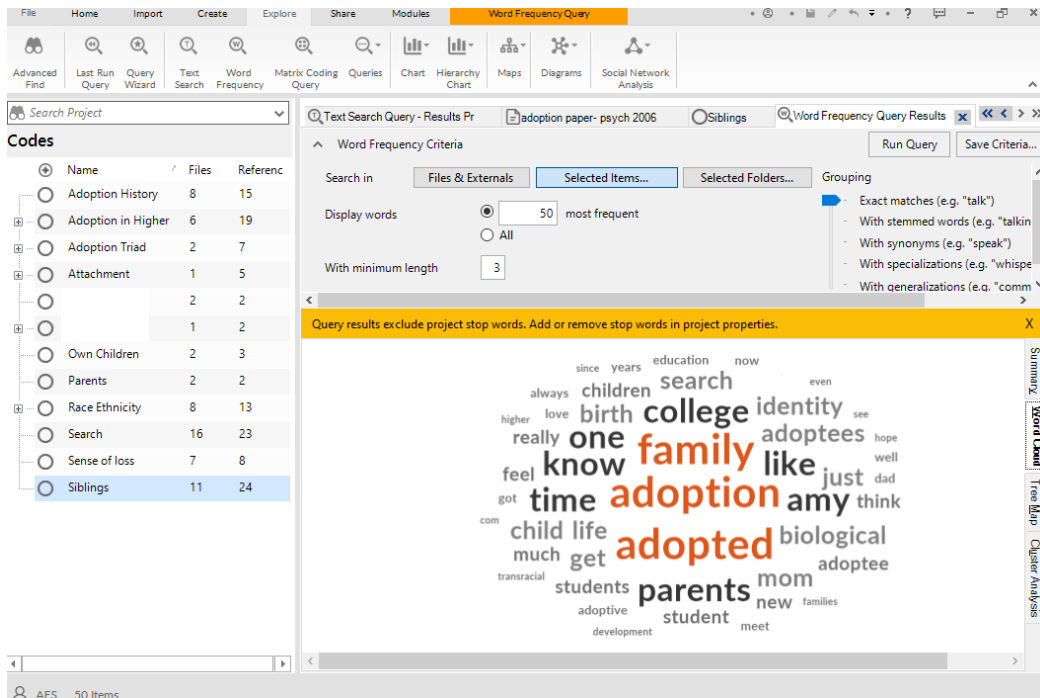
Figure 6: Word Cloud. July, 2020.

Another type of Word Frequency Query that helped represent my data in a different was

Cluster Analysis. It was helpful that it clustered all the data, but I had to keep scrolling through

the findings to find sections helpful to my data. One of the more robust sections was the section

about siblings. I found this to be on track with data that showed "siblings" as the code with the

most references. While I had thought much of my research would be about my birth mom and

adoptive mom, these queries shed light on the importance of my siblings in my search.
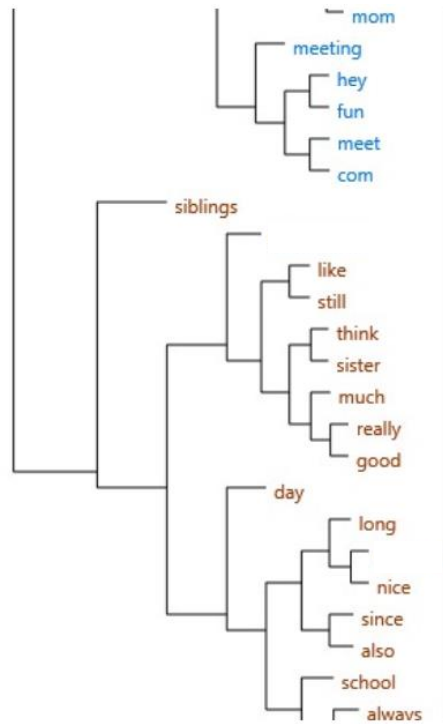
Figure 7: Cluster Analysis. July, 2020.

 After talking through these next steps with my professor, I was able to recode my data in order to best suit my data representation for this chapter. By rearranging and recoding my data by major moments in my adoption search story, I was able to refocus my research into my narrative storytelling. This narrative can be broken down into the pivotal moments of my search, which I realized I had already written on August 12, 2017, which I had an impromptu conversation with a fellow doctoral student, who mentioned he was writing his autoethnography utilizing Flanagan's Critical Incidents methodology. While my critical incidents were from my own memory as both the researcher and the subject, this type of methodology helped me organize my data into distinct, observable moments that could become pivotal points that turned into my narrative inquiry.

Codes | Search Project

Name	Files	References
1. 18 LETTERS	2	10
10. 2015 CHRISTMAS	2	3
11. 2017	3	3
2. 2008 Search and Reunion	7	27
3. 2009 AMY LETTER	5	12
4. November 2009 ANNIVERSARY	2	2
5. CONTACT	2	11
6. 2012 DEATH	3	5
7. 2013	MEETING	4	13
8. 2015 EDLEA 838	4	7
9. 2015 AUNT	3	12
Adoption History	8	15
Adoption in Higher Ed.	7	20
Adoption Triad	2	7
Attachment	1	5
	2	2
	1	2
Own Children	2	3
Parents	2	2

Figure 8: Critical Incidents Coding. July, 2020.

Data Representation

By using a data management system like NVivo, I kept learning new ways to organize

and digitize my data. At first, I sorted my data based off my theoretical frameworks and themes

like adoption history and siblings. Then, I was able to dive deeper into the data by using queries

and visualizations, which helped me to realize some common themes like the relevance of

siblings and my search. Then I learned how to seek and pull information like patterns,

comparisons and contrasts from the data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The assignments in that

data management course helped me document my progress on my data management throughout the semester.

As qualitative inquiry is continuingly gaining momentum, autoethnography is becoming more profound in the research world as more researchers are sharing their narratives through their own stories. Through my data representation, I am alongside other qualitative researchers in

> proving [my] ideas are the most exciting, [my] research is worth talking about, [my] theory understands paradox and contradiction, [my] methodology is the most rigorous, [my] excerpts are the most memorable, [my]relationship with the participants is the most honorable and reciprocal, [my] implications are most vital, and [my] criticism is the most astute. (Cahnmann, 2003, pp. 30-31)

Through continued study of my document analysis, I am discovering concrete universals, which are "[images], anecdotes, phrases, or metaphors that keep coming back until the researcher-poet is sure the concrete detail means something more than itself" (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 32). In sharing my research as an autoethnographic researcher, I must also maintain ethical research practices to demonstrate quality research.

Through reflection and more narrative writing, I was able to tie each critical incident with a pivotal person from my adoption journey, mainly my birth mom, my birth aunt and my birth sister. The diagram below shows a comparison between my search and reunion in 2008 with the anniversary one year later. While there is more data from the 2008 search and reunion, the data provided in 2009 and 2010 is just as rich because it juxtaposes the feelings and beliefs from the year I found my birth mother with the reality of what our relationship would look like two years later. Words and phrases like "bitter," "emotional," "at peace," and "It won't be the same every time" validate my feelings of being let down after my search.
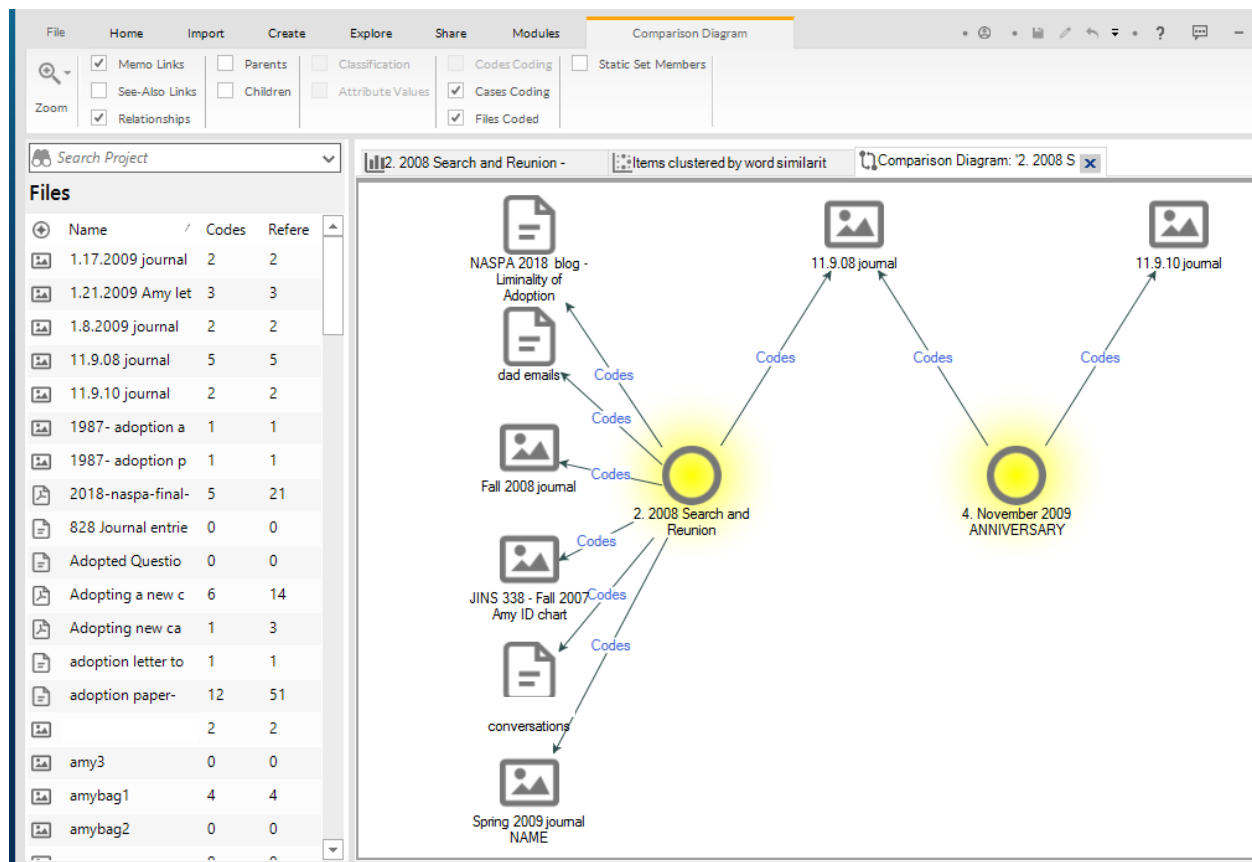
Figure 9: Diagram Juxtaposition. July, 2020.

Upon rearranging my data to reflect the person with the critical incidents, I was able to

take my analysis one step further to find the overarching themes of adoptee search letdown,

adoptee search benefit, and adoptee search identity because each theme ties in with pivotal

people from my search. Adoptee search letdown ties in closely to my birth mom, adoptee search

benefit ties in closely to my birth sister and my birth aunt, and adoptee search identity ties into

myself as the adoptee. Being able to put a name on the experiences I felt on my adoption search

process helped to clarify my experiences as an adoptee experiencing valid emotions throughout

my search and reunion process.

Rigor and Ethics

In autoethnography, there is vulnerability in sharing your story because, while it is from

the writer's perspective, close the stories of close family or friends are oftentimes intertwined

with your own story. Therefore, it is important to protect your family and friends through confidentiality because "people are always present in self-narratives" (Chang, 2008, p. 68). Some ways to do this would be to use pseudonyms, write in nom-de-plume, or not use data from people who say no after the official IRB process. While I was the central focus of my research, I utilized archival data from biological and adoptive family members with whom I needed to maintain ethical relationships by anticipating risks that might arise from my data collection. I used member checks with my adoptive and biological family members to see if they gave me permission to include them in my adoption story. Not only did this help them get accustomed to talking about my adoption story through their lens, it also helped to visualize my biological family tree in order to help me, as the researcher, understand about whom they are talking so that I do not have to interrupt them for clarification.

Maintaining ethical narrative practices has been an important part of my research. I have put measures in place to hold myself accountable since autoethnographic research can be tough to validate when the participant and the researcher is the same person. In preparing to represent my findings, narrative inquiry became the best way to display my adoption search story. Because narrative inquiry is relational oftentimes between the researcher and the participant, autoethnography alters that sense of relationship when the lines between subject and researcher blur together as the same person. Because "[ethics] deals with moral principles that govern our human behavior" (Kim, 2016, p. 101), I had to keep in mind both the way I was writing and what I was writing. Even though autoethnography deals with the perspective of the researcher, other people are oftentimes included in the story telling and narration, so keeping in mind one's relationships in the writer's narrative practice is important.

Reflexivity plays an important role in rigor and ethics checks for qualitative researchers. Reflexivity involves two steps to help check the researcher with their ethical review: the "first step back is the reflection of the objective observation of the research subject; the next step back is the reflection of the reflection of the observation" (Kim, 2016, p. 105). I worked to complete the first step in my observation of my research by looking at my various data sources through triangulation. Effective triangulation of data seeks to corroborate various types of data and methods into one display. I was able to utilize NVivo software to consolidate and compare my data. The next step in reflexivity is reflecting on my reflection of my data observation. I worked through this step with member checks and peer debriefing. By double checking my stories with family members and sharing my research process with a peer, I was able to be inclusive and validate my stories while also learning how to best restructure and reformat my data representation in a way that was more inclusive and informative to my audience.

