BSc (Hons) Psychology

Final Year Project

Exploring the experiences of Adoptive Mothers: A Thematic Analysis

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Cardiff Metropolitan University for the degree of Bachelor of Science.
Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own independent investigation under the supervision of my tutor. The various sources of which I am indebted are clearly indicated. This dissertation has not been accepted in substance for any other degree and is not being submitted concurrently for any other degree.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my greatest appreciation is to God for seeing me through what has felt like one 3-year-long trial. Though the people around me have of course played significant roles in helping me to achieve this, ultimately, it is God who has been cheering me on louder than anyone else could have.

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Secondly, I must thank my project supervisor, for her continued support, patience and guidance throughout this research project. Her insight has been invaluable and I truly appreciate the effort she has sewn into this.

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To my friends and family, your support to me came in many different ways – emotional, financial and social – all of which have been invaluable. The past three years have often felt long and challenging, but your continued love has seen me through – thank you for your faith in me.

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Last but by no means least, I must extend my greatest appreciation to the women who participated in this project – this research would not have been possible without you. Your willingness to open up about a very personal experience is recognised and greatly appreciated.

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Abstract

The available literature on adoption predominantly focuses on the children’s experience rather than the adoptive mothers (Baltimore, 2008) and focuses on specific issues they face, such as attachment issues (Archer and Burnell, 2003). A gap in research was highlighted in that literature on the experience of the adoptive mother is limited, and that available insight into the experiences of adoptive mothers was found as a secondary research aim (Argent and Coleman, 2012). Adoptive mothers are reportedly more likely to experience stigmatization, low self-esteem and lack of attachment with their child compared to biological mothers (Cast, 2004; Azar et al., 2005; Phillips, 2007; Bachrach, 1986). Gair (1996) revealed that feeling ‘overwhelmed’ was the primary experience for adoptive mothers in her research, closely followed by feeling ‘disillusioned’ resulting from inconsistencies between their pre-conceived expectations and their post-adoption reality (Gair, 1996; McDonald, Propp and Murphy, 2001). Past literature has presented an unbalanced view of adoption experiences; thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of adoption from the under-acknowledged perspective; that of adoptive mothers. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate: five women were interviewed using semi-structured interviews, all of whom self-identified as adoptive mothers as well as biological mothers. The data was then analysed using thematic analysis to highlight salient themes. Three main themes were identified from the corpus of data; Becoming mum, Lack of support and Dealing with the aftermath. Results were discussed in relation to the findings within previous literature and future areas of research have been suggested.
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1.1 Background and definitions of adoption

Adoption refers to the legal process of becoming non-biological parent(s) of a child and in doing so, permanently transferring the parental rights and responsibilities over to the adoptive parent(s) (Hull, 2016). Previous research regarding adoption is almost entirely focused on the adoptee’s perspective (Baltimore, 2008) and tends to address issues which are more unique to adopted children, such as social development (Harold, 2008) and more predominantly, attachment issues (Archer and Burnell, 2003). The association between adopted children and more complex attachment issues is well established (Brand and Brinich, 1999) however, the evidence in support of this notion has focused solely on the adoptees perspective and thus, its applicability must be questioned. Adoption has been defined as “a process that irrevocably gives recognition to the legal transfer of a child from his or her birth family to the adoptive family” (Herring, 2001, p. 201) which structures the framework by which adoption will be discussed throughout this research project.

1.2 The history of adoption

In previous years, adoption was regarded as the solution to infertility (Ragone, 1996; Gair, 1996) which has potentially shaped part of the stigma which continues to affect adoptive mothers. Infants were placed for adoption in families who were as biologically similar as possible, thus creating the typical family (Burke, 1991) and these adoptions were strictly ‘closed’ adoptions to maintain the illusion of the ‘perfect family’. Freud’s (1929) theories played a great role in the process of adoption in previous years; adoption agencies would focus on adopting only young infants because early attachment was regarded as highly important, therefore older children who became available for adoption were typically raised in residential settings (Harold, 2008). During this period, society promoted ‘a child for a home’ as the focus for married middle-class couples, which is why adoptive parents strived to hide the illegitimacy of
their child (Crittenden, Landini and Claussen, 2001). It has been shown that adoptive parents feared their reputation would be damaged and their respectability threatened if their secret became known (Harkness and Super, 1993), emphasizing how societal pressures significantly shaped adoption. The main issue which became noticeable over the development of the adoption process is that because closed adoption required ties to be severed with biological family, adopted children would grow up unaware that they were adopted, which led to deep-rooted issues (Argent and Coleman, 2012).

1.3 Equal opportunities

Over the years, adoption professionals promoted a child-focused perspective which prioritized the needs of the child above the needs of the adoptive parents. By the 1980s, homosexual adoptive couples and transracial adoptions were becoming accepted, although statistics were still significantly lower than heterosexual adoptive couples (Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014). It was suggested by Hicks (2005, p.49) that homosexual adopters refrain from putting themselves forward for adoption because “lesbians and gay men are still affected by the many negative attitudes toward gay parenting that pervade our society”. It was also argued that homosexual adoptive couples are viewed as a ‘last resort’ which still needs to be challenged. At present, social services and adoption agencies are clear that the welfare of the child is paramount, a great shift since the days of closed adoptions (Forrester and Warwin, 2008). Whilst this is necessary, it could be argued that the focus of ensuring welfare is disproportionate at the detriment of adoptive mothers (Burke, 1991). Considering that mothers are generally the primary care-givers (Harkness and Super, 1993) it is astonishing that more research has not yet been conducted to understand how the issues of the children affect adoptive mothers.

