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# An American Stuck in Another Body: Narratives of Adopted Emerging Adults

Anni-Ming Larson

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*sponsored by Meredith Harrigan*

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## ABSTRACT

The present study involves a phenomenological, interpretive investigation of how visibly adopted emerging adults communicate about adoption and the possible contradictions that are present in their speech, as well as how they choose to manage those contradictions. Using Baxter's 2011 relational dialectics theory as a lens to analyze five semi-structured interviews. The findings show five contradictions.

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**T**his project began out of personal curiosity. Shortly after I got to college, I realized how much I was contemplating who I was, why I was the way I was, and ultimately I concluded that my adoption was more influential to my identity than I ever thought before. I was eighteen, entering "emerging adulthood" and reflecting on my upbringing and my unique experiences. Subsequently, I began to think of this experience from an academic perspective in addition to a personal one and chose to study adoption through the eyes of a family communication scholar.

I began reading Meredith Harrigan's works on the storytelling and narrative choices of parents of visibly adopted children. The findings began to jog my memory about the communicative decisions my mother made with me. I then switched to thinking about what effect those adoption narratives have on the adoptee. Besides my wondering on this matter, I questioned my sudden interest in the subject. Was it pure luck in meeting a professor who studied a topic close to my heart, or could it be my reaction to the first time in my life where I was completely independent of my family, and thereby free to reflect on my experiences?

Jonathan Smith, a psychologist that specializes on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), states that IPA is "concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself" (Smith, 2007). Additionally, the purpose of a phenomenological analysis is a dynamic research exercise designed to be active for

both the participant and the researcher, letting the researcher into the participant's personal world (Smith, 2007). Therefore, choosing an interpretive phenomenological analysis seemed appropriate for the study of adoption, a topic that I have first-hand experience with.

Family makeup in the U.S. is more diverse than ever (Turner and West, 2018). The changing legal and cultural landscape has opened up many possibilities for non-traditional families. For example, the legalization of same-sex marriage in all fifty states legitimized new family structures. However, social change does not free members of non-traditional family types from challenges. The number of international adoptions in the U.S. has increased, as has transracial, challenging the traditional idea of what a family looks like and what it even means to be a family. Eighty percent of international adoptions are considered transracial adoptions (Anderson, Reuter, and Lee, 2015). In fact, in 2013, nine out of ten internationally adoptive parents were White, and eight out of ten adopted children were from Asia, Latin America, or Africa (Anderson, Reuter, and Lee, 2015).

According to Kathleen Galvin, a family communication scholar, non-biological families are discourse dependent. A discourse dependent family is one that relies on communication and discussions to construct a positive family identity for themselves, because their family type may not be positively viewed in society (Galvin, 2006). Parents may have to talk to their children about their family identity or discuss certain assumptions that children may hear from outsiders; these communicative steps are taken to legitimize their family inside the family unit and outside of it. Although adopting a child is by no means a new or even rare way of creating a family, adopted families are still considered to be discourse dependent.

Anderson, Reuter, and Lee (2015) discussed racial and ethnic differences in internationally adopted families, and they found that parents and adolescents tend to perceive conversations about race and ethnicity differently, and adoptive parents may over-report their engagement with racial and ethnic issues (p. 291). In transracial families, the adoptive parents of ethnically or racially different children are usually Caucasian, while the adopted children are not. Compared to same-race ethnic minority families, transracial adoptive parents have limited cultural resources to teach the child about his or her heritage due to a lack of shared racial, ethnic, or national origin identity, a greater likelihood of living in a racially white community, and parents' limited experiences with discrimination (Shiao & Tuan, 2008, p. 290). This leads to an even larger need for storytelling and narratives from adoptees themselves, rather than literature focusing on the parental experience.

Emerging adulthood is a stage of relative independence in a person's life. This time period is distinguished by "relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations" (Arnett, 2000, p. 8). Arnett describes this time as the point when "the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course" (Arnett, 2000, p. 8). For transra-

cial adoptees, this is the first time where they are most likely living apart from their ethnically or racially different parents, thereby removing the visible aspect of their adoption. I hoped that doing a study on emerging adults, who have just begun to live their lives independently and start to re-examine how their experiences have shaped them, would provide rich material from adoptees at this stage in their development.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: RELATIONAL DIALECTICS PERSPECTIVE**

The present study is grounded in relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2006). Relational dialectics theory (RDT) functions as lens to help researchers understand the way that family members negotiate and create their multifaceted experiences. Relational dialectics theory stems from the studies and research put forth by Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin. His theory of dialogism explains the reason why social life should not be treated as a “monologue;” instead, he describes social life as “an open dialogue characterized by the simultaneous fusion and differentiation of voices” (1984). This approach frames researchers’ approaches; it operates based on the idea that a discourse, or system of meaning, emerges from not one voice, but many voices including from societal, cultural, familial, and personal perspectives. Bakhtin regarded social life as a product of “a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies” (Baxter, 2004). In RDT, Baxter argues that “meaning making is a process that emerges from the struggle of different, often opposing, discourses” (2008, p. 350). In the present study, I sought to point out some discursive struggles that are present within visibly adopted emerging adults’ communication about adoption.