Limitations

As with every type of research, there were some limitations to this study. One limitation was the limited time and resources that I could use. Another interpretation of a time limit was the fact that I, the research subject, am 33 years old and have been out of college for 10 years. As such, I am still living my experiences as an adoptee and learning how being adopted intertwines with my daily life into adulthood. In terms of resources, this study was limited to the resources I have acquired from my adoption process over the years, but there were still many documents that could be helpful in my research that cannot be acquired, such as a newspaper article announcing my birth in order to seek out the biological father, my birth mother's diaries during my pregnancy and birth, and a few emails that have been lost through email account changes. These

examples of time and resource limitations show the possibilities of further research that could be done given ample resources and time.

Trustworthiness

I treated my autobiographical data with critical, analytical, and interpretive points of view to detect the cultural undertones of what is being researched (Chang, 2008). At the end of a thorough self-examination of my data within its cultural context, I gained a cultural understanding of myself and others directly and indirectly connected to my research, drawing upon my own subjectivity by studying the larger group of adoptees' experiences. As I studied my own part of the adoption world, it was important for me to maintain the quality of my research through self-reflection and peer debriefing as I delved into this emotional and personal topic, in order to help me stay unbiased and to keep my researcher focus.

An important aspect of every autoethnographic study is the researcher's "willingness to become vulnerable as both the researcher and subject of [their] research" because that vulnerability becomes the foundation on which these studies are completed (Wong, 2009, p. v). Through my confessional-emotive writing style when discussing my data, I invite readers into my personal journey by writing about the personal agonies, relationship developments, and disappointments that have accompanied my adoption journey. Through confessional-emotive writing, authors expose their personal confusions, dilemmas, and problems that have come from the story they are telling. In this case, that story was my adoption search and reunion story. I opened the door for readers to participate in my own story through my own self-exposure and vulnerability because "self-discovery in a cultural sense is intimately related to understanding others" (Chang, 2008, p. 34). Through self-narrative, adoptees and both their adoptive parents and biological parents can begin to understand the complexities of relationships within adoption.

A focus on the outward social and cultural context of one's personal story, as well as looking inward and becoming vulnerable with your own story, can help to maintain quality within research (Wong, 2009). Through this focus, I developed a better understanding of how I relate to others and how my story can fit into a wider cultural context of adoption searches within the higher education world. Some logistical ways to maintain rigor and trustworthiness within my study were to utilize a kinship diagram to help visualize myself within my family as well as to use an autobiographical timeline of the time period of my study (Chang, 2008). For me, this was a timeline within my higher education experiences; I began the search process for my biological family during undergraduate school and through graduate school, as I became more involved with NASPA and more interested in researching adoption in higher education.

Triangulation of Data

In order to have effective triangulation, it is expected that the researcher use more than one type of data for triangulation in order "to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods" (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). Triangulation was imperative to my research due to my use of various data sources. These sources showed my relation to these social institutions that showcase the social norms and standards for which I am implicated, such as being an adoptee. I triangulated my data by utilizing documents and artifacts to enhance the accuracy and validity of my autoethnographic writing rather than my own personal memory, which can oftentimes only reveal partial truths, be unreliable and unpredictable, and can trigger extreme emotions (Chang, 2008). By comparing multiple sources of data, I was able to paint a picture of my adoption search process as a whole from various contexts shown in letters, emails, journal entries, photographs and more.

Peer Debriefing

       Through reflective processes like member checks and peer debriefing, I dove further into my own subjectivities in regards to my research. Peer debriefing is when the researcher meets regularly with another person in order to talk through the researcher's personal understanding of their own perspectives and values within their research and to receive confirmation that their analysis is happening correctly in order to "[support] the credibility of the data in qualitative research and [provide] a means toward the establishment of the overall trustworthiness of the findings" (Spall, 1998, p. 280). Peer debriefing is "working with a peer who is informed with methodology and topic for academic rigor" (Bhattacharya, 2012, p. 26), which is helpful for qualitative researchers to help confirm the flow of their data representation. Trust between the researcher and the peer debriefing partner was proven to be an integral part of the relationship if authentic and valuable research was to be produced. The peer debriefing partner is oftentimes a trusted peer, coworker, researcher, or professor that does not have to be an expert in the research content area, but should at least be knowledgeable of qualitative research and the peer debriefing process. I checked in with a peer through a Zoom call who has taken numerous qualitative research classes and who is also writing her dissertation within the realm of student affairs in higher education. I sent her what I had written in my dissertation thus far to have her read my emerging findings, and I reviewed what she thought about how it related to the existing literature in the field of higher education.

       Since peer debriefing is such an individualized approach to establishing credibility among one's research, there are no set standards and guidelines to follow. Instead, the researcher and their peer debriefing partner must establish their own goals in terms of timeline, frequency of sessions, and methodology to guide the sessions in order to help the researcher work through

their own subjectivities and preconceptions of their own research (Spall, 1998). Therefore, my peer and I established our own goals, timelines, and frequency of sessions as needed for our respective qualitative research.

While I had originally organized my data into ten pivotal moments and matched each major incident with a song lyric and a theoretical framework, one of my peer debriefing sessions helped me reorganize my data into a more natural flow. This was helpful for me to talk through how I came to use lyrics from "Show Yourself" as a relevant and current way to relate readers to my search and my journey (Menzel & Wood, 2019). Even though I felt passionate about how the song relates so well to my search process, I was not convinced that readers would understand the connection. In talking through my thought process and the meaning behind the song, my peer said that, while originally she had not thought too much of the song even though she had seen *Frozen II,* she understood its connection to my adoption search story. She helped talk through how I was representing my data and helped me see a better way of incorporating the song into my dissertation. Another way my peer helped me to reorganize my paper was to talk through the organization of the theoretical frameworks incorporated into my data representation. She helped me separate some incidents into better spaces within the different theoretical frameworks.

Member Check

Due to the nature of my research, my data and my story comes directly from family members, both biological and adoptive family members. My story is not completely my own, but rather a compilation of many people's story seen from many different views. Since I wrote in an autoethnographic way, I told my side of my story, but I had to keep in mind the people that are intertwined with my research: my birth mom, my birth sister, my birth aunt and my adoptive family members. Member checks, which are participant or respondent validation, are "used to

validate, verify, or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative results" (Birt, etc., 2016, p. 1802). It was important for me to do member checks with family members that I mentioned in my research. Since my birth mom is deceased, I could not do a member check with her, but I could ask my birth sister and my birth aunt for their permission to tell aspects of my story where they might be intertwined.

When I reached out to my birth sister about my autoethnographic research, she encouraged me to share my story and said she would be interested in reading it. My birth aunt was also supportive, and said she trusted my writing, so there was no need to review it. Since my adoptive parents have helped with my adoption search, they have been intrigued with my story. My adoptive mom read my birth mom letters narrative. She has always encouraged me to pursue my Ph.D. and continues to be, even when she has become a part of it. She said she remembers the birth mom letters incident differently, but she would be interested in reminiscing together just because everyone sees each situation differently. We had a chance to talk through it together and realize that we were both coming at the incident from a different place. I wanted the letters, because I felt like they were mine, and she wanted to hold back the letters to not get my hopes up of finding my birth mom because she could be in a bad place. After the fact, I now realize my adoptive mom was right, and my birth mom was still a struggling addict who could not maintain positive relationships with others, myself included. My mom remembered a few details differently than I did, like how she thought I had dinner with my friends that day, whereas I thought I ate dinner at home. She thought my friends were influencing my decision to seek out the letters, but it was always something I had expected on my 18th birthday. It was good to receive that feedback to remind me that my autoethnographic writing comes from my

perspective, even though other people are often involved, which is the point for member checks and other reflective practices like peer debriefing.

Summary

While autoethnography might not be the most familiar word used in research, it certainly is becoming an increasingly popular method within qualitative research. This method allows researchers to have an insider view of their study by being both the researcher and the research itself (Wong, 2009). Autoethnographers must analyze their own personal data as they would any other data in order to have the most fair, unbiased viewpoint. By analyzing and interpreting their data as data, not narration, autoethnographers can provide valuable insight into their study and in turn, provide valuable research to their field (Chang, 2008). Through my autoethnographic study of my search for my biological family during my higher education experience, I brought valuable information to the fields of adoption and higher education so that student affairs professionals can learn practical ways to help adoptees go through the search process during their emerging adulthood years. As I had many valuable resources like my official documents, email communications, personal publications, journal entries, and photographs, I was able to analyze this data to gain personal information as well as share my data with the world. This can only be done thanks to the valuable research that comes from autoethnography. In the next chapter, I dive into the research by sharing my narrative of my adoption search story and how my lived experiences are incorporated into my higher education journey.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Since I have grown up knowing of my adoption and what it is, the idea of adoption has always been interesting to me. In doing research, I have discovered the lack of information about adopted college students. There is an abundance of research on adopted children, specifically transracially adopted children, and there exists plenty of resources for adoptive parents. However, when these adoptees grow up and leave the house, what happens to their development as an adoptee while pursuing college? In researching the history of adoption, it became evident that the idea of adoption and the adoption processes have changed dramatically over the years. I realized how passionate I was about this topic when I was presenting my portrait bag in my first qualitative research class. In this qualitative research course, I learned about narrative inquiry and the power of storytelling through autoethnography. After careful deliberation with faculty members, I decided to pursue autoethnography as my method of research. I am glad to have found this type of research in order to best display my own experiences in a way that will highlight the importance of adoptees in higher education.

In spring 2015, I took my first qualitative research methods course. One of our major assignments was called the bag portrait, where we decorated a grocery paper bag with our life story, important themes to our lives, and what we were interested in researching. It was in this class that I decorated my bag to show adoption at my core, my family as pivotal, and my higher education experiences at Truman State University and Kansas State University as core to my educational and career journey. On one side, I wrote "What's at your core?" and answered underneath with "adoption." All my life, adoption has been at my core. It is my fun fact for icebreakers, it is the reason I look nothing like my siblings, and it is the core of this dissertation. I have always been open about my adoption because my adoptive parents were open with me. The

more I share my story with others, the more I realize how adoption comes in all shapes and sizes. Adoptions can be open or closed, adoptions can be to a family member or to a stepparent, or adoptions can be to complete strangers. Adoptions can have happy endings, or adoptions can be laden with heartbreak after heartbreak. From adoptees to siblings to birth parents, anyone on a college campus could be dealing with the effects of adoption at any time. While adoption had always been at my core, it was not until my advanced student development theory course that I realized adoption was not a significant part of any student affairs theories or curriculum. Out of my 600-page student development theory textbook, four sentences mentioned adopted students.

Figure 10: My Bag Portrait. April, 2015.

Fast forward two years in this qualitative research course when we were sharing our bag portraits with our class. As we focused on this type of arts-based research, we were to talk

through how it highlighted ourselves as professionals, students, and researchers. As I was sharing my life story as an adoptee who searched for my birth family while in college, I became emotional as I touched on very personal topics like being a discounted baby who was deemed "unadoptable" (Brodzinsky et al., 1993, p. 184) because I was multiracial and my birth mom had used drugs during her pregnancy. Not only was I emotional about the financial aspect of literally buying another human, but I was reliving the disappointing outcome of my search process when telling my class that I had searched for my birth mom, not necessarily to find answers, but to showcase who I had become. When my birth mom did not reciprocate that desire to connect, I felt so rejected. Even after six years, my adoption wounds were still fresh.

That semester, I carpooled to class with two peers from another institution. From this carpool, we had grown close enough to question one another in loving ways. One of those peers asked me at the end of my presentation if I had thought about using adoption as my research topic for my dissertation. My initial reaction was "no," but that question lingered with me for days and upon much discussion with my major professor and my qualitative research professor, here I am presenting to the world an autoethnographic dissertation on my search for my biological family. Research is lacking in terms of adoptee student development, which is why I am excited to help shed light on adoptee experience in college.

A lot of adoption research focuses on the hardships, struggles, and attachment issues that adoptees face; however, there are also positive traits that can accompany adoption like resiliency and openness. Some studies have shown that adoptees can score better at prosocial behavior while having fewer social problems compared to non-adoptees (Nickman et al., 2005). I have experienced resiliency through my search and reunion process. I recognize that not every adoptee can search and reunite with their birth family, and I recognize this as a privilege. By my adoptive

parents being willing to pay for my search, and by being a domestically adopted person, it was easier to find my birth family than if I had not been able to afford it or if I had been an international adoptee.

While there are some adoptees who have experienced poor adoptive family relationships, I wanted to demonstrate, through my research, that adoptees do not have to be portrayed as unwanted, broken or failing. Adoptees can be strong, resilient, and successful. I have been able to maintain strong and healthy relationships with my adoptive family, who has supported me through my adoption search, and with members of my biological family like my birth aunt, who has been involved, caring, and loving towards myself and my family ever since we got in contact. While the outcome of my adoption search did not end with a quality relationship with my birth mom, I have come to realize that I can learn about my biological family history from more than one source. In this case, those sources turned out to be even be more reliable and helpful than the one I had originally sought out. In the next section, I show how my college experiences helped to develop my sense of identity and culminate in an adoption search during my senior year of college, during a time of both assurance that I was on an educational and career path that I was proud of as well as a time of uncertainty as I started to open the door of possibility of connecting with my birth family.