1.4 Negative emotions associated with adoptive motherhood

Transition into parenthood research is mostly limited to biological families, yet families formed through non-biological means has greatly increased in recent years (Azar, Nix and Makin-Bryd, 2005). Parents
with adopted children account for a significant percentage of families in the UK and whilst it is difficult to give a definitive number, the UK has seen a significant rise in the number of adoptions taking place since 2010 (Hull, 2016). It is claimed that within the adoption literature, adoptive mothers are vastly under-represented, arguably because researchers fail to acknowledge the problems faced by adoptive mothers as independent problems; but rather, problems of 'motherhood' as a whole (Sencky, Agassi, Inbar, Horesh, Diamond, Bergman and Apter, 2009). This notion has been refuted by many researchers who have found that stigmatization, low self-esteem and lack of attachment are more prevalent in adoptive mothers compared with biological mothers (Cast, 2004; Azar et al., 2005; Phillips, 2007; Bachrach, 1986). The issues brought about by adoption are seemingly specific; for instance, increased risk of adjustment issues in adopted children is evident (Rueter, Keyes, Iacono and McGue, 2010).

Bowlby’s (1969) Attachment theory reinforces the importance of forming healthy attachments in the early years of children’s lives: children are far less likely to thrive if they have lacked a close connection with at least one nurturing adult (Ragone, 1996). The cause of attachment issues in adoptive families is unclear, however, research implies there are mixed responsibilities including the insecurities of adoptive mothers and the disorganised attachment pre-existing in the adopted child (Brand and Brinich, 1999; Archer and Burnell, 2003; Cast, 2004).

1.5 Changes to Social Services

National statistics were published by the Department of Education (2016) stating that between the beginning of 2015 and March 2016 a total of 4190 children were adopted in the UK; 89% by couples and 11% by single adopters; with the majority of these children coming from the foster care system. Considering these striking statistics, it is astonishing that the reflection of adoptive mothers within academic literature is so minute. Children who become available for adoption nowadays have generally been removed from parents with drug issues, alcohol issues or mental health issues (Crittenden et al., 2001). The changes made to the care system has resulted in children remaining with biological parents.
for longer periods whilst parents are offered various means of professional support, as removing children from parents is generally a last resort (Azar et al., 2005). It has been suggested that these factors have directly caused the increase in adoption disruption due to prolonged exposure to psychologically harmful settings (Archer and Burnell, 2003). That being said, in most cases, outcomes for children from these backgrounds have been shown to improve when they move on from foster care into adoptive families (Argent and Coleman, 2012).

1.6 Unprepared and disillusioned

Of the scarcely available literature, Gair (1996) studied the experiences of adoptive mothers post-adoption and explored whether their initial assumptions were accurate. It was found that initially, experiences of motherhood by means of adoption was fundamentally based on feelings of being overwhelmed. These findings have been widely supported by alternative research exploring motherhood as a secondary research area (Harold, 2008; Hicks, 2005; Ragone, 1996). Expectancy was another factor significantly influencing the experience of adoptive mothers: researchers have reported inconsistencies between adoptive mothers pre-conceived expectations and their post-adoption reality (McDonald, Propp and Murphy, 2001). Stemming from this, adoptive mothers have consistently reported feelings of naivety (Brodzinsky, 1987) due to receiving inaccurate insight into becoming a mother through adoption. Considering the complexity of this life commitment and the immense impact that adoption has on every person involved, particularly mothers, these findings should raise concern and indicate the need for further research into this area.

1.7 Placement disruption: Parent-related factors and child-related factors

Whilst some of the major influences in adoption displacement are due to child-related factors (Ford, Vostanis, Meltzer and Goodman, 2007), additional research has suggested that systematic factors have also correlated with placement disruption, including negative relationships with siblings, adoptive
parents or social workers and the adoptive mothers personal experience of being parented (Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014). A plausible explanation for this influence was highlighted by Selwyn et al. (2014) who implied that the restriction of family routines and activities placed tension on the adoptive families and subsequently caused disruption. Furthermore, it has been reported that adoptive mothers feel that poorly managed initial introductions to adopted children played a significant role in the deterioration of placements (Sinclair, Baker, Wilson and Gibbs, 2005). This claim is reinforced with additional studies which have revealed that post-adoption depression is a common experience for adoptive mothers, particularly when their initial assumptions are proven incorrect (Senecky et al., 2009). The notion that depression rates are higher among adoptive mothers has been contested by Follan and McNamara (2013) who reported that women who experienced depressive symptoms post-adoption also experienced depressive symptoms pre-adoption, which challenges this assumption, suggesting that reactive depression among adoptive mothers may not be caused by adoption per se and must not be approached as if it were. Whilst there can be various reasons for this, it is clear that this often leads to a lack of bonding between adoptive mothers and children, inevitably resulting in placement disruption. The impact of substance misuse in biological parents has been considered (Forrester and Warwin, 2008) and it was concluded that there has been a significant rise in the proportion of adopted children born to mothers who misused alcohol or drugs during their pregnancies, arguably accounting for a large percentage of post-adoption disruptions.

