The International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review
2024, Volume 10, Issue 1, pp. 23-33
https://journals.radford.edu/index.php/IJRLR
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"Family is About Who Loves You." Exploring the Adoption Journey With Photos and Stories

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Adoption has complex implications for individuals and families, involving questions about the unknown (Dexter Brown & Reavey, 2008), a sense of trauma or loss (Lambert, 2020), or seeking one's identity (Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012). Few studies have used images to research the adoption phenomenon. This qualitative study used a photovoice approach to explore experiences and perspectives of people touched by adoption using photos and narratives. Through a *Photo + Story* online survey, 37 participants, including adoptees and parents, siblings, and grandparents of adopted children, uploaded an image of what adoption meant to them, along with a brief written narrative and demographic information. Seventeen of the participants additionally took part in one of four focus groups where they shared their photos, elaborated on their stories, and engaged in dialogue about common experiences. Photos and narratives underwent systematic visuo-textual analysis (Brown & Collins, 2021), subsequently integrated with a thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts. In total, 74 codes emerged across all data. Synthesis of the codes resulted in three main themes: 1) Identity (e.g., adopted vs. biological, race/ethnicity, belonging); 2) Journey (e.g., waiting, first encounter, questioning/searching, secrets); and 3) Making Sense (e.g., gratitude, whole/complete, acceptance). Participants' perspectives varied based on adoption status (e.g., adoptee vs. adoptive parent). Overall, the rich integration of images, stories, and dialogue revealed ways adoptees and their families reconcile the unknown as well as the diverse and dynamic ways we construct and understand both individual and family identities.

Keywords: photovoice; photo novella; focus groups; identity; adoption; family

This qualitative study, in the tradition of photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), used photos with accompanying written narratives and focus groups to explore the experiences and perspectives of people whose lives have been touched by adoption. Adoption is unique for each person and family. The past and present are constructs that develop who we are, as individuals and as a family. Adoption impacts each family member differently. Adoptees do not always have access to information about their past, potentially leaving part of their identity undeveloped or unreconciled (Moyer & Juang, 2011). Parents that adopt children may worry about how to reveal and answer questions about their child's history and origin, while simultaneously developing a cohesive family identity (Ballard & Ballard, 2011). Parents with international or transracial adoptees may experience guilt or shame about the adoption process (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2018). Siblings of adoptees learn what it means to be adopted and its impacts on identity and relationships within the family (Ballard & Ballard, 2011).

Clearly, adoption is a complex phenomenon that impacts many people in different ways. Therefore, revealing the rich nature of the adoption experience from diverse perspectives requires creative approaches to data collection. Historically, adoption has been studied through qualitative research, often in the fields of social work and sociology (Jones & Hackett, 2012; Lambert, 2020; MacDonald, 2017). The literature highlights varied aspects of the multifaceted journey of adoption, with particular focus on the adoptee experience. The constructs of identity and family, and visual approaches to adoption research are reviewed here.

Identity and Family

Identity research in adoption generally focuses on the adoptee experience. Often, especially in the case of

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international adoption, adoptees do not have a full history with which to reconcile with the self within the past, present, and future (Darnell et al, 2017; Xing Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012). Adoptees may lack knowledge of biological parents, medical history, why they were relinquished, and even their birthdate. Adoption support workers have suggested that adoptive parents create a life story book to help their adopted children establish a history (Dexter Brown & Reavey, 2008). The life story book serves as a replacement for missing historical information and becomes part of their family story (Dexter Brown & Reavey, 2008; Ballard & Ballard, 2011).

Family identity formed by adoption includes multiple sub-constructs of identity. Adoptees fitting in with families (Park & Green, 2000), how family units are defined, and family legacies and stories (Ballard & Ballard, 2011) are all part of what we typically refer to as "family." Sociological constructs of family include specific units and connections to people, history, and stories that have absorbed adopted children into the biological unit (Thompson et al., 2009). Adopted children have been expected to fit into the family unit rather than the family unit changing structure to fit the child (Goodwin et al., 2020).

The mainstream view of family in the U.S. remains one of physical resemblance (Witt, 2005); however, transracial and international adoption have challenged this construct. Transracial adoption can impose hardships, in particular, on adoptees' identity construction. In the United States, adoptive parents are mostly White, while adoptees are Asian (China, India, South Korea), African (Nigeria), African-American, Black, or Latino (United States Department of State, 2022). Adoptees must reconcile the culture of Whiteness of their adoptive family while not quite fitting in with the culture of their own race or ethnicity (Johnson, 2021). How adoptees incorporate their adoption status into their identity intersects with their feelings of race and ethnicity and where they belong (Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012). Reconciling these feelings with the way society views the construct of family and how families are supposed to look requires acceptance of being and looking different.