Glory Days

When people think about their glory days, oftentimes people are referring to high school. High school sports, dances, activities, and first romances all encompass a time of freedom, growth and independence. I, on the other hand, think of college as my glory days. I was living on my own for the first time in my life, I found degrees that I was passionate about, and I found fast friends that have lasted over the years. During my freshman year, friends in my residence hall

invited me to a game called arena ball that they played in a local church gym. Imagine indoor soccer plus tag plus football with a side effect of lots of bruises and sweat, and that's arena ball. It's a fast-paced, high contact sport that we would play every Sunday night. While it wasn't affiliated through campus or a church or anything, one of the members was a member of a campus church group, the Baptist Student Union (BSU), which I ended up joining my junior year of college. Through arena ball and the BSU, I found friends that have lasted me a lifetime. We went on spring break trips together, and have continued that tradition with a few friends that get together each year. Arena ball and the BSU were not my only extracurricular activities; I became heavily involved in residence life during my sophomore year of college.

Through residence life, I found passion in working in student affairs in higher education. My brother was the first one to recommend that I apply to be a Student Advisor (SA), mainly because of the free room and board that came along with it. However, little did I know that my first student worker position would lead to four years of student employment in our Residence Life department and a lifetime commitment to higher education. My brother told me once that college is the most selfish time of your life. I was in college at the time and disagreed because I was involved in clubs that volunteered in the community; I wasn't selfish! However, I look back and understand what he was saying. For traditional 18-year old college students, it can be the first time they are living on their own, choosing their schedules, choosing the food they eat, and choosing how to spend their money. Now that I am a wife, mother, and higher education professional, I understand what he meant. College can be the most selfish time of one's life, and that's ok. It's a time to learn who you are, make lifelong friends, and find your passions.

Starting my sophomore year, I became a Student Advisor (SA) in Casa Hispánica, a learning community that promoted Spanish speaking and Hispanic culture through faculty-led

programs and events. I was an active participant in Hablantes Unidos, an organization that helped teach English to native Spanish speakers in my college town, and I studied abroad in Costa Rica for a summer to improve my native Spanish-speaking abilities. While I thought I had aced my SA interview, I came to find out years later that I mainly got the position because of my Spanish degree. While I may not have been a top pick the year I interviewed, I later went on to win SA of the Year, Program of the Year, and was nominated for Homecoming Court through the Residence Life department. It goes to show that sometimes your number one pick can be a dud while the mediocre hire can shine bright! After being an SA for two years, I went on to become an Assistant Hall Director my senior year of college and was double majoring in Spanish and Elementary Education. Truman State University does not offer undergraduate degrees in education; you must major in an undergraduate degree and then go on to get your Master's in Education, which was a popular route for many students. Many students interested in elementary education majored in Psychology or English, but I chose to major in Spanish as I had interest in the language, and I thought it would be a good skill to have as well as a marketable quality to have. I often wonder if I majored in Spanish as a way to feel closer to my Hispanic heritage and the unknown side of my biological family. Because I look Hispanic, people will come up to me and automatically speak Spanish, and I felt that learning Spanish was a way to curb the awkward "I don't speak Spanish" conversations that would lead into me having to explain my adoption story to strangers.

Student Affairs Calling

While I started college planning to be an elementary teacher, I found a calling in student affairs, and did not want to let that go. However, my university had a five year master's in education program which I had already been accepted into my senior year of college. Knowing I

was already accepted and on track to graduate with a master's one year after undergraduate school, I had a choice to make. Do I try to apply to graduate schools in higher education, or do I continue on my path to the Master of Arts in Education (MAE)? My mentor sat with through this and encouraged me to continue on with the MAE because most entry-level student affairs positions called for a Master's degree in student affairs or related field, and she said a Master's in Education counts as a related field. She said I just needed to put myself out there and gain other student affairs experience while pursuing my master's degree. So, I did. I became a residence life summer conference assistant, an office assistant, and an assistant to the coordinator of student development, training, and orientation. I had found a passion and a calling in all things residence life.

I was able to get a full-time hall director position right out of graduate school, even with just a Master of Arts in Education. Since then, I have found work in student life, student activities, TRiO student support services, and transfer and early college programs, and I have never stopped pursuing my passion in student affairs. When I was in my first year as a hall director, I found a mentor who had received his Ph.D., and when I asked him what inspired him to get it, he said, "If you truly believe in the power of higher education, why wouldn't you get the highest degree possible?" And that stuck with me. When I found an institution that I planned to be with for a while, I starting pursuing my Ph.D. in Student Affairs in Higher Education, because I wanted to show that I believed in the power of higher education, and I wanted to have ample opportunities to pursue careers in both student affairs and academic affairs.
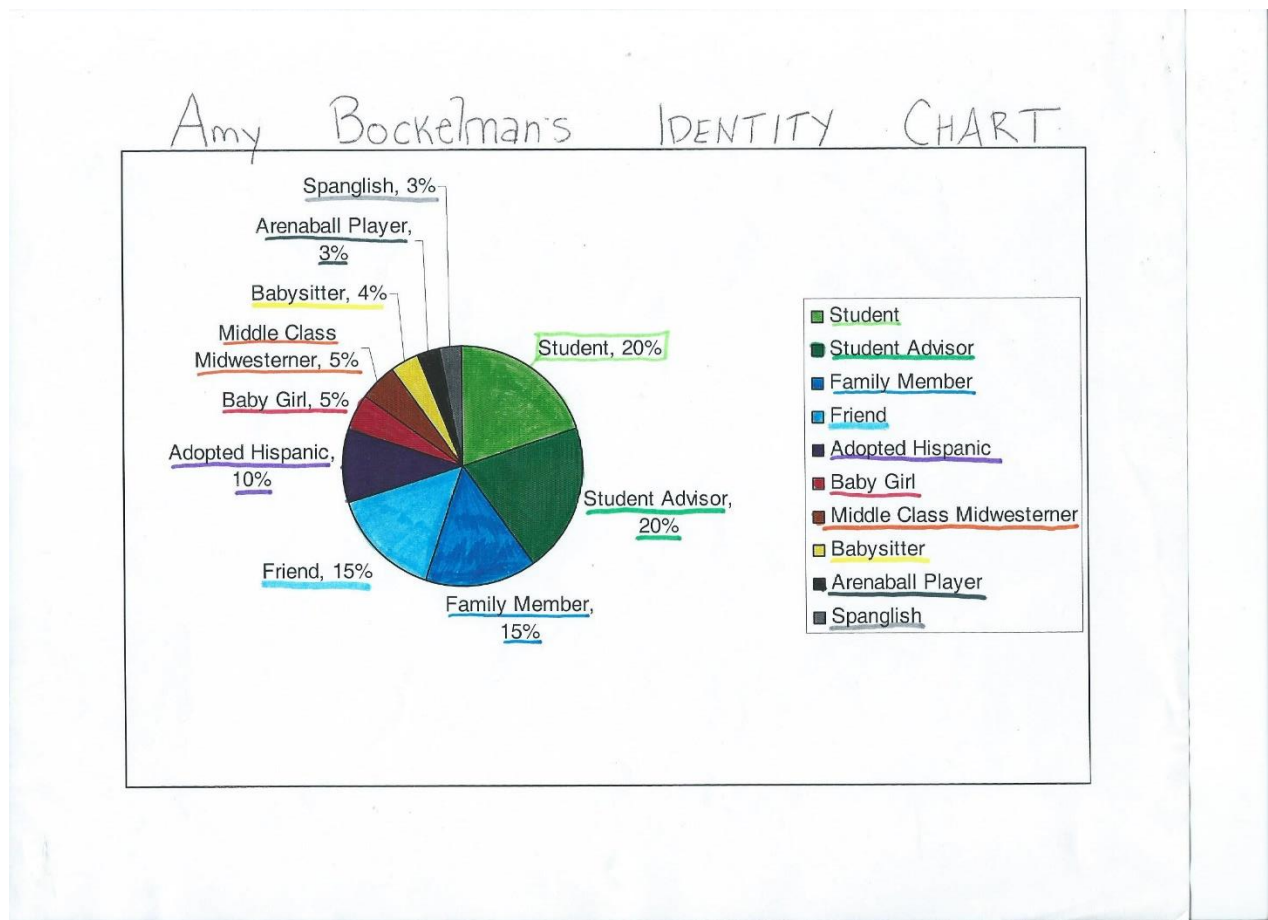
Figure 11: Identity Chart. July, 2020.
 Adoptive Identity

The above figure sums up my college experience. I took an interdisciplinary course called "Race and Ethnicity: Latin America" during my junior year of college, and I had to create the aforementioned identity chart. I summed up my identities as 20% student, 20% student advisor, 15% family member, 15% friend, 10% adopted Hispanic, 5% baby girl, 5% middle class Midwesterner, 4% babysitter, 3% arena ball player, and 3% Spanglish. This identity chart speaks volumes to how I presented myself in college. I was, first and foremost, a student, and a good student at that. I rarely skipped class, I attended extra-credit out-of-class options, I was on the Dean's Honor Roll a few semesters, and I was accepted into a Master's program during my senior year. Just as important was my student advisor identity, which allowed me to attend

college at a discounted rate with my room and board provided, but also as importantly, gave me leadership skills, helped me meet lifelong friends, and helped me find my passion in student affairs.

When thinking of my relationship with others, I was equally a family member and a friend. And when thinking about my own identity outside of the student world, I was an adopted Hispanic, baby girl, middle class Midwesterner who had interests in babysitting, arena ball and Spanish and English languages. The adopted Hispanic identity came to the forefront of my identity search during my senior year of college, when I decided to search for my birth mom. While I could have searched for her when I turned 18, I decided to wait until I felt sure of myself and of who I had become and was becoming. During my senior year of college, I was dedicated to working in residence life, I was accepted into the Master's program, and I was sure of who I had become. But I wasn't sure of who I was when I was born, so I decided to search for my birth mom to find those answers to my adopted Hispanic identity. This search turned out to be instrumental in my identity development in college, an identity that has turned out to be under-researched within the realm of student affairs in higher education.

Adoption is "one of the most compelling and complicated matters in human affairs" (Strauss, 1994, p. vii). When I inform others that I was adopted, I often get asked the same questions regarding the adoption: "How long have you been adopted?" or the infamous "Where are you from?" My race, ethnicity, and heritage are often questioned due to my dark hair and tan skin tone. Because of this, I have been asked anything from if I am Sicilian and Italian to Greek and if I know any Native American languages, implying a Native American heritage. My response of being adopted and only knowing I'm ¼ Hispanic always seems like a let-down to those who ask. Since I have grown up knowing of my adoption and what it is, the idea of

adoption has always been interesting to me. As Strauss (1994) wrote, adoption is fascinating because "[a] child's destiny is irrevocably changed when papers are signed. The person an adoptee would have been will no longer be" (Strauss, 1994, p. 5). She went on to say that the people who go on to shape that adoptee's life are "[whoever] happens to be at the top of that list, whoever makes for a good match on paper" (Strauss, 1994, p. 5). This idea that random chance determining someone's life and future is mind-blowing. The "What if" questions are endless for adoptees, which is often why adoptees seek out their birth families.

As qualitative inquiry is continuingly gaining momentum, autoethnography is becoming more prevalent in the research world as more researchers are sharing their narratives through their own stories. Through the presentation of my data, I am alongside other qualitative researchers in

> proving [my] ideas are the most exciting, [my] research is worth talking about, [my] theory understands paradox and contradiction, [my] methodology is the most rigorous, [my] excerpts are the most memorable, [my]relationship with the participants is the most honorable and reciprocal, [my] implications are most vital, and [my] criticism is the most astute. (Cahnmann, 2003, pp. 30-31)

Through my autoethnographic research, I am "[situated] in the liminality of being the researcher and the researched" (Bhattacharya, 2013, p. 613). It is my hope that my adoption search and reunion processes as told through the pivotal people and critical incidents within my adoption journey can shed some light on this under-researched topic.

Themes

Through my autoethnographic research, I processed through data to group codes together, and then develop themes that encompass my search and reunion experience. The following

overarching themes stem from the reunification of my birth family, first with my birth mom and then with extended family of my birth sister and birth aunt. As I have lived this search and reunion experience, I have learned both the heartache and the happiness that can accompany such a process. Throughout my college experience, I was living the raw emotions of excitement, anticipation, and utter disappointment of the lack of communication from my birth mom, all within my last year of college. Through my research, I have been able to dig deep into those emotions and cherish what has come after a disappointing search: answers, relationships, and cherished family heirlooms from family members for whom I did not intend to search. Adoptees are often portrayed in two lights: the embittered adoptee who is angry for being given up, or the happy adoptee who has a wonderful home life with parents who chose them. I hope my research can show that it does not have to be either/or; it can be both. Adoptees can have a great adoptive home life and have feelings of longing or sadness because they were given up. Adoption is a complicated process, and I hope to show that even through tough processes like search and reunion, adoptees, like myself, do not have to be broken by a disappointing reunion; they can show resilience and strength from their experience.