1.8 The lasting effects of experiencing trauma in formative years

Research has consistently revealed that adoptive parents are often disillusioned with the expectation that the adoption of their child marks a ‘new beginning’. What adoptive parents have later reported is that they do not get the ‘fresh start’ they expected when the adoption becomes official, but rather, they adopt not only a child, but also the past experiences of this child (Cast, 2004). This partially reinforces the claim that adoptive mothers face additional challenges compared to biological mothers:
often, children who are adopted have previously had negative experiences which are embedded into their memories, which ultimately increases the challenges that adoptive mothers face in parenting their children (Smith and Brodzinsky, 2010). Of the literature, one commonality identified is that adoptive mothers feel “ill equipped” to deal with the often-complex challenges of adopted children (Triseliotis, Feast and Kyle, 2005). This was highlighted in a study which investigated adoptive mothers of relatively young children rather than babies, thus emphasizing the influence that the age of the child has on the outcome of the adoptive placement (Crittenden et al., 2001).

1.9 Significance of the age of the adoptee

As previously mentioned, attachment disorders have been found more common in adoptive families. Howe (2010) examined the childhood experiences of adult adopted people and their level of contact with the adoptive mother and their birth mother. It was found that the age at the time of placement was strongly associated with adopted peoples experience of being adopted and their current contact with adoptive and biological mothers. Those adopted at an older age more commonly reported feeling they did not belong in their adoptive family, they did not feel loved and they were subsequently less likely to remain in contact with adoptive mothers (Howe, 2010) reinforcing the research highlighting the influence of the age of the adopted child on their ability to develop healthy attachments with their adoptive mother (Triseliotis et al., 2005). It could then be argued that placing children for adoption at an older age could negatively impact the adoptive mother, in that she may be unable to gain the trust of her child which could result in feelings of parental failure (Selwyn et al., 2014). If this area received more attention, the negative feelings experienced by adoptive mothers related to lack of attachment could be accurately accounted for which would reduce the responsibility adoptive mothers evidently feel (Miall and March, 2008).
Identity reconstruction and societal norms

The notion that motherhood is a natural progression for women prevails within western society. A study exploring perceived social norms revealed that the majority of people in western society believe that marriage should be followed closely by giving birth and that couples who have children before marrying are ‘doing things backwards’ (Shelton and Johnson, 2006), evidencing the influence of social norms. Whilst advances have undeniably been made in reducing social stigmas related to adoption, it is clear that these perceptions on the ‘typical family’ are still prevalent in society, subsequently creating additional issues which are unique to adoptive mothers, particularly the issue of identity reconstruction (Harold, 2008). Parenthood studies have asserted that identity change is standard when transitioning into parenthood, however, it is vastly under-acknowledged that adoptive mothers face additional challenges when transitioning into adoptive parenthood (Ragone, 1996). Women who become mothers through adoption due to infertility face the challenge of reconsidering their assumptions of their identity in motherhood (Senecky et al., 2009), an area which, again, is not considered unique to adoptive mothers. Further evidence in support of the cultural norm variation is offered by Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik (2007) who explored the experiences of single adoptive mothers in Israel. It was reported that these women perceived themselves to be empowered and self-sufficient, promoting motherhood for all women rather than it being restricted to couples. It was also found that fate was considered the cause of adoption, subsequently highlighting a more specific emotional quality regarding the relationship between mother and child (Letherby, 1999); a concept far less prevalent in UK-based adoptions.

Rationale

Baltimore (2008) found that adoption was strongly affiliated with parental stress, feelings of uncertainty and unique challenges; a justifiable association. Researchers advocate that more extensive knowledge is urgently required in order to improve success rates of adoptive placements and
appropriately support adoptive families; which primarily occurs through contemporary research (McDonald et al., 2001). It is clear that when defining motherhood, previous literature does not differentiate the differing journeys to motherhood and assumptions are made based on societal values rather than experiential research. Past literature has presented an unbalanced view of adoption experiences; thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of adoption from the under-acknowledged perspective; adoptive mothers. As previously discussed, the literature typically focuses on the experiences of the adoptive children which is undeniably crucial in order to understand and improve outcomes for these children (Archer and Burnell, 2003). However, the adoptive mother faces unique issues separate from motherhood in general which needs to be understood, so that the research can be used to inform and support adoptive families rather than solely adoptive children. Whilst quantitative research has helped to gain understanding somewhat, qualitative methodology provides the personal experiences of participants thereby providing richer, more in-depth knowledge which can be more beneficial in enhancing understanding of this research area and therefore will be employed within this research.
Chapter 2: Method

This present study aimed to explore the experiences of adoptive mothers. It was deduced that interviews were the most effective way of gaining the richest information (Hull, 2016; Harris, 2012). This information was then analysed by means of thematic analysis in order to identify common themes among participants in regard to their experiences of mothering adopted children.

2.1 Design

As the aim was to gain insight into the personal experiences of participants, a qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured interviews was employed.

2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited by means of snowball sampling and by word-of-mouth. Adoption agencies were not a viable option for recruiting participants due to the nature of adoption being highly confidential. Five participants were included in this research between the ages of 44 and 56 and were all females who had adopted at least one child. Participants voluntarily identified themselves as mothers of biological children as well as mothers of adopted children, which unintentionally provided an interesting dimension. Abigail adopted her daughter 2 years ago when she was age 2. Beth adopted her son 1 month ago when he was age 4 after having fostered him for 3 years. Charlotte adopted her son 6 years ago when he was age 3. Diane adopted her children 12 years ago when they were age 12, 8, 5 and 4 as biological siblings. Eve adopted her daughter 3 years ago when she was age 2. All five participants fostered their children before adopting them.