In contrast to traditional closed adoptions and most international adoptions where biological parents remain unknown, open adoptions have different effects on family structure. For example, some researchers contend that adoption trends in the U.S. and UK have changed from a form of replacement to a form of addition (Jones & Hackett, 2012; Thompson et al, 2009). That is, rather than replacing parents, adoptees remain in contact with birth parents in an open adoption process, stretching the ideas of what makes a family unit. Open adoptions allow adoptees to know their history, the stories of how they were born and where they are from, and especially, why they were relinquished. It also considers kinship in more fluid ways, as in relationships rather than biologically-related units (MacDonald, 2017).

Lambert (2020) suggests that adoption is rooted in the breakdown of biological families and is therefore manifested in loss and trauma. Whether the adoption process is international, closed, or open, incongruence in the family identity can add to adoptees' feelings of trauma and loss (Lambert, 2020). Feeling different from their adopted family or that their family is different from other families can further complicate reconciliation of identity. Feeling different may manifest in a sense of loss for adoptees - loss of the mainstream family unit in addition to feelings of loss of their biological family. Adoptees are expected to transfer from the biological family to the adoptive family, yet the adoptive family is impacted by this loss whether it is explicitly discussed with the adoptee or not. Lambert (2020) notes, "Adopted children's birth relatives linger in a time and space between life and death/absence and presence." (p. 371). How does the adopting family reconcile these absent figures? Are they replaced? Lost? Kept in a life story book? Lambert suggests that ambivalence, or being comfortable with not knowing, is the key to dealing with the sense of loss or mystery surrounding adoption.

Overall, qualitative research on adoption often focuses on identity and family, from the perspective of the adoptee, with some family structure research conducted from the perspectives of adoptive parents. Our study was also interested in these themes; however, we wanted to take a broader view, exploring the experiences and perspectives of anyone who has been touched by adoption in any way. We also wanted to expand the way we share and talk about adoption stories, using photos and stories.

Using Photos to Understand the Adoption Experience

Few studies have used visual images to explore the adoption experience. Dexter Brown and Reavey (2008) examined the effectiveness of using life story books (using photos and narratives) as ways of organizing family histories for families with adopted children. However, their aim was creating "a coherent narrative between the past and the present" (p. 474) for adoptees, not to understand the broader experience of adoption itself. Johnson (2021) used family photography to investigate the creation of kinship in cases of transnational adoption. This research explored how meaning was made through the act of family photography by examining the photos of transnationally adopted children's families.

In our study, we combined photos or images with narrative and invited participants to analyze the adoption phenomenon as insiders. To do this, we adapted the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997) and incorporated elements of photo novella (Hurworth, 2003) to our method of qualitative inquiry, "Photo + Story".

Researcher Self Disclosure

All three authors have experienced adoption, from different perspectives, and this was our motivation for exploring this phenomenon. Michelle was an adopted

child; Christina adopted two children, one internationally and one from the U.S. foster system; and Robin met her older sister, who had been relinquished for adoption, as an adult.

Our first inquiry into this topic was a collaborative, performance autoethnography (Danzak, Gunther, & Cole, 2021), which was a transformative experience for all of us. This deep dive explored our own diverse experiences with adoption and provided an opportunity to learn about ourselves and each other, bringing awareness and understanding of our shared experience of adoption from very different perspectives. After learning about the photovoice method, we created the Photo + Story project to broaden our understanding of others' adoption experiences and perceptions.

Method

This was a qualitative study inspired by the photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997). We applied a modified photovoice (Photo + Story) approach, with elements of photo novella (Hurworth, 2003). First, participants were invited to upload a single photo or image representing "what adoption means to you," with a short, written narrative. Later, participants gathered in focus groups where they shared their photos, elaborated on their adoption stories, and engaged in dialogue about the adoption experience. The research was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at the second author's university.

Photovoice is a participatory process in which members of a community, through the lens of their camera, record images reflecting the community's strengths and concerns. Information sharing through dialogue in group settings, including public exhibition of participants' photos, provides a platform to discuss the community's issues with a goal of informing policymakers to elicit social change (Wang & Burris, 1997). On the other hand, photo novella offers participants the opportunity to use a self-selected picture to tell a story (Hurworth, 2003). In our research, the images and short narratives reflected participants' unique experiences and perspectives, while focus groups offered participants the opportunity to share their stories in a community with similar experiences. The invitation to upload a Photo + Story was not time specific (i.e., photos could come from any time in the past, present, or imagined future), and participants had autonomy to include any image they wished to share, including abstractions or symbols. Our approach differed from photovoice in that it was not designed to initiate social change, and our participants' photos were not exhibited for the greater community. Instead, the dialogue among participants in the focus groups provided an opportunity to share and reflect on the meaning and significance of individual and collective experiences through the visual medium.