Adoptee Search Letdown

Since this is an autoethnography, I am writing from my perspective as the adoptee. Much research has been done on the adoption process, but I am looking at my own search from my perspective. While I do include stories and interactions with members of my adoption triad like my birth mom and my adoptive parents, I am choosing to use themes that only describe my experience as the adoptee. As an adoptee who is fortunate enough to have access to my birth records, I was able to search and to reunite with my birth family in a matter of months. I started the search process in June 2008 and reunited for the first and only time with my birth mom in

November 2008. While I recognize that some adoptees are not able to reunite with their birth family, I am writing from a perspective that ended in reunification, from which most of my research comes. I recognize that there can be letdown from a search process that might end with no reunion, or no answers, or deceased family members. However, my themes stem from the expectations that came from reunification.

With expectations comes letdown. I realize that there can be great letdown and disappointment from a search that ends without reunification, which I would call "adoptee search letdown." Because my search process did end in reunification, the after effects of reunification are resounding within my own research. Not only did I go into a search with expectations and ideas of the "family romance fantasy," I was lucky enough to reunite with my birth mom who said she wanted to get to know me. It was that initial communication of relationship expectations and wanting to get to know one another that led to my reunion letdown. I wavered between the terms "loss" and "letdown," and when I think about the idea of loss, I feel that you have to have something to begin with. But the idea of letdown can come from just expectations without tangible things like relationships and communication. In the end, I only spoke with my birth mom once on the phone and ceased communication with her six months after that phone call. She passed away three years later, never to have reached out to me again. One phone call and a handful of emails in six months does not equate to a relationship to me, so the true letdown comes from no relationships forming at all.

Helplessness of Waiting

My birthday is always a time of mixed emotions. On the one hand, I love celebrating with others, cake and presents. However, growing up, I would also become very sad on my birthday and I never really knew why. My adoptive mom thought it had to do with my adoption, maybe in

thinking about my birth mom, wondering if she remembered or even celebrated my birthday. However, my 18th birthday meant a lot more to me than just being able to vote. I could not search for my birth family until I turned 18, because I was in a closed adoption. Also, my adoptive mom had hand-written letters from my birth mom that she wrote to me around the time of my birth that she kept locked away until I became an adult, or so I thought. When I turned 18, I thought I would get those letters. At the time, I did not live with my adoptive mom, but I saw her regularly and on special occasions, like on birthdays. So, the night came and went. I ate cake and opened presents, but still I received no letters. So, on my way out, I casually asked her for the letters from my birth mom. I told her it was my understanding that I would get them now that I was 18, but she seemed to disagree. She was flustered; she said, "No, not now." I was devastated. I left, and made it to my car before I broke down, sobbing hysterically. I had lived 18 years expecting these letters that night, and I left with nothing. My adoptive mom had them, and at 18, I felt that they were mine, not hers. They weren't written to her; they were written to me. I felt so letdown.

A few days later, I got an email from my adoptive mom stating that she had "no desire or intention to keep [me] from [my] birth mom" (personal communication, June 1, 2005). She went on to say,

I have always thought it would be good for you to know her, and I have told you that from the beginning. Since you have never shown much interest when we've talked in the past, I can't help but wonder why the sudden request and what your motives are. Are you being influenced by your friends? Or was your 18th birthday a marker in your own mind? What brought this up? What are your expectations? What do you hope to gain? (personal communication, June 1, 2005)

She then said that she would support me if I wanted to search for my birth mom, but she also thought that it would be a good idea to wait until my life was more stable until I pursued my birth mom. She told me that my birth mom was in an emotional state when she wrote me the letters, and that neither she nor my dad knew anything about where or how my birth mom was now other than she was on probation for drug abuse when she became pregnant with me, a child who was not her husband's. She ended the email saying she mailed me the letters along with my birth mom's biography sheet, and that she wanted the best for me.

Turning 18 was a pivotal point for me, as it was a time when I thought I would gain knowledge about my birth mom through her letters. It is only natural for people to live with expectations. While I may not have necessarily been ready to legally search for my birth mom at that time, gaining access to those letters was a type of search that many adoptees seek out (Krueger & Hanna, 1997). My adoptive parents were supportive emotionally and financially of my search, which began in the summer of 2008. Since my parents still knew the social worker who handled my case, it was not hard to locate my biological information, nor locate my birth mom. We arranged through our social worker the day and time that worked for us both, and then it was just the waiting game.

Unanticipated Sense of Letdown

While I had been devastated on my 18th birthday, I realize now my adoptive mom truly wanted to protect me. Most of what she feared was accurate. My birth mom was still a recovering addict who did not have a stable relationship with any of her other three children. Even though I ended up waiting three years until I was about ready to graduate from college to search for her, my adoptive mom could not protect me from the hurt and disappointment that came in finding my birth mom. Nine minutes before the arranged time, I wrote in my journal:

Twenty-one years. I'm not worried, or nervous, or scared. Just excited about what we talk about today and about her impact on my life in the future. I know [my adoptive family] are my family and forever will be, through it all. Getting into contact with [my birth mom] was just something I've always wanted and I kinda think of it like all the dinners I've eaten with the families I babysit for. Kinda like a family friend you know, who knew me LONG ago. And just so happened to give birth to me. Ok…well…here goes…I'm ready. (personal communication, November 9, 2008)

So, on Sunday November 9, 2008 at 1:30pm, I called my birth mom. And she didn't answer. She didn't just not answer once. She didn't answer for almost an hour. I double and triple checked that email communication with our social worker. I made sure the day, time zone, phone number all matched up. Sure enough, I didn't get it wrong. The beginning of my search, I was seeking answers about my birth mom and my biological history. I had waited 21 years for that phone call, and then I had to wait almost an hour more than I had planned.

I called my boyfriend at the time, concerned that I had messed something up, and he said to try it one more time and then he would come over if nothing happened. Sure enough, I tried one more time, and a man answered. A man who started talking to me like he knew me, and a man who said my birth mom was there and was excited to talk with me. In my mind, I was thinking, "Wouldn't she want to answer the phone and talk with her biological daughter, who she has not spoken to ever, in 21 years?" Alas, he handed off the phone and my biological mom answered. When I asked her if I had gotten the wrong time, she said the cat must have knocked the phone off the hook. Once again, I thought, "Wouldn't she check the phone to make sure it was ready for the call?" We talked for a bit, and she caught me up on members of my birth family, and I caught her up on my interests at school. Then, 15 minutes into our phone

conversation, the only time we ever talked in person, she said, "It was nice to talk with you today, but I need to go to bell choir practice now." And that was that. We never spoke to each other again, we never met, and we rarely ever communicated after that.

Later that night, my boyfriend did come over, and I just cried all night. I didn't know how to handle the emotional roller coaster of feeling confident in myself and ready to take on contacting my birth mom, only to be completely letdown by an unanswered call followed by a 15-minute conversation. She gave me life 21 years ago, she gave me up 21 years ago, and she couldn't even give me 21 minutes? I felt so unwanted, unloved, and letdown. I didn't know how to process everything other than to just cry.

Just as I only talked with her once on the phone, I only ever sent her one piece of mail. By January of 2009, I had last heard from her right after Thanksgiving 2008, yet I had emailed her three times since then with no response. Since I had her physical address, I decided to give her one last chance, and I mailed her a hand-written letter that I wrote out twice in order to have a copy for my journal. I wrote,

> I haven't heard from you lately and was wondering if you still wanted to be in contact with me, or if it was a bad or busy time for you. If so, just please let me know. I'm curious about you and your family, and honestly, about my beginnings. In case you were wondering, I'm not in any way mad about being put up for adoption. I was raised in a caring and loving family and am proud and blessed to be a part of [my adoptive family] – so thanks for choosing them to be my family. I think it takes a strong person to know what's best for their child, even if that means giving them up. I would never ask to be in a different family, but that doesn't mean I'm not curious about my biological side. Feel free to write, email or call me. I'd love to hear from you in any way.

She wrote me an email a few days later saying she was back online, and she ended it in the following way: "Even when you don't hear from me, I am always thinking about you, and NOW I don't have to worry that you are happy and having a fulfilled life" (personal communication, January 24, 2009). I replied saying it was nice to be in touch, and it would be nice to see a picture of her and her family, but she never addressed that. In fact, I never saw a picture of her until three years after she had died. Through our emails, I hoped that she would show herself to me emotionally and physically. This sense of liminality, the in-between state (Arnett, 2000), stems from being adopted, and on a further level, from being a transracial adoptee. I had asked my birth mom to send me pictures of her, and I had sent her pictures of myself that she said she enjoyed. However, I never received any photos from her. Having grown up in a family where I did not look like anyone else, I was seeking out answers as well as proof of my biological history. This is common among transracial adoptees, who are adoptees raised by a family of a different race (Burrow & Finley, 2004). I grew up in a liminal space having never known anyone who looks like me. When I wrote her the letter in January 2009, I was in the state of liminality. I was betwixt and between the state of pursing a relationship with her, but also letting it go if that was her desire (Turner, 1969). That sentiment changed from fall 2008 to spring 2009.

When we first talked and emailed in fall 2008, I had talked about meeting up sometime and even reached out about meeting around Christmas that year. When she didn't respond, I pulled back to just email and letter exchanges. After a few exchanges in spring 2009, she asked if we would like to meet that summer. She followed that question up by writing, "No pressure. If you would rather just e-mail, that is okay too" (personal communication, April 29, 2009). I took some time to respond because I had a lot going on then. I had broken up with my boyfriend,

graduated from college, and attended my adoptive sister's wedding. I responded on May 18, 2009 by writing,

> I don't know how comfortable I would be meeting at this point in my life. I've had a
> pretty rough semester dealing with…life. I think I would be more inclined to just e-mail
> for now. Do you have a functioning computer now?" (personal communication, May 18,
> 2009)

She responded on that same day, and that was the last time I ever heard from her in any way. She said she was perfectly fine with just emailing for now. She was glad to hear from me, and she was sorry I was having a rough semester. She said things were rough for her as well with an ankle fracture and getting laid off. The last thing she said was, "Your birthday is coming soon. I can't believe you will be 22! I hope you have a wonderful birthday. I'd love to keep in touch when and if you want to. Love." (personal communication, May 18, 2009).

Eleven years later, two things stick out to me: that she remembered my birthday and that she said she would love to keep in touch. Considering that was the last communication that I heard from her and she lived for another three years, I can't see how the latter is true. I emailed her back on May 31, 2009, requesting any pictures of herself or her family, and I never heard from her again. I now knew that she did in fact remember my birthday, which is maybe why I don't get as sad on my birthday anymore. I think I could gather from her inconsistent communication that any semblance of a relationship I had imagined was not going to happen. Even though I could walk myself through the steps of getting over it, there were still hard times and reminders of this disappointment ahead.

Adoption is a part of you that never fully "goes away." On November 9, 2008, I wrote that I was excited and ready to talk with my birth mom. One year later, it was the anniversary of

my adoption reunion, and I had not had any communication with my birth mom in almost six months. I was on the quad at my college, and I became very emotional. It was the anniversary of our phone conversation, and I was trembling. I was crying. The conversation did seem like a dream that I could not quite grasp, and the past year seemed like a blur of fuzzy communication. It had been a year of transition. Most of my friends on campus were in class, so I called my good friend from home and cried. I told her I did not know why I was feeling this way, but that I could not stop crying. I felt so disappointed by the lack of relationship with my birth mom, and that one-year anniversary mark of our phone conversation hit me hard. My friend supported me and kept me company while I needed her. Later that night, I was crying again and I texted my ex-boyfriend that it was the year anniversary of my communication with my birth mom. I thanked him for supporting me the previous year, on the day that I talked with her and felt so letdown. Although I didn't ask him to, he came over that night and gave me a hug. I just cried and said I didn't know why this was hitting me so hard. The last thing he said to me as he was leaving was, "It won't be the same every time," and he was right. One year later, I wrote in my journal, "So, it's been two years since I chatted with [my birth mom], and let's be real…. I'm still bitter. I'm surprisingly at peace now about it and not as emotional as I thought I would be" (personal communication, November 9, 2010).

Adoptee Search Benefit

While the reunion with my birth mom did not go as I had expected, there were other unexpected benefits that came from this reunion. Even though I knew I had extended family such as biological half siblings, aunts, and cousins, I had not based my search process on them. However, I developed much better relationships and learned a lot more about my biological side from those relationships than I did from the communication I had with my birth mom. From my

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analysis came the theme that I called "adoptee search benefit," to reflect the often unexpected benefits resulting from the adoption search and reunion processes. As with adoptee search letdown, I am approaching this from the vantage point of being the adoptee. Even though I talk about other members of my adoption triad, I am writing from my own experience, and therefore, need to frame it as such. I chose "benefit" over "gain" because I feel that one thinks of gain in terms of tangible things like relationships, artifacts, heirlooms, etc., while benefit can entail intangible items such as knowledge or family stories. While through my reunion I did gain relationships with my birth sister and my birth aunt, I recognize that other reunions might result in benefiting from learning medical information or knowledge about one's birth story. If someone's search results in deceased family members, the adoptee might not gain a relationship, but they can still benefit from knowledge of their past.