2.3 Materials

An information sheet and a consent form were developed and given to participants to read and sign. An interview schedule was developed and referred to within the interviews to provide structure to the
researcher regarding the topics which were discussed. An audio recorder was used to record the interviews. A mobile phone was available to the researcher but switched off during interviews, this was because interviews took place in a mutually agreed location away from campus.

2.4 Development of the interview schedule

The interview schedule was based upon the pre-existing knowledge of the researcher and was supported with previous research surrounding adoptive mothers (Hull, 2016; Harris, 2012). The existing literature indicated specific areas of focus in regard to the interview schedule; including the perceived insecurity of adoptive mothers, the stigmas experienced by adoptive mothers and their effect on their parenting relationship and the feelings of self-doubt which have been consistently highlighted, which provided the basis for the questions. The interview schedule was further discussed with the project supervisor to confirm it was appropriate and would be effective. It was not feasible to carry out a pilot study due to the difficulty in accessing a specific sample. However, the initial interview with Abigail confirmed the suitability of the schedule and therefore it was not altered.

2.5 Data collection

Individual semi-structured interviews took place in mutually agreed locations, more specifically, in each participants’ home. Prior to each interview, the researcher explained to the participant that she was within her right to withdraw from the project at any point she felt uncomfortable. The researcher explained that she needed to inform the researcher of this within 4 weeks following the interview, so that her data would be disregarded and not included within the research. The researcher provided participants with information forms which detailed the relevant information regarding the research; they were informed of their role, why the research was being carried out and also of support groups should they feel in need of this following the interview. Participants signed the consent form signifying
that they agreed to participate and for their answers to be used. The signed consent form was returned to the researcher, whilst the information form remained with the participant.

**2.6 Ethical considerations**

Due to the recruitment means of the present study, lone working was a major ethical consideration. In order to reduce this potential risk and adhere to the university’s lone researcher policy, the researcher kept a phone switched to silent on her person at all times during interviews. The researcher exchanged contact information with the supervisor and sent a message to her prior to the interview with details of the location, and again after the interview was concluded. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used in place of participants’ names which eliminated the risk of them being identifiable. Debriefing material was offered to participants in the form of a leaflet with website links and contact numbers seeing as the topic was likely to evoke an emotional response; the wellbeing of the participants was paramount.

**2.7 Method of analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data from the interviews, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) steps were adopted. After interviews were conducted, they were then transcribed individually and read thoroughly by the researcher searching for any clear patterns or meanings which may later become relevant. Once the researcher was familiar with the data, initial codes were produced from small sections of the data identifying features considered significant. After initial codes were completed, they were collated into a table and arranged into groups based on the relationship between the codes. These groups were then transferred into themes and sub-themes relevant to the research question, and were later refined and reviewed, discarding any which did not represent the data sample and also re-coding if necessary. The remaining themes and sub-themes were then compiled into a thematic
table where each theme was defined with an explanation and justification of its relevance and which aspect of the data it captured. Names were given at this stage to indicate the content of each theme.
Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Background and table of results

Five mothers who had adopted their children were interviewed about their experiences of adoptive motherhood. The thematic analysis identified three main themes from the corpus of data; *Becoming mum*, *Lack of support* and *Dealing with the aftermath*. These themes will be discussed below along with relevant subordinate themes. For the purposes of this report, quotes will be referred to by pseudonym.

Table 1: Main themes, subordinate themes and quotations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main theme</th>
<th>Subordinate theme</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Becoming mum</strong></td>
<td>Transitioning from foster parent to mum</td>
<td>“...I felt I’d crossed the line because at that point, I felt that I was, um, advocating for him like a mother rather than a foster carer and the paths started to get muddled”. Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The need for family</td>
<td>“...not because we couldn’t have biological children, they were for her because she needed adopting... she needed us rather than us needing her”. Abigail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doubting self</td>
<td>“...I went into it (adoption) thinking love was going to be enough and love isn’t necessarily enough to fix the issues they come with”. Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>“...we feel that he became attached to us and we know that won’t be taken away...” Charlotte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of support</strong></td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>“...whereas perhaps I looked at it beforehand as when you adopt a child that child becomes yours, yes legally you’re the parent... but she’s, she’s not our biological child we’re given the privilege of parenting her”. Abigail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“...and it’s challenged my ideas on nature and nurture”. Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>“...it’s a bit of a minefield I think that people who have no knowledge of it perhaps won’t look into adoption because they still see it as a um, a taboo subjec- it’s quite difficult to get information”. Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dealing with the aftermath</strong></td>
<td>The need for transparency</td>
<td>“...there can be a lot of confusion with children as they get older if they aren’t told the truth”. Abigail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“...she’s not our biological child she has biological parents and when she is old enough, um, if she wants to find them we will encourage her to do that”. Eve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling ill-equipped</td>
<td>“...they carry those feelings of rejection with them and regardless of how much and how well you love them, there is a hole that you can’t fill”. Diane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Becoming Mum

Whilst all participants were already biological mothers when they adopted their children, it is apparent that becoming an adoptive mother was perceived as a new level of motherhood. They were conscious that their mothering days are distant memories and whilst they see no differentiation between being a biological mother and an adoptive mother, they feel they need to resume the role of ‘mum’ after pausing it for several years. These mothers did not intend to adopt when they set out to become foster carers, therefore ‘becoming mum’ also encompassed the emotional preparation that came with this transition.