Participants

Participants were 37 adults who self-identified as having an adoption experience. The invitation to participate was posted on various social media platforms and university email distribution lists. All 37 participants completed the Photo + Story, and 17 also participated in a focus group. Participant demographics are presented in Findings.

Data

This study had two sources of qualitative data. The first was the Photo + Story online survey whose responses procured images and short written narratives. The second data source was focus groups, where participants shared their photos, elaborated on their stories, and connected with others over common experiences.

Photo + Story Online Survey

This brief, seven-item survey was developed and launched on SurveyMonkey. After describing the study purpose and obtaining informed consent to participate, the survey asked for basic demographics: gender identity, age, geographic location, and adoption status (e.g., adopted child, parent, sibling, etc.). Next, participants were invited to upload a photo or image representing what adoption meant to them. Finally, an open-ended question asked for a brief written narrative about the submitted photo. We also asked participants whether they obtained consent from any people shown in the photo, and if they would like to participate in a focus group.

Focus Groups

Four, one-hour focus groups were scheduled on a variety of days/times during a one-month period. Participants were contacted and asked to rank their availability among the scheduled options. The focus groups were held on Zoom with groups of 4-5 and began with researcher introductions and an overview of what to expect (time, safe sharing, etc).

Participants' photos were then presented one by one in a PowerPoint using the screenshare feature. For each photo, the related participant introduced themself and told their adoption story. After each story, other participants could ask questions, provide feedback, or comment. After all the participants had shared, we facilitated a discussion, asking participants what themes had emerged during the conversation. To close each focus group, we asked the participants to write in the chat a single word or phrase that summed up the significance of 'adoption.' We all attended each focus group, alternating the main facilitator role among us, and taking notes throughout.

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed. For the purpose of member checking (Birt et al., 2016), participants received a de-identified transcript of their

focus group to review. Participants were invited to provide feedback or request any changes to the data. No participants responded with corrections or changes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed in two phases: 1) visuo-textual analysis (Brown & Collins, 2021) of the paired images and narratives; and 2) thematic analysis (Lochmiller, 2021) of the focus group transcripts, integrating with phase-one codes. For both phases, we used Dedoose qualitative data analysis software (Dedoose, 2021), and we met regularly to review and discuss code creation, data coding, and emerging themes.

Phase 1: Visuo-Textual Analysis

The submitted photos and narratives were analyzed using systemic visuo-textual analysis, "a framework that accounts for visual and textual materials in an interconnected analytical process" (Brown & Collins, 2021, p. 1276). Initially, we reviewed and talked over the images to become familiar with the data. We then coded the images with basic descriptors, such as people, abstract/symbol, event, etc. A second, deeper analysis of the photos revealed codes about the relationships among people in the photos (e.g., inter-racial family, physical closeness, siblings), emotional expressions (joy, love), and events (first encounter, celebration/milestone).

Next, the narratives were coded using existing codes from the images and new ones. Because the narratives provided more elaborated experiences and perceptions, many more codes emerged at this stage (e.g., reasons to adopt, waiting, belonging, cultural difference). To complete the visuo-textual analysis, the photos were paired with their narratives and re-examined, providing further connections between the visual and textual data. We each coded the data independently and met frequently to refine the codes and synthesize emerging themes. As the analysis progressed, we reviewed each other's coding, discussed any differences or questions, and came to consensus on all codes and their application.

Phase Two: Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis consisted of identifying key words or phrases resulting in codes that were applied to excerpts across the four focus group transcripts. We started with the codes created in the visuo-textual analysis; however, many new codes emerged during this phase because the focus groups offered the most elaborate narratives and dialogue of all the data. We continued to meet regularly to discuss coding and explore emerging themes. The final analysis occurred when all codes from phases one and two were synthesized and categorized into main themes, which are presented in Findings.

Trustworthiness

In addition to the steps taken during data collection and analysis described above (multiple data sources, member checking, systematic analysis using multiple coders), we used reflexivity strategies to ensure trustworthiness in the research process. Because of our insider perspectives, we were mindful to not allow our experiences and feelings about adoption to influence the participants' stories or our interpretation of the data. We remained intentionally aware of our personal experiences and acknowledged them throughout the research process.