I was lucky enough to benefit from two significant relationships to my birth mom: her sister and her daughter. Upon analyzing my data, I realize that each relationship allowed me to get to know a different side of my birth mom, no holds barred. Her sister, my biological aunt, was able to tell me stories about their childhood, about my birth mom before she had kids and before she became addicted to drugs and alcohol. My biological sister, on the other hand, only knew my birth mom after the addictions began. She was honest about her own upbringing and about my birth mom's lack of relationship with not just me, but also with her other three biological children. My birth sister was the one who I met first, who I learned the truth about my birth mom first, and who contacted me about our mom's passing. My birth sister helped me to learn the truth about our mom's lack of communication and lack of relationships towards the end of her life, while my birth aunt helped me to learn my own birth story since she was with my birth mom when I was born. My birth aunt has been able to help me answer family medical

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questions, learn more information about our extended family, and provide me with family treasures such as pictures and heirlooms. Both my birth sister and my birth aunt have played an important role in my adoption reunion story.

Birth Sister

On May 26, 2010, almost a year after I lost touch with my birth mom, I received a Facebook message from my biological half-sister. We have the same biological mom but different biological dads. She said she had been back and forth about contacting me but felt that it would be nice to get in touch. While our initial interactions were full of small talk and getting to know each other personally, it took me almost six months to work up the nerve to ask deeper questions about our birth mom and our family history. While that may seem like a long time, I think building upon our relationship and gaining each other's trust was significant in order to pursue the heavy questions and answers that pertained to our birth mom. I told her I had been thinking of that part of my family history lately, and I had not heard from our birth mom

in over a year and a half and I guess I was just wanting closure with that part of my life if that's what she wants. I don't mean to burden you, but it'd be nice to have some answers. I understand that you may not know everything, but I'd love to hear whatever you're willing to share. (personal communication, January 22, 2011)

She replied the next day that she didn't want to be the one to tell me this, but our birth mom struggled with addiction and was not reliable in her nor her siblings' lives. I responded that night by saying that I didn't know any of the information she had shared, "but it's good to know her lack of communication had nothing to do with something wrong at my end. This whole time I've wondered why the communication stopped/kinda never started, and now I know" (personal

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communication, January 23, 2011). While it was not the best news to receive, there was a weight lifted when she validated that it wasn't me in the wrong.

The relationship with my birth sister did not blossom under the best of circumstances, but I am glad we had established our relationship prior to the summer of 2012 at which time she messaged me saying our birth mom had passed away after a fall and other health complications. Adoption search theory (Brodzinsky et al, 1993) encompasses six universal themes to the adoption search process, the first of which is loss and mourning. Although I never met my biological mom, I found out about her passing three years after we made contact. While we had lost touch within the first six months of contact, this was still a difficult loss to process. I was lucky enough to have made contact with my birth sister during that time, so she could tell me when my birth mom passed. I found about her death on a work retreat, and I struggled to mourn the loss of someone I did not know. Although I had already lost touch with her twice, it was difficult for me to process because I felt that I should feel certain ways: sad, disappointed, angry, etc. While I worked through those emotions, I have come to realize that the emotion I now feel with her passing is relief. Relief that there is no pressure to get in contact, no more feelings of rejection, and no more thoughts of "what if?" I am also fortunate to be in contact with my birth sister and my birth aunt, so I can still receive answers about my past and about my birth mom. Through online interaction and eventually meeting in person, I learned more about my birth mom from my birth sister than I did from my birth mom herself. Since she is six years older than me, she grew up with our birth mom and experienced the ups and downs and the instability that our birth mom offered. While I did not get the answers I wanted from our birth mom, my biological half-sister helped me gain a sense of home within my birth family and my birth story.

While I struggled during the days surrounding my birth mom's death, I learned that I was strong enough to make it through the loss of mourning someone I had never met. The interesting timing is that she passed away the day before my bridal shower, a day when many influential women and friends that have supported them their whole lives shower the bride with love and support. I wrote to my older adoptive sister that

> it was a pretty rough few days […] but I think the shower was a really good reminder of all the support I've had over the years, even being adopted. I don't know if you knew this, but I have a biological half-sister who is 6 years older than me, and I'm fairly certain that one reason my birth mom chose [our adoptive family] was because of you- so that I'd have an older sister to grow up with just like I would have in that other family.
>
> (personal communication, July 21, 2012)

Growing up, I never had the closest relationship with my older adoptive sister, but as we got older, we have become closer. She is my adoptive sibling who is most interested in my adoption story, so it is neat to find out that she is one of the reasons my birth mom chose my adoptive family.

Though I was invited to my birth mom's funeral, I let my biological half-sister know that I would like to meet members of my biological family under better circumstances. However, she was collecting stories for our birth mom to display at the funeral, so I did send one in:

> [My birth mom] is the reason I'm here today. She chose to give me life, and she chose to have me live it with my adopted family, and for that, I am forever grateful. It takes a truly strong person to know what's best for their children, even if that is choosing to have them raised by another family. I have led a wonderful life, and I have [her] to thank for that.
>
> (personal communication, July 31, 2012)

I've had people console me when I tell them my birth mom passed away before I could meet her, but I don't feel sad. I believe that everything happens for a reason, and I have grown to learn about her through others. I honestly believe that I have benefitted from getting to know about my birth mom, the good and the bad, through her sister and my birth sister. In learning about her from others, I have been shielded from experiencing the hurt and trauma she has inflicted on others, while still getting to learn about our family history and some of the circumstances surrounding my birth.

A year after my birth mom had passed away, I was going to be in Chicago to visit some college friends. Since my birth sister lived in Chicago, I reached out to see if she would be interested in meeting with me, and I am thankful that she did. My birth family is unique in that I have a half-sister who is six years older than I am, as well as two younger siblings who are about eleven and twelve years younger than I am. My three half-siblings all have the same dad, while I have a different biological dad. My birth mom was married to their biological father when she got pregnant with me by another man, and then she divorced their father and gave me up for adoption. A few years later, she re-married their father, had two more kids, and then re-divorced their father. I learned all of this when I was at breakfast with my birth sister.

Although I was in Chicago with friends, I thought it was important to meet with my birth sister one-on-one, and I am thankful that I did. I later wrote to my adoptive family about this experience and described it as "a nice breakfast, and I'm glad we met. I don't foresee this as me and [my half-sister] becoming best friends, but more so just keeping in touch every couple months and meeting up" if we are ever near each other (personal communication, July 29, 2013). I often think of my relationship with my birth sister as like a distant cousin, someone who you are family with but do not necessarily see them all the time and only on some holidays.

Meeting my half-sister was not actually the emotional roller coaster I thought it might be. As a highly emotional person, I thought for sure I would cry when I met her, when I talked to her about my birth mom, or even when I left her. But I surprised myself by being fairly at peace with the interaction. I wrote to my adoptive family that

> [seeing] as how I'd never have the opportunity to meet [my birth mom] (probably a good thing, in the end), meeting up with [my biological half-sister] was a nice step to getting to know at least one person from my biological family. (personal communication, July 29, 2013)

This meeting with my birth sister allowed me the closure to make amends with my birth mom while starting a fresh relationship with my birth sister, one that has continued slowly but steadily over the years. We have met together a few times when I have visited Chicago, and we have kept in touch via social media and through our mutual aunt who is our biological mom's sister.

Figure 12: Biological Sisters. July, 2013.

Birth aunt

Not long after my first qualitative research class, I began talking to my biological aunt,

who was my birth mom's sister. Considering my birth sister did not know about me until she was 26, I could not get any birth or pregnancy stories from her. However, my biological aunt was the reason my birth mom moved from Chicago to Kansas City for a short while. My biological aunt was married to someone who had roots in Kansas City, so they settled here. When my biological family realized my biological mom needed to leave Chicago and be in a safe place until I was born, they found a place for mothers who planned to put their children up for adoption. The place was located near my biological aunt, so that my birth mom could have the comfort of nearby family. Not only did birth aunt know about my birth mom's history, she could actually share stories about my birth mom's pregnancy and my birth story.

Two years after meeting my birth sister, I met my birth aunt, who had lived in Kansas City most of her life, just 15 minutes away from where I grew up. It was an emotional meeting. What I did not realize was how impactful this relationship with my birth aunt would grow to be in my life. My biological aunt is not one to sugarcoat things; she let me know the good and the bad with regard to my birth mom. She let me know that my birth mom had come clean from drugs and alcohol when she moved to Kansas City and that she had given birth to me at a local hospital, but that she had slipped back into old habits of alcoholism after moving back home to Chicago. She let me know that it was not just me that my birth mom lost touch with over the years; she had been in and out of touch with her own kids that she kept, her sisters, and her parents. She also let me know that, when she was sober, she was a great person. My birth mom was caring and loved to help people. So, she made sure to let me know that my birth mom did think of me and that any lack of relationship between my birth mom and me was not my fault. Her mode of operation was to distance herself from people, and I was no exception. That emotional meeting has led to over five years of getting to know my birth mom through other

people's eyes. My birth aunt has given me letters, pictures, and trinkets, and she continues to be an active part of my life.

Figure 13: Biological Aunt. August, 2015.

Adoptee Search Identity

When I got the letters from my mom after my 18th birthday, they were sufficient to tide me over until I grew more in my own identity during those three years in college before I decided to search. While at 18 I do think I was looking for answers, I realized three years later that I was no longer looking for answers but rather looking forward to showing off who I had become. Throughout my years at college, I had developed my sense of identity. The semester before I graduated from college, I was a student assistant, a double major in Spanish and

Elementary Education, and active in many clubs on campus. I was on Homecoming Court, in my first serious relationship, and confident in who I was and who I was becoming. It felt like the right time to search for my birth mom. I had pride in my upbringing with my adoptive family, as referenced in the letter I wrote to my birth mom. I was not angry that I had been given up for adoption. I had a loving adoptive family, three older siblings who cared about me, and a quality college education that was leading me to a successful career pathway. In that letter, I thanked her for choosing my adoptive family, for choosing life, and for being strong enough to know what was best for me. Although I was hoping for other circumstances, I believe everything happens for a reason. Through the process of searching and finding my birth family, I have gone through highs and lows. I have lost relationships that never really started and gained relationships that I never sought out. I am honest and open about my adoption story, and I believe all of my experiences have made me who I am today. Some adoption stories end in being beaten down by one's personal story, but I have chosen to accept my story, the good and the bad, and to remain resilient and strong. And, I have chosen to still be proud of being adopted, to be happy with my adoptive family, and to be happy with my biological family as well.

My birth aunt would answer many questions I had surrounding my birth mom's pregnancy, she would grow to become a regular family visitor, and she would offer me the first insight to seeing a picture of my birth mom. A few months after meeting my birth aunt, she sent me a care package in the mail for Christmas. Along with chocolate and a few Christmas gifts, this package contained the first picture I ever saw of my birth mom, and she was beautiful. She looked to be in her younger 20's, just a few years younger than I was at the time, with long brown hair and well put together. It was a professional headshot. I was captivated. Along with that picture came pictures of when my birth mom was pregnant with me. It was the first time I

had seen pictures of my birth mom, let alone her pregnancy with me. She also sent me an engraved poem, titled "Christmas in Kansas" (Henry, 1973) even though my birth mom had lived in Chicago most of her life. So, the fact that she had made this plaque for her sister's sister-in-law's mother, and it found its way back to me, her biological daughter who happened to live in the middle of Kansas, meant a lot.