Dialogue is the core concept of RDT. It argues that oneself and one’s relationships are constituted in communication (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The self is a fluid thing, dynamic, constantly changing due to the dialogues we engage in. Therefore, to study the ways in which visible adoptees see themselves and see adoption might be specific to the time in their lives. I argue that relational dialectics theory can help capture some common experiences and ground those experiences in the larger context of societal and familial discourses. The research aims to address the following questions: (1) What contradictions are present in adoptees talk about adoption? and (2) How do adopted emerging adults manage these contradictions?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Currently, these findings are based on five semi-structured in-depth interviews with visibly adopted emerging adults. In order to participate in this study, participants needed to meet three criteria: (1) they had to be at least 18 years of age, (2) they had to identify as an 18–25 year old who was adopted into a single or dual parent household in which their race or ethnicity is not the same as their adoptive parent(s), and (3) they had to be someone who identifies as a person who does not have an ongoing re-

relationship with one or more birthparents, meaning that the participants were not part of an open-adoption agreement. Five visibly adopted emerging adults volunteered for this study. All current participants identify as female. The ages of the participants vary from 19 to 23. The five women are adopted from various countries: two from China, one from India, one from South Korea, and one from Colombia. None of the participants recalled contact with their birth parents or have had an ongoing relationship with them presently.

## **Procedure**

After collecting willing participants by posting research announcements on SONA systems, as well as announcing my study in classes on my college campus, I scheduled the interviews. All participants engaged in semi-structured, open-ended interviews that lasted between twenty and sixty minutes, and they were asked to fill out a brief demographic survey before the interviews began. In addition to background information such as birthplace, age, and name, participants were asked to jot down words, phrases, bullet points, or even drawings of a few things that come to mind when they hear the word 'adoption.' Interviews took place either face-to-face or via Skype, depending on distance and availability. Questions focused on adoption and the participants' feelings toward their adoption or adopted life were asked: (1) What is your relationship with your adoptive parent(s) like? (2) How, if at all, do you think the fact that you're adopted influences your self-concept, self-esteem, or the person you present to others? (3) What, if any, thoughts/feelings, do you have toward your birth parents that you may have been reluctant to share with your adoptive parents? (4) Why do you think, if you feel reluctant, that those thoughts/feelings are difficult to share?

To ensure transcription accuracy of the participant responses, each interview was audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. I then listened to the audio-recordings and transcribed the responses. Once finished with the transcriptions, all recordings were destroyed. The consent form stated that I would stop the interview at any time and turn off the audio-recorder, if participants request it. Participants could choose not to answer any question at any point during the interviewing process.

## **Data Analysis**

To analyze the participants' interviews, a qualitative thematic analysis was used. A qualitative thematic analysis is a process that researchers use to find repeated themes that emerge from the participants' responses. The analysis process began with the re-reading of the transcripts, while highlighting consistent or repeated language or themes. After reading and annotating the participants responses, I identified key words to guide my research questions on potential contradictions and the ways that the participants may communicatively manage these contradictions. However, themes that emerged from these responses were not meant to generalize or assume objective truths about how adoptees talk about adoption. Instead this interpretive study was intended to shed light on personal experiences of visible adoptees, relating their stories

for those who share similar experiences or those who desire to learn about adoption through personal narrative.

## RESULTS/FINDINGS

The data shows how adoption may add layers of contradictions to an emerging adult's identity. It also reflects how the contradictions that they experience do not necessarily have easy explanations.

### **Culture as both birth culture and raised culture**

All participants expressed confusion and unknowingness about which culture they belonged to or should want to belong to. According to Horstman, Butauski, Johnsen, and Colaner (2017), many adoptees feel secure in their adoptive identity until the first time an outsider challenges their identity. This type of interaction or feeling usually occurs in the first few years of elementary school, often times by classmates. Participants often discussed when and where and whom they decided to disclose their adoptive identity to within the context of elementary school. Adoptees privacy management has been noted as complex, and the things that they choose to disclose or keep private affect their identity work and well-being at times (Horstman et al., 2017). However, when visibly adopted or have an aspect of birth culture that has been kept hidden by adoptive parents, the choice to disclose a story, assimilate into a culture, or decide which culture to momentarily belong to may not be possible. For example, Participant Three stated:

I always hated my middle name from [place of birth], because I always hated it when teachers would put your name up on the board and put your middle initial and then all the girls in my classes would go around and say, "Oh my middle name is this or that." And I just thought, "Oh gosh, now I have to explain this whole new concept, this is my middle name and here's why." I just didn't want to do it front of random classmates I didn't know, and I didn't want to be ridiculed for it either.

### **Family as a structural definition and social definition**

The definition of family, according to family communication scholars Turner and West is "a self-defined group of intimates who create and maintain themselves through their own interactions and their interactions with others; a family may include both voluntary and involuntary relationships; it creates both literal and symbolic internal and external boundaries; and it evolves through time: It has a history, a present, and a future" (2018, p. 4). Many participants describe believing in a social definition of family is one that is not created through blood ties. Instead they talk about honesty, love, and open-communication fostering their sense of family and thankfulness; however, there is also a contrasting discourse of missing a blood relative, making the structural definition important in their lives.