“...it’s taken me right back to uh, the things I was doing 20 odd years ago. You know, playgroup, nursery- meeting up with other mums at the school gates...”. (Abigail)

“I'm bringing her up with the same values and the same- um, you know, the same ways that I've brought my older children up”. (Eve)

Transitioning from foster parent to mum

Transitioning from foster parent to mum encapsulates the shift from temporary to permanent that adoptive mothers experience. Several mothers conveyed a sense of ‘blurring the lines’ between ‘foster parent’ and ‘mother’ prior to the adoption, suggesting that it was a natural progression rather than a forced one. However, it is clear that a change occurred in the mind-sets of these mothers, with the exception of one, which appears to come hand-in-hand with the security of knowing that their child is permanent rather than temporary.

“I felt I’d crossed the line because at that point, I felt that I was, um, advocating for him like a mother rather than a foster carer and the paths started to get muddied” (Beth).

The need for family

The mothers’ accounts seem to consistently reveal that their decision to adopt was fundamentally based on the child’s need for a family rather than their need for a child. This appears to be associated
with the fact that these women did not choose adoption due to fertility issues, but rather, because they were given children to foster who evidently needed a family. The mothers expressed, without exception, that their children needed the security of having official families. It was consistently recognised that these were ‘unintentional adoptions’; they expressed that they were primarily foster carers but their love for their child grew and it appeared to fall into place.

“...it was not the intention for him to be adopted but the plan didn’t work for him to go back home and, so we decided that we would adopt him”. (Charlotte)

**Doubting self**

Self-doubt was a salient theme; feelings of uncertainty were conveyed in regard to parenting skills and level of experience. These mothers all had experience of parenting biological children but they recognised that parenting adopted children is a different experience: they expressed insecurities and a lack of self-belief due to their lack of experience in mothering adopted children. The mothers talked about the attachment issues, behaviour issues, low self-esteem and all the related issues that foster children typically come with. It was indicated that their self-doubt was partially rooted in their fear of their biological children being compromised. It was also expressed that they felt they needed to ‘fix’ their children and heal their damaged areas, which sometimes led to feelings of parental failure.

“They (adopted children) come in with attachment issues which then manifests itself in a lot of behaviours that can be difficult to handle in a, in a family situation” (Eve)

“...they carry those feelings of rejection with them and regardless of how much and how well you love them, there is a hole that you can’t fill” (Diane)

**Security**

Sense of security was highlighted as a prominent aspect of the experience. Having fostered their children prior to adopting them, they were able to compare the two experiences. The fear of losing their children when they were simply fostered was crippling at times for three of the mothers, which
stemmed from the uncertainty of their futures. Whilst a sense of maternal responsibility was felt, without exception, they acknowledged that they possessed no parental rights and therefore the children whom they felt maternally responsible for could be removed and rehomed at any time. Adoption provided these mothers with the emotional security of knowing with confidence that their children were permanently theirs, and they would not be going elsewhere.

“...we feel that he became attached to us and we know that won’t be taken away... The fear of him going to a family that wouldn’t be able to meet those needs was more difficult to us than us adopting him”. (Charlotte)

3.3 Lack of support

The emotional and psychological damage in their children was evident as a result from trauma experienced in their formative years, according to the mothers. Strong feelings of abandonment were conveyed in regard to the support, of lack of, they received following the adoption. Disappointment was expressed due to their support as foster mothers differing significantly from their support as adoptive mothers: they received very minimal support after their status changed and it was perceived that when the adoption became official, they were left to work things out independently, such as how to deal with complex behavioural issues which was perceived by three mothers as exclusive to adoptive children. Whilst acknowledging that this is the case when birthing biological children, they felt that there should be more guidance in regard to dealing with previous negative parenting experiences influencing their present experience.

“You know, it’s quite difficult to get information... I don’t feel there’s enough information out there... you don’t seem to get that support...” (Beth)

“...children are left in their home situation quite often for too long and the damage that’s done is quite insurmountable” (Diane)
**Expectations**

This theme emphasizes the lack of support consistently felt by adoptive mothers. Several mothers acknowledged that children who become available for adoption nowadays have generally been left with their biological families for too long, resulting in the children being adopted along with significant baggage which was not considered prior to the adoption. It was recognised that their pre-conceived expectation was to be their child’s one and only mother following the adoption, whereas the reality they found was that they already have and will always have biological mothers, which took some time to accept.

“…whereas perhaps I looked at it beforehand as when you adopt a child that child becomes yours, yes legally you’re the parent... but she’s, she’s not our biological child we’re given the privilege of parenting her” (Abigail)

**Isolation**

Feelings of isolation were prevalent: disappointment with the lack of competency of the adoption system was expressed when the mothers discussed the support they received in becoming their child’s mother. It was stated that there were too many agencies involved in the process which actually caused more problems because details were being forgotten or overlooked. The mothers, with the exception of one, felt discontented with the support from their social workers and conveyed that their limited understanding was the product of a lack of information and guidance. These mothers felt isolated following the adoption of their children due to the withdrawal from professionals: it was highlighted that the poor handling of this delicate process was detrimental to the children, with the exception of two.