"Christmas in Kansas"

When Christmas

comes to Kansas

and the stately

sunflowers sleep,

a mystic calm

spreads through

this land known

for its rustling

wheat …….It

reaches beyond

the flint hills

and brings our

loved ones near,

making Christmas

here in Kansas

a most joyous

time of year!
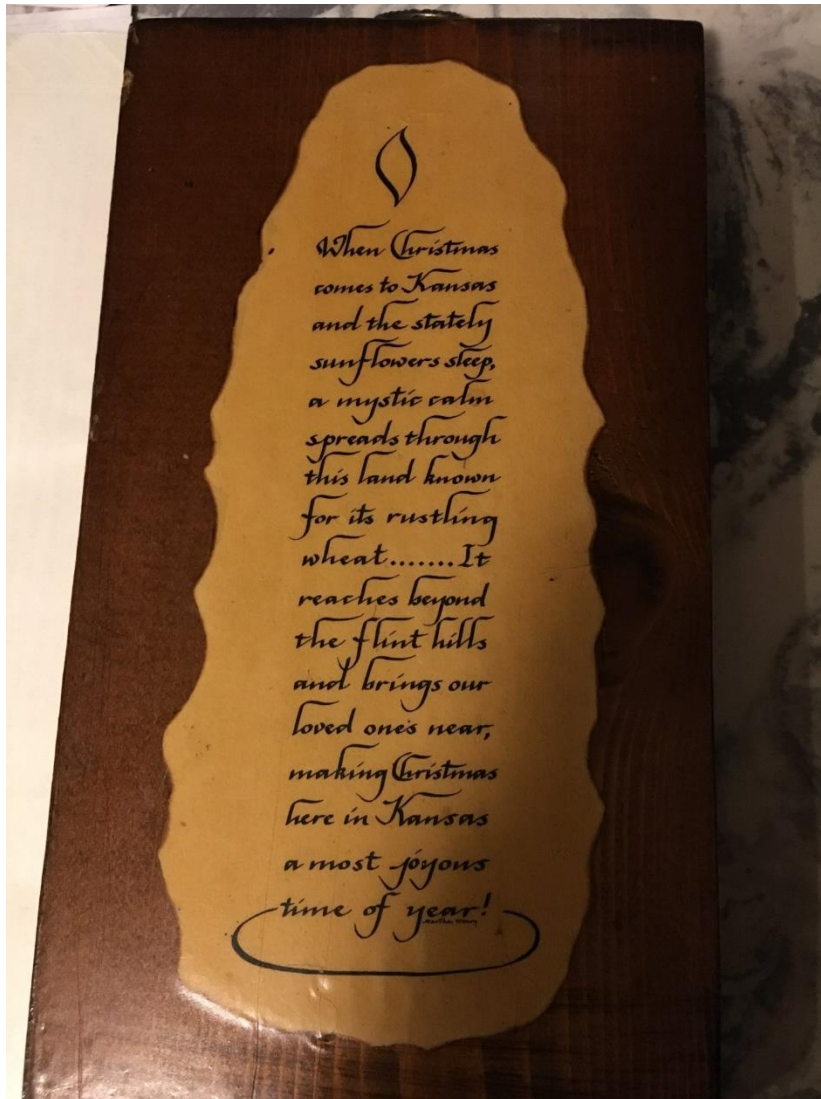
Figure 14: Christmas in Kansas. December, 2015.

As I analyze most of this poem, it is both eerie and serendipitous that my birth mom

engraved this plaque 14 years before I was born, 39 years before she passed away, and 42 years

before I was holding it in my hands. At the time I received it, I was living in Salina, Kansas, and

it was Christmas-time. Sunflowers are the Kansas state flower, the main flowers at my wedding,

and a favorite flower of mine each fall season. I lived in the Flint Hills for two years, and my

husband and most of his family attended Kansas State University, which is in the middle of the

Flint Hills region. I may not remember anything I actually received for Christmas that year, but I will never forget this care package that truly made me feel the most at home with my adoption search process. Since that Christmas, I have become much more confident and capable of sharing my adoption search story with others, which has allowed me to support others in their adoption search journeys. One way I have done so is through an adoptee club that I helped to start at my current university.

Adoptee Club

"Are you adopted?" Three simple words that caused a group to form. My coworkers both responded "yes." I had found them through a simple commonality with coworkers. From that fateful meeting, we come together to form an adopted persons group, encompassing students, faculty and staff that are adopted. We get together on a monthly basis to network with other adoptees, to share our stories in a safe space, and to create a community of adoptees through shared experiences and language. Upon announcing our group at an all-campus get together, we have found other members who are adopted both on our branch and main campuses. Our club has grown each meeting. While we all came from different backgrounds and have different adoption stories, we could all relate and support each other.

Our adoption group hopes to educate our campus community about some important issues regarding adoption and to keep educating ourselves on various facets of the adoption process. For instance, our campus art museum held an exhibit with art from an adoptee that helped to see another person's perspective on adoption. This exhibit raises awareness about civil rights issues for immigrants and sheds light on the adoption process in the United States. It helped facilitate some good dialogue between our group members and helped us focus on adoption as a societal process and not just through our own personal lenses. We hope to bring

this awareness of issues in the adoption and foster care process to our campus community through future programs and presentations.

Summary

Considering adopted individuals touch the lives of approximately 60% of Americans, adoption is an important subject to research (Carp & Wegar, 2002). As an adoptee myself, I have been fortunate enough to be able to focus on my own experiences to answer the following research question: "What was the lived experience of one adopted student who searched for, and was united with, her biological family during her undergraduate and graduate higher education experience?" Upon settling on this type of narrative, I was able to organize my data not only into those critical incidents but also into the pivotal people that relate best to those moments, as most aspects of my adoption story related to someone in my biological family: my birth mom, my birth half-sister, or my birth aunt. From that data, I was able to identify themes that tie in all the pivotal moments and people: adoptee search letdown, adoptee search benefit, and adoptee search identity.

Adoptee search letdown comes after the search process happens, once adoptees know whether or not their search was successful. Upon finding out if they found someone from their search, expectations usually set in: expectations of reunion and relationships with biological family members, expectations of information gained, and expectations of questions answered. However, with expectations comes disappointment, disappointment in the lack of relationships formed, the lack of communication, and the lack of effort. There is a helplessness in being adopted. Someone who is adopted at a young age has no say in being given up and no say in who they are adopted by. The search process can be one of the first times adoptees feel like they have a voice in their own adoption journey. They control how much information they want to share

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and who they want to meet. But, therein lies another helplessness in the waiting. There is waiting in the search process and waiting in reunion. In my case, I waited for a response from my birth mom for only 45 minutes, but in reality, I waited for four years for answers for a relationship before she passed away. With the expectations of a reunion came expectations of a relationship, and when that relationship fell by the wayside, there were reminders on the anniversary of our phone call, on birthdays, and when my birth sister reached out.

While the adoptee search letdown was enveloped by disappointment and anger, my adoptee search benefit came from unexpected relationships enveloped in surprise and honesty from my birth sister and my birth aunt. The adoptee search benefit has allowed me to learn the good and the bad about my birth mom without getting personally involved and hurt from her any more than I already was before she passed away. I have learned about her hardships as well as the good she did for others, and because of her passing, I have gotten relics of her life that were important to her. The benefit of these unexpected relationships has gotten me answers that I never could have gotten from my birth mom, and while it took longer than expected, the waiting has paid off. As an adoptee who waited 21 years to make contact with my birth mom, waiting a few more to make contact with family members who could give me answers was just another part of the process.

Every adoption story looks different, and no two adoptees have the same experiences. Some adoptees have experienced abuse and neglect and are angry at the idea of being given up, while others cherish their adoptive families as their chosen family. However, I do not believe it has to be either/or; it can be both/and. Adoptees can have a supportive adoptive family and also have trauma from being adopted, which never goes away. This trauma can continue and take on different forms as adoptees go through the search and reunion processes. It can come from

expectations being unmet or from empty search processes. But adoptees can choose resilience over trauma. And I have chosen to use my search process to showcase who I grew to be in college: an educated teacher who is passionate about working with college students. I choose to speak truth to my adoption and not sugar-coat it, while also showing the strength I have from my personal adoption story.

Since so many people will be impacted by adoption in some way, shape, or form as a sibling, friend, or adoptee themselves, it is important that student affairs practitioners keep adopted students in mind when thinking about student development theory. Adopted college students are often forgotten in terms of student identity development theory (Carp & Wegar, 2002). From using inclusive language to developing support groups, student affairs practitioners have many ways to help include adopted college students on today's campuses. As I relate my sections back to theoretical frameworks like Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood, and Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, I am able to showcase how my research ties directly into student development theory. Throughout this search process, the ideas of liminality, emerging adulthood, and transition permeated my search experiences. Adoptees often feel liminal as they live in an existence based off the unknown. They could have unknown biological parents, unknown pregnancy and birth stories, or unknown reasons why there were given up for adoption. Even upon finding their biological parents or finding out about their history could lead to more states of liminality, like when I found my birth mom and then our relationship failed to flourish. Adopted college students could be experiencing emotions from anger and sadness to relief and joy. This adoption experience could affect their school work and college experiences, and it is time that adopted students are recognized and supported within the higher education setting.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusion

College is a time for growth and development for students. There are textbooks written on student development theory; there are dedicated offices to certain identities like gender identity, racial identity, and first-generation college students; and there are clubs and activities for any interest from gaming to agriculture. While these opportunities are open for most students, it is important for higher education practitioners to keep adopted students in mind in their practices. While there is an abundance of research on young children adoptees (Neil, 2009), transracial adoptees (Brocious, 2014), and the adoption triad (Ge et al., 2008), there is very little research on adopted college students. There is even less research on adopted college students who search for their biological families while in college.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study was to explore my adoption and search process for my birth family throughout my lived experiences in higher education. The research question that guided this qualitative study was: What was the lived experience of one adopted student who searched for, and was reunited with, her biological family during her undergraduate and graduate higher education experience?

Overview of Findings

Throughout my autoethnographic study, I analyzed my own experiences as an adopted college student who searched for my biological family while pursuing higher education. While the search to locate my birth mother only took six months, I came to realize that the idea of the search is much more than just finding out the identity of my birth mom. The search encompassed meeting my birth sister and my birth aunt, and in turn, learning more about my birth family from them than I ever could have from my birth mom. While the timespan of my research lasted about

ten years, an adoptee's search never really ends, as there are always more questions to ask, more family members to meet, and more information to learn.

As I delved into my adoption research, I went through many different ways of analyzing and interpreting my data. From topical to timeline, I analyzed my data based on critical incidents tied to key people within my adoption search process: my birth mom, my birth half-sister, and my birth aunt. When I coded and re-coded my data, I came to find three themes that best reflected it: adoptee search letdown, adoptee search benefit, and adoptee search identity. The first theme that emerged was adoptee search letdown, which stems from expectations of a reunion with one's biological family. Whether the reunion happens in-person or electronically, expectations can come in all shapes and sizes. When those expectations are not met, letdown can occur. However, that adoptee search letdown can be offset by the unexpected relationships that can form from adoptee search benefit, as did from my biological sister and my biological aunt. Even though very few of my questions were answered from my birth mom, the more I came to know my biological sister and biological aunt, the more answers I discovered through those relationships. The benefit of my search did not come right at first through contact with my birth mom, but rather, it came years later when I established relationships with extended family members.

The final theme that emerged was adoptee search identity. While adoptive identity development is an overarching theory that focuses on being adopted as a lifelong process, adoptee search identity specifically focuses in on the adoption search experience. This search experience can be supported by adoptive identity development, which shows how an adoptee "can reflect on the meaning of adoption or actively engage in a process of gathering information or decision making about what adoption means in his or her life" (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011,

p. 394). Adoptive identity theory outlines three dimensions within one's adoptive identity: the depth of adoptive identity exploration, the internal consistency of the narrative, and the flexibility of that narrative (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). This theory helped me process through some of the critical incidents of making contact with my birth mom as I explored reasons why I chose to seek out my birth family.

While I can only share what I know from my own experiences, I encourage you to get to know your colleagues. Ask the tough questions. And don't be afraid to tell your own story. Since starting this group, I have had a staff member reach out and say they found it very helpful, and they wish they had an adoption group when they were in college. We all work with students who are going through something. Not everyone is adopted. Not everyone has the same family structure or background. But when you are willing to open up about your story, it makes other people feel more comfortable to share their story. Whether you find commonalities among family structure, sports teams or food, those connections could be the difference between a student and staff member leaving your institution or staying because they have found a place where they belong.

Discussion of Findings

Adoption can seem like a stigma to some, but I see it as my foundation that has made me who I am: a resilient, successful adoptee. I am thankful I have been able to search for my birth family, lucky enough to meet members of my birth family, and passionate to share my journey with others. While the reunion with my birth mom was an anticipated transition, the results of her not following through with our relationship turned into a nonevent: an expected event that failed to occur (Schlossberg, 2011). I had sought out a relationship with my birth mom, only to be let down by a lack of communication from her end. My entire search process encompasses the

ideas of liminality (Turner, 1969), the time of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), and the steps with the transition theory (Schlossberg, 2011), which has helped throughout this search process by being able to label my different events and work through how to cope with change.

Congruent Literature

Transracial adoption is a well-researched topic; however, much of it relates to transracially adopted children and to their families. Liminality is a common theme among transracial adoptees growing up among family who look different than they do. As a transracial adoptee, I incorporate liminality on a deeper level by feeling liminal in my own race and ethnicity. I was born Hispanic but was raised by Caucasian parents. Because this liminality is derived by being raised by parents of a different race, it is important for me to not only recognize the liminal space I felt as a transracial adoptee, but also how I felt liminality throughout my entire search process (Kelly, 2019). As a brown-haired, brown-eyed girl raised with blond-haired, blue-eyed siblings, finding pictures and meeting people who had similar physical characteristics as I did was something I yearned for my whole life. The liminality of transracial adoption did not necessarily go away when I met my birth sister and birth aunt. But, when I saw a picture of my birth mom for the first time, I felt a sense of physical trait connection I had been missing my whole life. Even with this connection, there are still pieces missing, since I do not know my biological father's side of my family. "Not knowing (about your adoption story) keeps you waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for the call—of adoption, of death, of story, of what's possible" (Jones, 2011, p. 331). During my adoption search process, I felt all of these: the waiting for answers and the sadness in the death of my biological mom but also the hope that came afterwards from outside family members.