Specifically, our reflexivity strategies included note-taking when reviewing data, asking questions of ourselves and each other about perspectives, pausing and taking time to acknowledge personal interpretations, question each other about personal interpretations, and evolving to understand the perspectives presented (Olmos-Vega, et al., 2022). We promoted safety within our conversations, were transparent, welcomed challenging questions, and embraced the perspective of others.

Findings

Findings are the result of the synthesis of the two phases of data analysis described above. Before presenting the main themes, we will describe the participants based on their responses to the demographic questions in Photo + Story.

Participant Demographics

In terms of gender, 29 of the 37 participants identified as female and eight as male. Participants represented diverse age groups (Figure 1). Regarding geographic location, participants most commonly lived in the Northeast region (n = 26), with five in the South Atlantic, two in the Midwest, and four undisclosed. Finally, regarding adoption status, there were 16 adopted children; 14 parents that adopted children (12 mothers, two fathers); five individuals with adopted siblings; three grandparents of adopted children; one mother who relinquished a child for adoption; and one adoption worker. Note that three

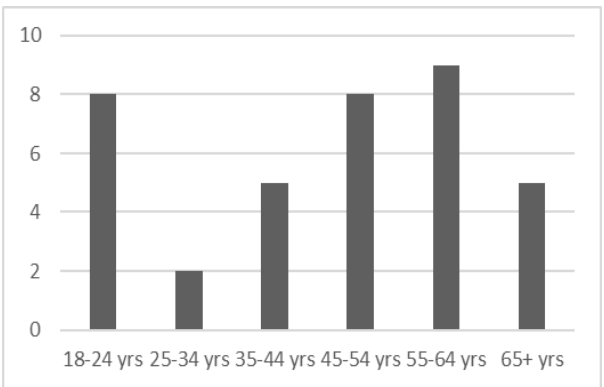

Figure 1. Participants by age group.

participants had overlapping adoption statuses (e.g., adopted and adoptive grandparent).

Resulting Codes

The visuo-textual analysis of the photos and narratives produced 54 codes, including a set of seven basic photo descriptors. The thematic analysis of the focus groups incorporated the 54 original codes and revealed 20 additional codes. In total, 34 parent codes and 40 child codes were created and applied across all data (see Figure 2 for codes and frequencies).

origins, defined "real parents" as those who had adopted and raised them. One woman in Focus Group 3 explained, "You don't really have a choice to define family as blood related, so you define it in other ways… by the people who love you, who care about you, who are there for you." Another adoptee commented, "I used to hate when people would say to me, and it would tick me off, 'Well, don't you want to know who your real parents are?' I'm like, 'I've got real parents' (Focus Group 1).

Parents that had adopted children shared the sentiment that "real" equates to the family that surrounds you. One mother stated (Focus Group 4):

Figure 2. Code cloud with coding frequencies across photos, narratives, and focus group transcripts (Created with freewordcloudgenerator.com/).

Main Themes

The codes were synthesized into three main themes pervasive across the Photo + Story data and focus groups: *Identity, The Journey*, and *Making Sense*.

Identity

The theme of *Identity* included the codes *adopted vs. biological* (including *parent/child origin*, "*real parents*", and *being chosen*), *belonging vs. feeling excluded*, *family resemblance*, *looking/feeling different*, *culture*, and *race*.

Adopted vs. Biological. A key topic that emerged across all data was the question of *adopted vs. biological*. Many adoptees recounted moments during childhood or even as adults when they were questioned by others about their "real parents." Most adoptee participants, including those who were eager to learn about and connect with their

> *I also think it's hard when people say, "Does he know his mom?" and you're like, "I am his mom." "What about his real mom?" "I am his real mom." I appreciate [his biological mom] and I value and respect her for what she did, but he's mine. … It's one of those things that makes the hair stick up on my neck. I am his mom.*

With a more humorous tone, Simon (all names are pseudonyms), who with his wife adopted three children from South Korea shared (Focus Group 3):

> *Kids can sometimes play the "real card," when things aren't going their way. We have friends whose teenage son was very angry at his father and, you know, "You're not my real dad." And the Father looked at him, "No, you're right, I am not your biological dad. But I am the dad who loves*

you, I am the dad who cares for you, and right now I am the dad who has the car keys that you want. So that makes me real enough."