“Um, having gone through the process with our little girl and realising what you know, all that you have to go through and the assessments um, I think that there’s something missing, there’s something lacking definitely” (Abigail)

“…seeing the way that process was handled, I wasn’t comfortable with the process at all I think that it was detrimental to the children”. (Eve)
3.4 Dealing with the aftermath

The mothers detailed some of the issues they have had to deal with when parenting their children, resulting from their negative experiences in formative years. Attachment disorders and destructive behaviours displayed by their children were highlighted: they expressed concern for how these issues may affect the rest of their families. The mothers felt deep concern for the emotional development of their children, and conveyed their doubt in regard to their ability to overcome these issues. Delays in development were talked about, which led to the mothers discussing their fear for future support considering that post-adoption support had ceased: they stated that when the adoption became official, they were left to deal with the remaining issues independently and felt there was a lack of professional guidance. Regardless of the boundless love they have for their children which was evident, their pessimism was related to the realisation of the complexity of the issues of the children.

“...if you adopt an older child you are going to have a backlog of emotional and physical problems that you will need to be equipped to deal with” (Beth)

“...love isn’t necessarily enough to fix the issues they come with” (Diane)

The need for transparency

There was great importance placed on the need to be honest with adopted children regarding their roots and previous families. This was paramount, with the exception of one mother, it was felt that they have a duty to allow their children to grasp an understanding of where they have come from, because it was recognised that this is crucial to healthy development. They feared that confusion and resentment would be the result if honesty was not practiced with their children, and that missing out information, regardless of good intentions, would ultimately result in further trauma in the future and possibly the breakdown of their relationship. The mothers conveyed the importance of trust in regard to their relationships with their children, alongside feeling that they wanted to protect them from the
upsetting details of their formative years. Finding the balance between protection and honesty is an
ongoing battle.

“...there can be a lot of confusion with children as they get older if they aren’t told the truth” (Abigail)

“You can have the best relationship in the world with your adopted child, but there is still a part of them that
wants their birth parents to have either not given them up or to have prioritized them so they could have kept
them” (Diane)

**Feeling ill-equipped**

The mothers felt that the issues that come hand-in-hand with adopting a child are complex and can
feel overwhelming. Feeling overwhelmed led to feeling ill-equipped to respond to certain questions and
to handle certain situations. The sense of rejection displayed by their children after becoming aware of
their adoption was challenging and left these mothers feeling like they did not possess the skills or
knowledge to effectively handle the situation. It was expressed that low self-worth and low-self-esteem
are prominent issues in adopted children which then project onto the mothers. Often, issues can
become more intense and further issues can be uncovered as time goes on, which caused the mothers
to feel unsettled and apprehensive about their futures.

“...they can only remember things from their perspective and they’ve got a lot of things that happen to them
before they’re aware of having the memories of them, and you can be unaware of triggers” (Diane)
Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 Overview

The rationale was influenced by previous research that focused solely on childhood and adolescent perspectives, thus, the perspective of adoptive mothers was the focus of this research project, using a qualitative approach. In this chapter, findings from the thematic analysis will be presented in relation to the relevant literature explored in the beginning chapter. These findings will be discussed with the view to enrich understanding of the experiences of adoptive mothers which could potentially play a role in improving this experience for future adoptive mothers. All five participants who contributed to this present research were aged between 44 and 56 and had adopted at least one child, as well as having previously parented at least one biological child. Three main themes were identified within the present corpus of data; ‘Becoming mum’, ‘Lack of support’ and ‘Dealing with the aftermath’.

4.2 Transition, security and maternal attachment

The theme ‘Becoming mum’ encapsulated a number of prominent sub-themes, including ‘Transitioning from foster parent to mum’, ‘Doubting self’ and ‘Security’. Statistics have revealed that the largest group of children adopted each year comes from the foster care system (Hamilton, Ventura, Martin and Sutton, 2004). It is interesting to highlight that there is a greater likelihood of secure attachment in children who were fostered prior to being adopted compared to children who were adopted immediately from their home settings (Smyke et al., 2010). Evidence of this conception is limited, however, due to the inconsistencies in the adoption process between different regions. In relation to mothers, the present research included only women whose children were fostered prior to their adoption. ‘Security’ was identified as a theme within the corpus of data; reflecting the sense of security these women felt after the adoption was official compared to the insecurity felt when their child was fostered. It was found that a significant difference was felt between being a foster mother and being
an adoptive mother in relation to the security of these women: this was consistently referred to as ‘temporary vs permanent’. These findings are consistent with findings from previous research by Brand and Brinich (1999) which was reiterated by Archer and Burnell (2003) who reported that attachment issues are caused by both maternal-related factors and child-related factors; more specifically, they stated that the insecurities of adoptive mothers was the primary influence, followed closely by the pre-existing disorganised attachment in the adoptee.