Liminality can speak to many adopted college students' experiences, as noted in Kryder's study on 16 adopted college students, age 18-21 years old (1999). From her qualitative study, she discovered four categories of adoptee experience for her grounded theory: *In the Beginning*, *The Question Mark*, *Alma Mater*, and *Interracial Adoptions* (Kryder, 1999). The two stages that relate most to my research are the Question Mark and the Alma Mater stages. An interesting piece of qualitative data showed that, of the students who had met their birth mothers, "none of the students felt more settled about their biological mothers after having met them" (Kryder, 1999, p. 360). Similarly, I did not find a sense of clarity after contacting my birth mom, either. Some of those lingering questions were not answered until I met other family members.

The Alma Mater stage addresses the growing independence of adoptees during college, largely thanks to being on their own for the first time, meeting other adoptees who share similar experiences, and starting the search for their birth family. My search can relate to the idea that "[many] students linked their choice of major to having been adopted" (Kryder, 1999, p. 365), because of my chosen major of Spanish. I did not realize it at the time, but my transracial adoptee background was a deciding factor in helping me choose Spanish as a major. While I knew I wanted to pursue elementary education, my college only offered a Master's in Elementary Education, so I had to choose a different bachelor's degree. Growing up looking Hispanic but not knowing how to speak Spanish led me to major in Spanish so that, when a stranger comes up to me in a grocery store and speaks Spanish, I am now able to respond. Another similarity between our studies was the importance of finding a sense of belonging, through a club, a campus job, or new friends, all which I found at my alma mater through residence life, which turned into a lifelong career for me.

While my initial search started during my emerging adulthood years in college, the rest of search continued on through adulthood for over a decade now. Browning and Duncan's (2005) research looked at the idea of family membership within adoptee and biological families post-reunion for over ten years. Their longitudinal study showcased the idea of the adoption triad between the adoptee, their adoptive family, and their birth family. Being able to follow adoptees throughout, their journey allowed research to focus the relationships of extended family and how the relationships change over the years. They found that "long-term reunited relationships have no predictable pathways and are approached with varying levels of ambivalence and emotional strain" (Browning & Duncan, 2005, p. 156). This goes to show that, just as no two adoptions are the same, no two adoption search and reunions are the same either. Similar to my experience with my birth sister, this research found that "adoptive family remains the primary family, while the relationship with the birth family emerges as something like an extended family" (Browning & Duncan, 2005, p. 162). I have described my relationship with my birth sister as like that of a distant cousin. I am glad to know her, and I know I can call on her in need, but she is someone I'm not in touch with regularly. While the aforementioned studies of college students, emerging adults, and adoptees over time can relate to my research, there is other research that conflicts with my adoption search process while missing some key aspects of an adoption search process.

Conflicting Literature

While there are some studies and theories that relate to my research, like Arnett's emerging adulthood and longitudinal studies on adoption reunion relationships, some of the adoption literature conflicts with my findings from my search and reunion research (Arnett, 2000). According to some 1983 sociopsychological research on adult adoptees' search for birth parents,

[increased] searching was found to be related to a traumatic adoption revelation, knowledge of circumstances of birth and adoption, strained adoptive family relationships, poor self-concept, the experiencing of stressful life events and a belief that having been adopted made one feel different and incomplete. (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983, p. 477)

This outdated research depicts adoptees lives being filled with trauma, stress, and strain. Another more recent study of adoptees who searched for their birth families contradict my adoption story. Chavaux's research (2003, p. 1) "indicated those adoptees who rated their relationship with adoptive parents as weak were also more likely to be searching for biological parent(s)." I do not consider my relationship with my adoptive parents to be weak, and the reasons that I searched for my birth family had more to do with finding answers and showing who I had become, rather than replacing my adoptive family.

In contrast, other research on adoptee searches reveals that "an adult adoptees' curiosity about birthparents is a natural and healthy phenomenon and that there does not exist a significant relationship between poorer self-concepts, unhappiness and adoption satisfaction" (Smith, 2001, p. 111). From my experience, I maintained positive relationships with my adoptive family, did not have a traumatic adoption revelation, and had a positive self-concept that developed throughout college. This positive self-concept was a main reason why I searched when I did. However,

[it] is assumed by adoptee searchers that the completed search is the end and final conclusion to a long sense of incompleteness. But rather, for most, it is the beginning of a period of adjustment for the adoptee, the adoptive parents, and the biological parents. (Smith, 2001, p. 55-56)

As I discovered, the concept of adoption never really goes away. Even after a search and reunion, I have continued to discover answers, family history, and how adoption continues to be a core part of my identity.

Not only did these identities influence my development, I recognize how social class plays a role in my privilege as someone who was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to search and to find my biological family. Not every adoptee gets to experience this luxury. While I do consider myself fortunate to have had the ability to find my birth family, another study that contradicts my findings relates to the birth mother experience. Since I conducted an autoethnography, my vantage point was my own and did not include the point of views from my birth mom or birth family. In Affleck and Steed's (2001) qualitative study about the expectations and experiences of participants in ongoing adoption reunion relationships, they found that "the person with greater expectations (more frequently the birth mother), […] accommodates by accepting less" (p. 46). In my search, however, I found myself to have more expectations of my birth mother that were not met; therefore, I was the one who accommodated my birth mother by lowering my expectations of her throughout our short-lived relationship. Throughout my adoption reunion, I experienced a number of transitions that helped to reshape my journey, and while I had thought these transitions might take one form, they often changed and morphed into unexpected transitions as my relationship with my birth mother fizzled while my relationship with others flourished.

By journaling about my experiences, sharing with others, and keeping an open mind about meeting new members of my birth family, I have come to appreciate my search and reunion process. It has taken many years, and it is filled with disappointment but also joy in finding answers about my history and family. I have come to realize that no adoption story is the

same, and no adoption search process will look the same either. However, there are ways that higher education professionals can be supportive of the adopted college students who might start that journey while in college. By listening, being supportive and inclusive, and by creating safe spaces for adopted college students, professionals working in higher education can create an atmosphere of support and care in recognizing the struggles and growth that adoptees might be experiencing.

Theoretical Insights

Turning 18 is such a liminal time in one's life. You are no longer a child, but you are not yet an adult. You have graduated high school, yet you are not in college yet. You say goodbye to high school friends and go off to explore and make fast friends in your dorms and classes. What could be more exploratory than searching for your birth family? I am glad I took my adoptive mom's advice and waited until I felt more confident of who I was before I searched for my birth mom. However, this period of liminality did not make it any easier to come to terms with being let down by my birth mom. There were many examples of liminality throughout my search and reunion process: from the months when our social worker was searching for my birth mom, to the period of waiting for my birth mom to answer the phone for almost an hour, to the months of waiting for some kind of active response from my birth mom. Liminality marks the middle phase of the three stages of a rite of passage: the margin phase (Turner, 1969). This life stage is full of ambiguity, just as most of the interactions with my birth mom centered around. The search, the meeting, and the aftermath of my journey to my birth mom, was full of unanswered questions and unfulfilled promises. However, the answers came when I least expected them from sources like my birth sister and my birth aunt. Although they had dealt with the same misgivings from

my birth mom, they had also overcome adversity and worked through her denial and rejection, which is something that would be many years in the making for me to work through.

The emerging adulthood period (Arnett, 2000) is a time for "explorations in love [which] sometimes result in disappointment, disillusionment or rejection" (Arnett, 2000, p. 474). While this may have been written regarding romantic love, it rings true for any type of love, including the love from family. While I didn't go into the reunion with super high expectations, I was excited for a new relationship to blossom. I just did not realize it wouldn't be with my birth mom. Being in touch with my birth sister has allowed me to process a lot of my adoption journey through her lens. Turning 18 is no different for an adoptee, especially an adoptee in a closed adoption. Just as age 18 marks the transition to being able to vote and sign legal documents, it marks the time many adoptee's lives where they can actively search for their biological family (Arnett, 2000). Arnett describes these emerging adulthood years as "more typically a period of frequent change and exploration" (2000).

While I had started this journey to seek out answers, I felt both disappointed and rejected from my birth mom as someone who said she was interested in getting to know me but whose actions showed otherwise. Arnett's emerging adulthood theory is "neither adolescence nor young adulthood but is theoretical and empirically distinct from them both. Emerging adulthood is distinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). The search process for my biological family often left me in a liminal state, which aligns with Arnett's emerging adulthood theory as a time with frequent changes and a time that adults often think of as when the most important events that affect their lives took place. I am no different, as my adoption search process took place during emerging adulthood, I

met my husband during emerging adulthood, and I started working full-time in my career during this time.

I recognize that my socioeconomic privilege contributes to my ability to search for and easily connect with my birth family both online and in-person. This reality relates to Arnett's emerging adulthood theory, as it suggests that "social class may be more important than ethnicity, with young people in the middle class or above having more opportunities for the explorations of emerging adulthood than young people who are working class or below" (Arnett, 2000, p. 478). As someone whose adoptive family was supportive of my search in both emotional and financial means, I realize that I am fortunate enough to have easily located my birth mom through a search agency, had the means to pay for it, and had the means to travel to meet my birth sister face-to-face. While I had planned to gain answers from my birth mom, I realize now that my other connections with my birth sister and my birth aunt have been the answers and driving force behind my adoption search.

Emerging adults often attend college and live on their own for the first time. Considering how much growth comes from the college years, it is no surprise that the emerging adulthood theory reflects my adoption search process, but it does not mention adoptees as a pivotal population within this time period (Arnett, 2000). The emerging adulthood years applies to those from 18-25, and this is the exact time frame when I received the letters from my birth mom. This period is full of change and transition for all students, and adoptees are no different. However, Arnett did not mention adoptees in his research, only the time frame and the types of life experiences emerging adults may have in this time period. Because adoptees could be searching for their birth families during this timeframe that is already filled with great change and

transition, it is important for higher education professionals to recognize the transitions adoptees may be experiencing while in college.

This research relates well to the Multidimensional Identity Model (Pope & Reynolds, 2017) as it encompasses the various aspects of this time, as I developed my personal identity, my relationship identity, and my career identity. The Multidimensional Identity Model "grew out of a need for identity development models that embraced the multidimensional nature of identity" that other models were lacking (Pope & Reynolds, 2017, p. 19). This model focuses on integrating one's identities, rather than the intersection of one's identities. While I agree with much of this theory, it misses a key component of recognizing adoption as a part of one's identity. While it could be categorized under the family background contextual influence, adoption must be recognized as a core part of one's identity as a person, not just as a family member. Student affairs practitioners must acknowledge and embrace the idea that adoption might be another dimension of identity that students are facing while in college.

> Once student affairs professionals fully appreciate these frameworks and the realities of students today, including how institutions may actually be harmful, they are in a better position to provide support and encouragement. In order to achieve aspirations, it is vital that academic preparation and professional development fully engage with frameworks and models that embrace intersectionality. (Pope & Reynolds, 2017, p. 22)

Knowing that this part of their identity could interact with other aspects of their identity can help professionals best to support students going through this adoptee identity search during these formative collegiate years.

My adoption search is the combination of my identity dimensions as an adoptee and as a multiracial person plus my contextual influences with my familial background in being raised by

my adoptive family. The emerging adulthood years are a time of great identity growth, and as someone who comes from a dynamic set of intersecting identities, I can now see how my identities as a multiracial adoptee and as an adopted college student came together during my search process. In reflection on my collegiate experiences, I realize now that being a multiracial Hispanic individual influenced my decision to major in Spanish. By being born half Hispanic but then being raised in a white family, I did not feel that my ethnic heritage matched my childhood experiences. Therefore, I think majoring in Spanish was one way to get closer to my multiracial identity.

Schlossberg (2011) stated that there are three different types of transitions: anticipated transitions like graduation or marriage, unanticipated transitions like a car accident or losing your job, and nonevent transitions of events that fail to occur. While I would like to believe that my adoption search and reunion experience would have been an anticipated transition, because it was something I had looked forward to my whole life, it turned out to be a nonevent transition because of my expected outcomes not coming to fruition. In my journal, I wrote that I was excited about my mom's impact on my life. While she did have an impact, it certainly was not the impact for which I was hoping or expecting.

The one-year anniversary of our phone conversation caused me to break down emotionally. As Schlossberg highlighted, there are four S's for coping with transitions: situation, self, supports, and strategies (2011). During my senior year of college, I started actively searching for my birth mom because I felt emotionally ready. I was confident in who I was and who I planned to become upon graduation from college; I was confident in my adoptive family who was supportive of my search; and I was ready to find answers. As I graduated from undergraduate school in spring 2009, I transitioned to graduate school at the same university. In

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doing so, I left my community that I had built in residence life and moved out of the dorms that I had lived in for four years, all while coping with this lack of relationship with my birth mom. There were stressors in my situation, and I was struggling with coping myself, which is why I think my biggest help during this time was the supports I had from others. I relied on my adoptive parents to pay for the search, friends and ex-boyfriends to help me cope through the actual reunion, and biological family to find the answers I could not find with my birth mom. I was able to call on long-time friends to help me work through the stressors of the anniversary. As I would grow to learn, my birth mom was not the only member of my birth family who could help me learn about my biological beginnings.