Finally, participants with adopted siblings also expressed the "realness" of their sibling relationships. One participant submitted an image of an adoption poem and wrote, "That moment we got the first pictures and I got to see her. I instantly knew, I would love her with all my heart and make sure that I am the best big brother." Another participant shared a proud moment in the photo and its accompanying story in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Participant with her brother.

Note. Faces and other identifying images in the photos have been pixelated using the online app, PicDefacer (Barakin, 2020-2023) to protect the participants' privacy.

I love my brother so much. I have always known he was adopted, it was never a secret, I never questioned it. He is my brother and I have never thought of him any other way. ... My brother would say to me when we were kids, "I was chosen, but they got stuck with you." I always laughed and it made my brother feel so good that he was chosen.

As noted in this excerpt, the notion of adopted children being chosen by their parents also arose from multiple perspectives (parent, child, sibling). One adoptee stated, "I don't like to label my family as 'adoptive family' because they are my family. That's my tribe, that's who I belong to. And my dad always said to me, 'I always want you to know that I love you unconditionally and you were chosen' (Focus Group 1).

Family Resemblance and Inclusion. A related topic was the idea of looking like people in the family or looking unique. Family resemblance, even in terms of behavior or mannerisms, rather than physical traits, played a role in adoptees' feelings of inclusion or exclusion in their families. An adoptee in Focus Group 1 expressed, "My mom and I would always be told that we looked like each other. … I don't look anything like [her]. But my mom and I do smile the same 'cause, you know, I've copied her my whole life." An alternate perspective was, "Well, I'm unique. I don't look like anybody else. That's kind of cool. I can be me, you know what I mean?" (Focus Group 1).

More than one adoptee participant expressed that giving birth to their own children reconciled long-standing questions about family resemblance and identity. One woman spoke about her daughter: "I found my identity. I could look at her face and go, everybody now says, 'You guys are twins.' So it gives me a mirror of something, I know it sounds silly, but something that's mine that looks like me" (Focus Group 1).

Race and Culture. Finally, an important component of the *Identity* theme related to culture, ethnicity, and race, which often arose when these things differed between parent and child. Simon, whose three Korean children were born in the 1990s, shared:

They were aware early on that they don't look like their parents. L. [son] was watching Mr. Rogers with [his mother] one day and the guest was Yo-Yo Ma, the cellist. ... L. looked at Yo-Yo Ma and said, "Mommy, he look like me." And this was at the age of three (Focus Group 3).

Annie, a White woman from the Midwest, adopted a son from Brazil because her husband is Brazilian. She expressed tensions that have emerged in situations of questioning or even acknowledging her son's racial identity:

I've spent my entire life colorblind. I remember [my son] was about eight months old and we were at a grocery store. A woman walked up to me and said, "He's beautiful. Is he mixed?" I was so taken aback. I looked at her and I was like, "Mixed with what? He's Brazilian" (Focus Group 4).

Sarah submitted a photo of her family (mother, father, two teenage sons, and grandparents) and spoke about racial diversity in the related narrative:

Diversity. My parents adopted me in 1976. My mom was told we looked alike. She is Italian with olive skin, brown eyes, and black hair. I'm fair skinned, blue eyes, and blond hair. I married a Cambodian refugee. I gave birth to our 2 sons. I am constantly asked about their adoption process.

In Focus Group 1, Sarah elaborated:

I'm living in the same town I grew up in. When I was growing up, I was the only adopted kid. So I had to look like my parents. I had to not have an

adoption story. I had, we had to fit in. … And now to have a nontraditional-looking family again in our community, and them trying to wrap their brains around the fact that a White woman could give birth to Brown people is really fascinating.

The Journey

The adoption *Journey* was experienced differently for adoptive parents and adopted children; however, there were points of overlap. Beginning with the parent perspective, codes that emerged here related to reasons to adopt, dreams, waiting, the first encounter, transitional moments, celebrations/milestones, and culminations.

Tracy, from the Northeast, adopted her two sons from foster care. Her Photo + Story summarizes a culminating point in the adoption process:

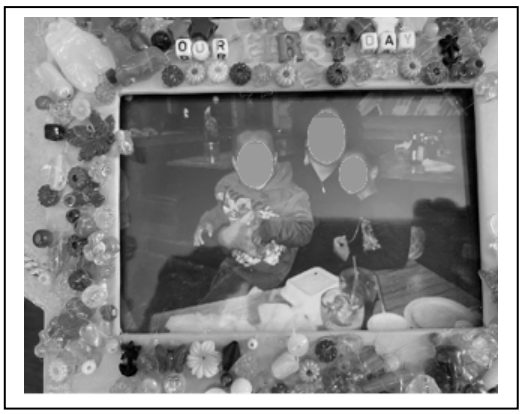

Figure 4. First Dinner.