4.3 The influence of prior experiences

It was previously highlighted that children who become available for adoption have generally been removed from parents with drug issues, alcohol issues or mental health issues (Crittenden, Landini and Claussen, 2001). Participants in the present study stated that the issues of the birth parents of their children has majorly influenced the outcome in regard to attachment issues between mother and child, self-esteem issues and behavioural issues. ‘Feeling ill-equipped’ was identified as a focal sub-theme within ‘Dealing with the aftermath’. Forrester and Warwin (2008) found that there has been a significant rise in the amount of children whose biological mothers experienced drug or alcohol abuse and poor mental health. These findings are echoed in the present research: ‘Dealing with the aftermath’ was identified as a main theme, encapsulating the feeling of being ill-equipped to deal with the complex problems that adopted children carry into their adoptive placements as a result of their traumatic formative years, thereby supporting previous research. Furthermore, Sinclair et al. (2005) reported that adoptive mothers felt that poorly managed initial introductions contributed significantly to the deterioration of adoptive placements, which coincides with the present findings: ‘Lack of support’ was identified as a main theme which encompassed ‘Expectations’ and ‘Isolation’. These women detailed that they expected a strong connection with their child which was encouraged by the professionals involved in the adoption process, however, it was consistently felt that there was a lack of support from professionals, particularly in regard to initial introductions.
4.4 Perception and the role of self-confidence

‘Becoming mum’ encompasses the many emotions and perceptions of self that adoptive mothers were found to have experienced. It has been said that the conceptualization of adoption is a key determinant of the psychological outcome for both child and mother (Link and Phelan, 2001), which corresponds with present findings. Several studies that explored these concepts in relation to the way participants associated them with stereotyped beliefs revealed that both adoptive children and adoptive mothers believe that others perceive them as abnormal or second-class (Hollingsworth, 2000; March, 1995; Miall, 1996). Findings from the present study are consistent with this; ‘Doubting self’ was a prevalent theme which encompassed the negative perceptions adoptive mothers felt about themselves in regard to their ability to parent a non-biological child. Results from the present study also highlighted that the adverse view of outsiders negatively influences adoptive mothers’ self-confidence, which ultimately influences their relationship with their child, thereby supporting previous findings which showed that maternal insecurity was one of the main influences in adoption breakdown (Link and Phelan, 2001; Brand and Brinich, 1999; Archer and Burnell, 2003).

4.5 Post-adoption support and over-looked issues

Findings from the present research highlight factors which have been overlooked in previous research: the magnitude of influence that post-adoption support carries, the often-distorted expectations pre-adoption, and the significance of the role of self-doubt in adoptive mothers. Whilst low self-esteem has consistently been identified within existing adoptive motherhood research (Cast, 2004; Azar et al., 2005; Phillips, 2007; Bachrach, 1986) the present research specifically identified self-doubt as a salient theme. As previously discussed, existing research repeatedly reports that adoptive mothers are often disillusioned with the expectation that the adoption of their child marks a new beginning (Gair, 1996). Present results correspond with these findings, that adoptive mothers feel they adopt not only their child, but the past experiences of the child also (Cast, 2004) supporting the notion that adoptive
mothers face additional parenting challenges compared to biological mothers. The present research is consistent with previous findings, evidencing that the negative experiences embedded into the memories of adoptees has a direct negative influence on the self-esteem and self-confidence of adoptive mothers, subsequently impacting the quality of mother-child relationship.

4.6 Limitations and future research

It is interesting to highlight the fact that previous research surrounding adoption focused on children who were adopted at a relatively young age; under 18 months (Baltimore, 2008) and under 6 months (Stams, Juffer and Van IJzendoorn, 2002). Evidently, there is a gap in research, in that children who are adopted at older ages are being over-looked and consequently, the influence that this has on adoptive mothers is also over-looked. It has been suggested that the age of the adopted child bears great weight on their outcome in regard to educational issues, social and emotional development, and particularly with attachment issues with adoptive mothers (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson and Guthrie, 2010) which is reinforced in the present research in the theme ‘Dealing with the aftermath’. Thus, variation in severity of related issues is possible and therefore must be considered. A potential area for future research is comparatively studying children who are adopted younger and children who are adopted older (i.e. before and after 24 months) and assessing the varying impact this has on adoptive mothers. Countless research has implied that there is a significant difference in regard to attachment issues and future emotional development between various age groups (Smyke et al., 2010), however, evidence in support of this notion is yet to be undertaken. The issues faced by adoptive children directly influences the experience of adoptive mothers (Follan and McNamara, 2013) therefore this gap in research must be recognised as crucial in improving the outcome for adoptive mothers and subsequently, adoptive children.

It must be noted that of the previous literature, a large proportion studied mothers who adopted young children rather than new-borns. Commonalities and discrepancies are evident within the present
research highlighting the unexpected diversity found in the experiences of adoptive mothers. The prior assumption was that experiences would be consistent between adoptive mothers considering the previous findings. It has been suggested that whilst the age of the adoptee has been considered as a potential confound, the diversity of the age of participants has not been considered. The participant sample spanned 12 years, therefore, amendments to adoption policies during this time and subsequently, attitudes toward adoption could perhaps explain the few discrepancies among findings.

Similarly, it could be argued that research findings are context-dependent. Research by Baltimore (2008) for example, was carried out in America and therefore may be less applicable to UK adoptions due to differences in legislation, policy and practice. It is possible that these differences cause adopters to construct their adoption experiences a certain way which subsequently varies between countries. Whilst research from different countries can be useful in providing insight into adoption in general, it must be considered that divergences in results are because research is context-dependent and should not necessarily be generalised to alternative contexts.