Through my research, I have come to realize that, while I searched for one person, my birth mom, I ended up finding numerous family members and realizing all the support systems I already had in place: my adoptive family, my friends, and members of my birth family. No person is an island, and adoptees are no different. I was able to rely on adoptive parents to help me search, long-time friends when I was suffering from the lack of relationship and letdown of expectations, and important women in my life the day after my birth mom passed away. The last part of the transition theory is strategies, which are coping mechanisms used to deal with the transition (Schlossberg, 2011). During this time, some of my coping mechanisms were journaling, which I ended up using as data, and campus involvement in residence life and the Baptist Student Union for friendship support and regular extracurricular activity. The dynamics of all of those support systems changed as I had to be vulnerable and open about what was going on and how I felt about it. These four factors have helped me process the many transitions of my adoption search process. These theoretical insights, combined with existing literature on

adoptees, has helped to guide the next section on implications on working with adopted college students for higher education practitioners.

Implications for Practice

Some adopted college students begin the search process for their biological families while in college. Therefore, it is important for higher education professionals to support those students as they embark on this adoption search journey. In order to be inclusive of adopted students, it is important for staff and faculty to employ several strategies that help adoptees feel welcome and included within their higher education setting. Three ways higher education professionals can support adoptees is through supporting relevant campus clubs or organizations, using inclusive actions and language, and facilitating campus-wide adoption recognition.

From my personal experience in starting an adoption group on a college campus, one recommendation to support these students is to help them to start a club for adopted college students, including transracially-adopted students, in order for them to feel connected to each other and their campus (Sellers, 2018). The students could tailor the club to fit their needs. It could be open for only adopted students, any student who wants to adopt, or any student who has adopted friends or family who might need help and support. As Astin's theory of involvement (1999) suggests, students who participate in extracurricular activities, like a student club, are more likely to persist in college than other students who do not. Only a handful of universities have an adopted student club, but considering there are adoptees or students with a connection to adoption at every university, initiating an adoptee club could be a first step in reaching adopted college students. According to Kryder's research (1999) with college students, "[many] students related that they met other adopted people for the first time in college and could achieve a level

of intimacy with these friends" (p. 364). Establishing an adopted student club could help students find those deeper connections with fellow adoptees.

A way to be inclusive of transracial adoptees on college campuses is to include them in the populations that the multicultural and diversity offices work with on campus. Transracial adoptees do not have an office or a department on college campuses that is dedicated to supporting their needs and development. One way to do this is to provide "[space] to connect and explore a common identity with others who identify the same way [as] an important part of identity development" (Blair, 2012, p. 14). Having a place where they can hold adopted student meetings and meet other transracially-adopted students who might be struggling with their own identity development (racial, ethnic, medical, etc.) could be the starting point of the help and support adoptees need on a college campus. Through policy change and inclusive language from offices that include language regarding adopted college students and transracial adoptees, student affairs practitioners will create a space and place for adopted college students.

Another way that higher education professionals could be more inclusive is through their language. When having conversations with adoptees, they should use inclusive language by asking questions like, "Tell me about yourself" or "What's your story?" instead of "What are you?" or "Where are you from?" or using the phrase "real parents." Inclusive language can make a difference to an adoptee who is struggling internally with his or her identity because it allows him or her to guide the conversation (Sellers, 2018). When professionals, mentors, or adults question adoptees by saying things like "No, you're not adopted" or "Where are you really from?" it invalidates the adoptee and discredits their personal history. In one of my biology courses, we had to do a genetic eye color trait chart from our own family. Being adopted, my chart made no sense, because I did not know my biological family, and both my adopted parents

have blue eyes which has no genetic relation to my brown eyes. An academic way to be inclusive of adoptees is to not do genetic science projects based off the students' background. If a student is adopted, then they do not know their genetic history, and therefore, they cannot complete the eye color genetic chart of which parent contributed which eye color. Instead, provide the assignment based off sample people or some other means. This is just one example of ways higher education faculty and staff alike can be inclusive. When you flip the language and assignments to be more inclusive and open to new types of family dynamics, higher education can become a safe space for adoptees as well as others who are connected to adoption.

Another way faculty and staff members can support adopted college students is to promote openness if they have a connection to adoption. Although adoption can be a very sensitive and personal subject, the more that faculty and staff are open about their stories, the more adopted college students might feel comfortable coming to them if they need support. This openness could be as simple as faculty or staff member having a sticker or decal on their door that says, "I'm adopted!" or "Ask me about my connection to adoption!" if they are adoptive parents or have adopted siblings (Sellers, 2018). This simple sign could create a connection to campus that might improve adopted students' "positive racial/ethnic identity development […by] attending [a] racially diverse [school and] having role models of their own race/ethnicity" (Brocious, 2014, p. 848). Because I am open about my adoption, I have had students come up to me to tell me their personal stories about adoption. One particular student had only found out he was adopted just before he came to college, and he had not spoken about it with anyone until he told me. He said he did not know how to process the fact that his parents had lied to him his whole life, and that his adoptive parents were not willing to talk about it with him. Because of my personal connection to adoption, I was able to reach a student who was going through similar

struggles and help him find a connection to campus. College campuses could incorporate

transracial adoption into a diversity series by holding online events that interview adopted

college students, faculty, or staff to share their stories connected to adoption. With the use of

social media to showcase your institution's promotion and inclusion of adoption, higher

education professionals can help adopted students realize they are not alone. Such students might

even find role models and mentors in adopted faculty or staff. With more faculty and staff

willing to share their stories and do research on adoption, further student development theories

that surround adopted college students could be included in student affairs textbooks.

Adopted college students do not check a box on their college application that says they

are adopted. No one looks like they are adopted. There is not an office on campus dedicated to

adoptees. However, through campus organizations, inclusive language, and university-wide

recognition and support, higher education professionals can make a marginalized adopted college

student matter. Even though these are some ways higher education professionals can support

adopted students, more research can be done to enlighten the field to other ways of supporting

this unique population.

Future Research

While there are some studies on adopted college students, there are many possibilities for

future research regarding adoptees who search for their biological families. Further possibilities

of study could be to conduct qualitative, phenomenological research by interviewing many

adoptees who searched for their biological families during college to better understand the

essence of that experience. Furthermore, building on Browning and Duncan (2005)'s research,

researchers could conduct longitudinal research on long-lasting relationships among the adoption

triad. Today's trend of open adoption, where communication can exist between the biological

parent(s) and the adoptees, could impact the number of students who search for the biological families in college because that information would already be known. However, the adopted student identity will not go away even knowing their birth family, so it would still be important for higher education professionals to keep supporting adopted college students in a variety of ways.

Future research could also look into adoptee search letdown during the college years and how that impacts the collegiate experience for adoptees. When diving deeper into this theme of letdown, research could search for common themes behind the letdown, like from the search process, the reunion process, or the relationships that are or are not forming. Future research could tie this concept of letdown into other experiences that college students often face in terms of other relationships, major change, or job changes in college. Stemming from the idea of adoption search letdown, it is important to recognize the prevalence of mental health issues within college students, and the mental health issues that could be exacerbated by being an adopted college student. In turn, substance abuse could be turned to as a coping mechanism for adopted college student. Knowing college campuses are rampant with alcohol issues already, this could be intensified as an adoptee searching for one's birth family during the college years. Research on the mental health of adopted college students would benefit the student affairs field and student affairs practitioners alike.

The adoption benefit theme could also be researched further for adoptees who have relationships with biological family in college, and how those relationships might affect their collegiate experiences. For example, adoptees in open adoptions might already know biological family members, and college might be a time when those relationships are formative since they are away from their adoptive families for the first time. Since much of my adoptee search benefit

did not come until graduate school, it would be interesting to research this theme from the undergraduate lens.

A final way to extend this research is to encourage other adopted higher education practitioners to conduct their own autoethnographic research on their adoption stories. Since my research only reflects my own perspective, it would benefit the field of higher education for others to do their own research to find similar and different experiences among adopted researchers. With more voices within the higher education setting revealing their adoption search journeys throughout their higher education experience, more students might feel connected to someone who might be going through similar experiences as they are going through.

Summary

When I identified this topic of research, I thought I was going to study the impact that the adoption search process has on adopted college students' identity development and collegiate experiences. After discovering autoethnographic research and receiving encouragement from friends and faculty, I pursued this type of qualitative research and changed my lens to being about my higher education experience and steering away from identity development. Through my research, I have come to realize that I do not need to explicitly state how I was impacted; rather, my narrative shows the significance that my adoption search and reunion process had on my collegiate experience through the power of storytelling. As with all autoethnographic research, I came to develop a better grasp of the difference between the insider and outsider perspective, as I was the outside researcher looking inside at my own data.

From my research, I found three themes throughout my adoption journey that permeated each chapter of my journey: adoptee search letdown, adoptee search benefit, and adoptee search identity. The first theme came from the first chapter of my adoption data, when I felt letdown

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time and time again from varying aspects of my adoption search journey. From not receiving my letters on my 18th birthday, to being letdown on my initial phone call from my birth mom, being let down was common thread throughout my journey. The next theme, adoptee search benefit, stemmed from numerous unexpected relationships that were formed from family members that I had not expected to meet. I gained knowledge, cherished family heirlooms, and relationships from these newly found family members. The last theme of adoptee search identity became an evident theme of importance as I recognized my adoption was at the core of my identity. An overarching strength that was evident throughout this theme was resilience. As evidenced by my ability to search in the first place to continuing to meet new family members once my birth mom had passed away, my adoption journey showed that adoptees can be well adjusted, thriving and supported, despite the stigma of being adopted, experiencing poor search experiences, or facing unexpected reunion experiences.

Last year, I took my daughter to *Frozen* 2 as her Christmas present. We had seen *Frozen* countless times, and had listened to the *Frozen 2* soundtrack on repeat getting ourselves prepared to see it in theaters. While I came in knowing many of the songs and lyrics, the song "Show Yourself" did not resonate with me until I understood the true meaning surrounding the song. Queen Elsa has had a secret siren that was drawing her away from the palace and into the unknown. While the song "Into the Unknown" might be the more well-known song from *Frozen 2*, understanding the context around Elsa's search for this singing siren that keeps calling to her will help you better understand why I relate it to my search for my birth mother and why I can relate to "Into the Unknown." Most of the movie, Elsa doesn't know the identity behind the voice that keeps calling to her, but she finds out during the song "Show Yourself" that it has been her deceased mother, who passed away when she was young, calling to her the whole time.

While it will help to have seen the movie *Frozen 2,* I hope this set-up of the song will help show how many of the song lyrics relate to my own search into the unknown for my biological family. For example, "Here I am; I've come so far. You are the answer I've waited for all of my life" (Menzel & Wood, 2019) relates to my search culminating during my senior year of college when I was waiting for my birth mom to pick up the phone after having waited all of my life to know my birth mom. I was proud of who I had become, and I wanted to show that to my birth mom. Even though the relationship with my birth mom did not work out as I had hoped, I developed other relationships with my biological sister and biological aunt that helped gain closure and clarity on my birth family situation. As I thought about my communication with my birth sister, these lyrics came to mind: "Are you the one I've been looking for all of my life? Show yourself, I'm ready to learn" (Menzel & Wood, 2019) can relate well to my developing relationship with my biological half-sister and biological aunt. I have learned more information from my sister and aunt then I did from my birth mom, because they were willing to show themselves and help me find clarity with my birth story.

While the previous lyrics and many parts of the song relate to my journey, the lines that really resonate with me are when Elsa's mother sings "Step into your power; throw yourself into something new. You are the one you've been waiting for… All of your life" (Menzel & Wood, 2019). Even though Elsa, like me, has been searching for something her whole life, her mother lets her know that she, Elsa, is the one she has been waiting for all of her life. We both have been in a state of liminality for so long, searching for answers to our questions about our beginnings. This time of our emerging adulthood has caused us to step out of our comfort zone to seek out answers and explore the unknown. It was an empowering moment when I realized I am the answer to my questions. I did not need my birth mom to move forward with my life. I have all

the power in my own hands to live the life I have built on my own. The next lines in the song following this realization are: "Come, my darling, homeward bound/I am found" (Menzel & Wood, 2019). I feel like the first part of that lyric reflects my birth aunt and my birth mom calling to me letting me know I am home, both literally and metaphorically, when I received the "Christmas in Kansas" plaque. I was literally at home in Kansas, while I was also metaphorically at home in what I was learning about my birth mom and my adoption story. The ending line of "I am found" (Menzel & Wood, 2019) helped to bring home the fact that I knew who I was, where I came from, and what I was pursuing in my autoethnographic research.

This research has helped me dive deeper into my adoption story, and this song has helped me realize that while it was a search for my birth mom, I have been the most important part of my story: how I chose to search, how I handled the many feelings of loss and rejection, and how I have overcome the hardships and shown strength and resilience throughout this search process. When I first started this program, I didn't know what an autoethnography was nor how lacking the world was in college-student adoptee research. Through my own vulnerability and the support of both my adoptive and my biological family members, I have highlighted the unique experiences that adoptees might face throughout their higher education experience and how higher education practitioners can better support adopted college students along their own adoption journeys.

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