This was our Homecoming dinner after a full day of unpacking and such. We went to dinner and I asked a man at the next table to take a photo of us. He commented, 'your kids are so cute,' and without thinking I said, "Yes they are," stating that yes indeed they are MY kids!

In Focus Group 3, Tracy elaborated on her adoption journey, touching on themes of waiting, disruption, and first encounter:

I would say it was maybe a two-year process and in between that I was matched with a 10-year-old girl and right before she was gonna come home, the foster family that she had been with for three years decided to adopt her. So that was beautiful for her and heartbreaking for me. So, I kind of played this close to the chest. But, I remember the first day that I met them… we call it Love-at-First-Sight Day.

Capturing the *Journey*, a mother uploaded this Photo+ Story (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Love at First Sight

This photo represents the culmination of the journey our family took through two adoptions. When I look at this photo, I see the entire process—years in the making… but mostly, I just see my children.

For adopted children, the Journey was more about solving the mystery of their adoption story and connecting with their biological parents. Stories about this process resulted in codes such as questioning/searching, trauma, fear, rejection/denial, coincidence/lucky break, and perspective. Julie, an adoptee from the Northeast, exemplified the *Journey* theme. Julie submitted as her photo the cover of the children's storybook *Are You My Mother?* (Eastman, 1960). She wrote:

I have chosen this picture because my entire life I was always looking at women and wondering if they were my mother. It was an obsession that ruled my life as a kid even though I had great parents. When I was in high school I remember asking a few teachers if they had ever given a child up for adoption. Later on my obsession with, "Who was I?" and "Where did I come from?" almost ruined my marriage.

In Focus Group 3, Julie narrated the "emotional struggle" of obsessively searching for her biological parents for most of her life: "It just consumed me, and not in a good way." Although Julie was eventually able to track down her biological mother, she was not met with warmth or acceptance. After years of failing to create a relationship with the woman who had relinquished her, Julie begged her for information about her biological father. "She never said the name, she just wrote it. And she goes, 'I don't know if I spelled it correctly.'" Years passed. "I finally decided to do Ancestry.com and do the DNA. And when I got the results back there was the last name with one letter spelling difference from what my biological mom had given to me." A couple years ago, Julie finally met her biological father and her new half-siblings: "We talk on the phone, weekly or every other week, and all of my half

siblings from their side fully embraced me into that family."

Roger, from the Midwest, was adopted in 1972. For Photo + Story, he uploaded an image from the comic book, *Man of Steel* (Byrne,1986), depicting a spaceship blasting off a fiery planet and the caption, "For I have always loved you." Roger's brief written narrative encapsulates the mystery of the adoptee experience: "Baby sent on a rocket from Krypton, a dying planet. New life among midwestern farmers with good values but less technologically advanced."

In Focus Group 2, Roger further developed his personal adoption metaphor:

> *I was always told I was adopted, but that was it. There's no real discussion about it. … So as a really young child, like six or seven, I had to make up my own story of what adoption was or what it meant. I was drawn to comic books early on and Superman is… an adoptee. He came to us from some kind of shattered world where something horrible happened, which we're not really sure of. … you know you can't have a fairy tale ending without a fairy tale beginning. And the fairy tale beginnings are often pretty bad.*

Both parents and adopted children (and others, such as siblings) talked about relationships, avoidance/tabu vs. open, secrets, challenge/struggle, taking a risk, "what if?", and emotions related to the adoption *Journey*. After hearing Julie's story in Focus Group 3, another adoptee reinforced, "I think it's pretty safe to say that anybody who is involved in adoption on any level, whether you're an adoptive parent or an adoptee or a birth parent, struggles emotionally to process it."

From the parent perspective, this was also the case. Jen, a mother who recently adopted a child through the foster system explained (Focus Group 2), "It's just such a rollercoaster of emotions that I wasn't prepared for… just because at times I really, really wanted him to go home as much as- you know, you have this child in your home and you you're loving them like your own, but I was truly rooting for his parents."

Across the data, both adoptees and parents expressed the conflict of whether adoption was a secret/taboo topic, or something openly talked about in their family. Both perspectives came through. For example, in the Photo + Story in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Taboo.