When asked about what their future family might look like, all of the participants who expressed wanting children disclosed that they would adopt, but they would also love to have their own child; often following that statement was a notion of confusion as to why they want biological children. It may be difficult for adoptees to accept the sadness and helplessness they feel when they voice the fact that they have never met or seen someone who they are related to and looks like they do. Participant Five stated:

My mom has given me a lot of my core values as a person that I will bring onto my family...but I really want to have my own biological children, ummm, I think it is interesting when I see kids with their parents, and I'm like, "Wow, she looks exactly like her dad," or "They're a good mix of half and half," and I don't have that reference.

## MANAGING CONTRADICTIONS

### Privacy management

Past studies have indicated that transracial adoptees want to avoid feeling different or weird, and want to blend in with their white parents in their white community (Horstman et al., 2017). This is due to the fact that disclosing information about being adopted can lead to the adoptee receiving insensitive comments, or potentially negative reactions. Visibly adopted emerging adults do engage in privacy management when meeting new people or living their daily lives. Participants in the interviews have mentioned different ways that they keep the information hidden. Participant Five expressed what happens when the topic of families and backgrounds comes up on first dates by stating, "If I don't feel a connection with the person is going any further, I won't disclose, or I'll make up a story. Actually, I kind of have a set story that I always refer to, but sometimes people guess that I am adopted because I don't seem like the stereotype."

In that case, avoidance and deception were used to cover up the fact that they were adopted. Participant Four noted disclosing their adoption in order to clarify a situation, in this example, their application to medical school. Participant Four said:

Applying to med school is far away, but demographics and things like that play huge parts in opportunities. So I think it's important for me to share that information because I just think people can make assumptions about how I grew up, not realizing that I am different.

A challenge that is constantly at play for visibly adopted emerging adults is the idea that assumptions will be made about physical appearances. Regardless of whether or not parents are around, or the name is disclosed without permission, we make judgments based on race or ethnicity, and when someone's culture or chosen culture is confusing or does not match their race or ethnicity, people become confused.



## DISCUSSION

### Limitations

The present study explores the narratives of a minimally researched group, however there were certain aspects that may have been limited. Although a semi-structured interview is a proven way to collect data and stories from participants, due to the nature and specificity of the questions, the responses from participants may not reflect the most honest or true discourses involved. In addition, although qualitative research is not meant to generalize for smaller populations or provide generic language with which to talk to the group, I am sure that the study would benefit from having a larger number of participants. Due to timing and resources, it was not possible to interview more than five people.

### Directions for Future Research

The area of communication within visibly adopted families and among visibly adopted emerging adults has a great realm of possibilities for future research. Although this research added to the minimal but existing research on how adoptees feel about their adoption and how it might have affected their identity, research on invisibly adopted emerging adults may be a good next step. Visibly adopted emerging adults are more likely to experience macroaggressions and racial assumptions, however I wonder how an invisibly adopted emerging adult may approach the topic of disclosing their adoptive status if outsiders could not see the racial or ethnic differences. In addition, it would be interesting to interview both visibly and invisibly adopted emerging adults and compare the ways in which they negotiate their familial identities.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

My hope for the future of this research is to create a book of quotations, brief passages, and images that reflect the messages that visibly adopted emerging adults have expressed. A compilation of experiences and explorations of identity from adopted children is much less common, if in existence at all, than books and materials for the audience of parents of adoptees. I believe that the reason for this stems from the fact that adoptees have a sense that they do not own their stories. The feeling adoptees have, of not owning their own narratives, is potentially very problematic. Their right to their own stories should not feel illegitimate just because their stories have different tones than those adoption narratives told by parents—these stories are powerful because they are the words and feelings of an adopted child to be read by other adopted children.

Though I am adopted, I have found that I rarely discuss my story or my feelings about adoption openly, even with friends who are also adopted. I speculate that this is due to the fact that adoptees think their feelings about their adoptive and birth families must be kept secret. Unfortunately, due to history, psychology, and media messages, adopted children are often seen as damaged or wounded. Therefore, it makes sense



that they would not want to disclose feelings of sadness, anger, hurt, frustration, happiness, or love, because that might make them seem vulnerable and weak to outsiders who already believe they are fragile. In creating a book for adoptees to share their side of the story, I hope to create thorough presentation of all of the mixed emotions that exist, to show a complete dialogue that will hopefully inform others on how certain adoptees want to be approached with questions, or even to act as a relatable book for other adoptees who feel reluctant to share or think about their adoption.

## CONCLUSION

Research shows that adoptees seek affirmation rather than apathy after personally disclosing their feelings related to adoption (Horstman et al., 2017). Therefore, in the continuation of this study, I hope to synthesize previous literature with the data collected from the participants to create a beautiful mélange of narratives. Dialogue is a way to hear the contrasting and conflicting discourses that are present in one's self, so with more semi-structured interviews and transcriptions, the sense of tension and complexity may show through—making it easier for adopted individuals to understand the normalcy of the multiple feelings they have, the conflicts and contradictions, and sense-making processes.

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