A methodological constraint which must be highlighted is that from a quantitative perspective, the snowball sampling of participants is not an ideal recruitment method because it ultimately provides a limited sample. Participants were recruited as they were known to the researcher thereby presenting a potential bias. A more appropriate method for future research would be to recruit through adoption agencies thus creating a randomised sample of unknown adoptive mothers who simply fit the criteria. However, it is acknowledged that due to the nature of adoption, agencies are generally required to maintain confidentiality and would therefore be unlikely to provide the researcher with a sample of participants.

4.7 Reflexive analysis

My interest in pursuing the topic of adoption from the perspective of adoptive mothers stems from a foundation of knowledge and experience due to my mother being a foster carer who adopted a child
several years ago. My extensive understanding, alongside further research and learning, has enabled me to develop a strong rapport with the participants as I was able to engage with them and their reports of adoptive motherhood.

Initially, I anticipated specific experiences to be discussed by the participants, based on my prior knowledge of my mothers’ experience of adoptive motherhood. Having already rephrased some of my interview questions when this became apparent through a pilot study which was later disregarded, it was not until the beginning of the interviews that I became fully aware of my assumptions and I ensured that I was not prompting the participants to reveal experiences which would line up with my assumptions. As the interviews progressed, I develop a richer understanding of adoptive motherhood and realised that whilst there were similarities between the accounts, ultimately, their experiences differed to some extent.

4.8 Conclusion

Overall, the findings conclude that whilst experiences vary from person to person, the experiences of adoptive mothers is fundamentally based upon doubting ones parental abilities, feeling ill-equipped and feeling failed by professionals in regard to post-adoption support. These experiences then develop into potential issues which affect the quality of the adoptive mothers’ relationship with the child. The transition from foster mother to adoptive mother is consistently found to be a relatively natural process whereby the adoptive mothers felt their maternal feelings kick in prior to the adoption becoming official, in most cases. However, the difficulties regarding the transition to adoptive motherhood is also evident and contributing factors must be considered to improve the quality of this experience, primarily lack of support. It is clear, though, that the common difficulties in adoptive relationships between mother and child are not necessarily caused by child-related factors per se, as was the prior misconception.
References


6.1 Appendix A – Semi-structured interview schedule

1) Firstly, could you tell me the age and gender of the child you adopted?

2) Was your child fostered before you adopted him/her?
   
   If yes, were they fostered by you, or by other carers?

3) How old was your child when you adopted him/her?

4) Do you have any biological children?
   
   Are they older or younger than your adopted child?
   
   Do/did they live at home with your adopted child?

5) Before the adoption, what were your pre-conceived ideas on adoption?

6) How has your experience lined up with these ideas?
   
   What has surprised you?

7) Could you explain to me your thoughts on adoption as a general topic?

8) In what ways has adopting your child changed you as a person?

9) What are some of the issues more exclusive to adopted children?

10) In what ways is parenting adopted children different to parenting biological children?

11) At what point did you feel like a mother?

12) What stigmas (if any) have you been subjected to as a result of adoption?
Title of Project: If using a working title, it should convey what the project is about

Participant information sheet

The study

What would happen if you agree to participate?

Exclusion criteria

Potential Risk

Potential benefits

Withdrawal, anonymity and confidentiality

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Reference Number:

Participant name or Study ID Number:

Title of Project: If using a working title, it should convey what the project is about

Name of Researcher:

__________________________________________________________________

Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before leaving the experiment, without giving any reason.

3. I agree to take part in the above study.

_______________________________________   ___________________
Signature of Participant                        Date

_______________________   ____________
Name of person taking consent        Date

________________________________________
Signature of person taking consent
### Table 1: Main themes, subordinate themes and quotations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main theme</th>
<th>Subordinate theme</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Becoming mum</strong></td>
<td>Transitioning from foster parent to mum</td>
<td>“...I felt I’d crossed the line because at that point, I felt that I was, um, advocating for him like a mother rather than a foster carer and the paths started to get muddied”. Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The need for family</td>
<td>“...not because we couldn’t have biological children, they were for her because she needed adopting... she needed us rather than us needing her”. Abigail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doubting self</td>
<td>“...I went into it (adoption) thinking love was going to be enough and love isn’t necessarily enough to fix the issues they come with”. Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>“...we feel that he became attached to us and we know that won’t be taken away...” Charlotte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of support</strong></td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>“...whereas perhaps I looked at it beforehand as when you adopt a child that child becomes yours, yes legally you’re the parent... but she’s, she’s not our biological child we’re given the privilege of parenting her”. Abigail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“...and it’s challenged my ideas on nature and nurture”. Diane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>“...it’s a bit of a minefield I think that people who have no knowledge of it perhaps won’t look into adoption because they still see it as a um, a taboo subjec- it’s quite difficult to get information”. Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dealing with the aftermath</strong></td>
<td>The need for transparency</td>
<td>“...there can be a lot of confusion with children as they get older if they aren’t told the truth”. Abigail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“...she’s not our biological child she has biological parents and when she is old enough, um, if she wants to find them we will encourage her to do that”. Eve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling ill-equipped</td>
<td>“...they carry those feelings of rejection with them and regardless of how much and how well you love them, there is a hole that you can’t fill”. Diane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract: 246

Introduction: 2,414

Method: 912

Results: 2,220

Discussion 1,419

7,358

Signed:

Date: 16/04/18