> *Me, eyes wide open (like the 'open' adoption I'd had), with my adoptive dad with eyes shut tight (never seeing his adoptive kid had questions).*

Making Sense

The *Making Sense* theme was about acceptance, resolution, and meaning/purpose, and included codes for emotions like love, joy, loss, pride, gratitude, comfort/contentment, pride, and feeling whole/complete or connected/bonded. Interestingly, and unlike the previous theme, *Journey*, adopted parents and family members as well as adoptees expressed the varying aspects of *Making Sense* similarly, resulting in shared codes, though from different perspectives.

Resolution and Acceptance. Many adoptees expressed reaching a point of understanding or acceptance about their searching/questioning journeys. For example, in Focus Group 1, Susan talked about discovering her two biological sisters, who had been raised by their mother with, "a lot of bad issues in that family." After years of questioning and "survivor's guilt," Susan explained:

> *I was a very angry young woman… and I think a lot of it stemmed from the not-knowing. And feeling that, even though I was loved, feeling that "unlove", you know, from something or somewhere, and questions not being answered. But since the questions have come together, I can tell a difference in my actions.*

Another participant, Linda, exemplified this aspect of *Making Sens*e in her Photo + Story submission. Linda's written narrative summarizes her sense of resolution (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Resolution.

> *This photo to me represents the end of a long and sometimes painful journey with many ups and downs. It is a picture of my 3 full biological siblings the first time we met 2 years ago. They have been incredibly warm and welcoming, despite never knowing I existed. Getting to know them has filled in so many missing pieces of the puzzle for me. So many questions have been answered. There is a sadness and sense of loss around not sharing history and experiences, but*

so much joy in building new memories and being a part of this tribe.

Both Susan and Linda, among other participants, described a resolution that took place after experiencing feelings of instability or conflict around their adoption histories. For these participants, the resolution occurred as a healing process over time. In contrast, Hailey, an adoptee from the Northeast, expressed a sense of contentment about her adoption and the family she grew up with. Hailey submitted a photo of her and her mother, showing "one of the highlights of my life," the day she earned her PhD. In Focus Group 3, Hailey explained, "It was a closed adoption, so I don't know anything about my adoptive mother or father. I really have no, at this point in my life, I have no desire to go searching."

Figure 8. Life's Highlight.

Meaning and Purpose. Many participants expressed that they were able to make meaning through the adoption experience as it impacted their lives and provided a sense of purpose and feelings of love and appreciation for their family. For example, both parents and adoptees talked about bonds that connected their family members. Susan summarized (Focus Group 1), "I have come to this point in my life where I feel such joy and such gratitude, for my life, with my mom and dad, and how much they love me and how much my family loves me."

Roger, who was adopted and now has his own children, shared (Focus Group 2):

I think adoption might have opened me up to the idea of fragility, of not taking your family for granted, being kind of more wrapped up in my kids and my marriage too. I think my marriage probably benefited from that in a sense. I'm very pro-marriage and the idea of disunity or divorce, or these things that break families apart would hit me 10 times as hard as an average person.

Gratitude and joy were also common emotions related to *Making Sense.* Several participants expressed deep admiration and gratitude for the biological mother that relinquished a child. Jen, who adopted from foster care, wrote in her Photo + Story narrative:

I am truly inspired by [my son's] biological parents and their ability to make such a selfless decision for their child. They will always be a huge part of his story and the love we feel for them is very strong. I know we have a long road ahead, likely full of questions. I hope that I am able to rise to the occasion and that the joy in this picture continues to shine through this little boy.

A sister of an adoptee in Focus Group 4 concluded, "I think joy is a huge theme. After listening to everybody's stories, that is a big part of it. … All our families wanted the children to not feel like they were different, and a lot of love and acceptance."

Through this exploration of the themes, *Identity, The Journey,* and *Making Sense,* we have learned that the adoption experience is full of ups and downs, questions, pain, and joy. The concept of family can be created, questioned, or consolidated. Roger mentioned that fairy tales usually have dark beginnings. Tracy, who adopted two boys from foster care, reminded us that happy endings are not so simple. Sadly, Tracy's mother passed away during her adoption process. This impacted her sons' relationship with their grandmother, but also consolidated Tracy's love and new sense of family with her recently adopted sons. She explained (Focus Group 3):

About three months later she [mom] got really sick and we went up to Ohio. The only time that they [the boys] ever met her was in the hospital. … And then she passed away. … You know, people will say, "Oh, they're so lucky to have you." I tell them all the time, "No, they saved my life," because imagine, it was not expected that my mom was going to die, which she did, and then I lost my job. And you know, I don't know what I would have done because everything that I have done is because of them. And so, they saved my life, I'm the luckier one.

Adoption in a Word

At the close of each focus group, we invited the participants to type into the chat one word or phrase that encapsulated adoption. The participants' very summative responses to "adoption in a word" (see Figure 9) reflect the study's main themes and their related codes. Note that Love is the largest word because it was mentioned most frequently (4 times).

Discussion

This qualitative inquiry used a Photo + Story approach to explore diverse perspectives on the adoption experience. In their submitted photos and brief written narratives, the participants captured the essence of their adoption

Figure 9. Adoption in a Word.

journeys. In focus groups, using their photos as inspiration, they elaborated on their stories and engaged in dialogue about shared experiences and feelings. Visual and narrative data revealed interrelated themes that intersect participants diverse in age and adoption status.

Intersection of Perspectives

As expected, everyone's adoption story was unique, and each participant had their own perspective based on their personal experience and status (adoptee, adoptive parent, family member, etc.). However, in spite of the unique and diverse experiences and perspectives, deep within the stories, patterns emerged.

Similar to previous qualitative research on adoption, identity was a major theme. For our participants, the question of being adopted vs. biologically-related to family in terms of resemblance, relationships, and culture, also intersected with questioning/searching and adoptees' journey of making sense of their stories. A sense of loss was shared by both parents and children yet experienced in different ways. There was a loss of "what it was supposed to be'' for parents that couldn't have biological children or had disruptions in their adoption process, and a loss of "what it could have been" for adopted children wondering about their biological families. As Lambert (2020) suggested, loss is inherent in the mystery of adoption.

Dealing with the Unknown

Related to the shared sense of loss, parents and children experiencing adoption must learn to deal with the unknown as a constant in their lives. Our findings again confirm Lambert's (2020) work, suggesting, "a missing story seems sadder than a sad story" (p. 372). However, we observed different approaches to missing stories: Julie obsessively searching for her biological family to the point it almost destroyed her marriage; Susan growing up angry but later coming to terms with her uniqueness; Roger using comics and fairy tales to analyze and understand his experience; Hailey accepting the unknown and rejecting the need to search or question. Our participants also revealed that finding parts of the story, through connections with long-lost family members, provided some, but not all, with resolution. For example, Linda found some "missing pieces," answering questions about her biological family and past. Despite the new connection to her biological family members, some sadness and loss on what could have been remained. Many of the experiences shared in our study resembled Roger's fairy-tale analogy of a tragic beginning, further calling attention to the significance loss plays in the adoption journey.

Ways to Define Family

Finally, findings from this study highlight the many ways we construct families. "Ways to define family" was a code that fit under all main themes: *Identity, Journey,* and *Making Sense*. Physical resemblance and family were threaded into many conversations and perspectives. As described by Witt (2005), physical resemblance is a cornerstone of the mainstream view of family. For our participants, deviating from this was met with noticing and questioning. For example, Simon's young child observing similarities between him and Yo-Yo Ma, or Annie being asked if her son was "mixed." In Focus Group 1, Sarah questioned, "Why do families have to look one way? Why is there a one size fits all? Why? Why are we defining people by their physical attributes anyway, whether it's a handicap or ethnicity, or gender? Why are we trying to fit people in these tiny little boxes?"

Although families may have diverse physical attributes or are constructed in unique ways, family, however it is described, is at the heart of the adoption experience. It is important to note the diversity of perspectives/adoption statuses this study included: LGBTQIA+ parents, single-parent families, parents of children with disabilities, and families with children from different countries/cultures/races. Every participant, no matter what their perspective or adoption status, applied the meaning of family to the adoption experience. One participant in Focus Group 3 defined family as, "the people who love you, who care about you, who are there for you."

Final Thoughts

Beyond the findings shared here, there were other results of the Photo + Story approach to adoption. During the focus groups, participants frequently mentioned that there is a sense of connection among people who have experienced adoption, as if this shared, special experience creates an immediate bond. Our focus groups benefited greatly from the nearly instant rapport established among the researchers and participants based on their shared adoption experience. Participants were open and eager to share their stories and listen to other people's perspectives.

For us, the researchers, engaging with photos and stories representing the meaning of adoption as others

perceive it was a profound experience. For Michelle, an adoptee, the participants' images, and stories provided clarity. For Christina, the research experience was transformational in that it helped her understand her adopted daughter better. Robin, the sibling, gained new insights about the emotional complexity of adoptees' reunions with biological parents and siblings.

There are many points along the adoption journey. Different people experiencing adoption focus on different points along the way. Sometimes they get stuck, sometimes they find a purpose, sometimes they realize it's time to move forward or look back. Adoption, just as life, is a journey. This journey may begin with loss but can become hopeful with love and family.

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