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## Happy Tears: An Evocative Autoethnography on an Adoptee's Development of Identity through Reunification

Jessica Popham

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Happy Tears: An Evocative Autoethnography on an Adoptee's  
Development of Identity through Reunification

by

Jessica Popham

A Dissertation Presented to the  
College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences at Nova Southeastern University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation was submitted by Jessica Popham under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Philosophy in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Abstract

The story of adoption reunions is a story of many others. With the invention of the internet and DNA profiling websites, what was once impossible, or very difficult, is now as simple as submitting saliva to a DNA profiling company. This easier way to explore family backgrounds has created new experiences for adoptees. After a reunification, adoptees can reevaluate their identity with the new information to help develop a broader and deeper view of themselves (Henze-Pederson, 2019; Kiecolt & LoMascolo, 2003; Palmer, 2011; Schooler & Norris, 2002). In this study, I looked at how my adoptive identity changed after reunification with my birthmother through DNA profiling. There is a gap in the literature on non-transracial and non-transnational adoptees' experiences of reunification through DNA profiling and the impact of this on the adoptee's identity. I used autoethnography to explore my own personal reactions during and after reunification and how these reactions shaped my identity as a person and an adoptee. Autoethnography allowed me to explore my own life-changing experience, how it contributed to my identity, and how it can provide insight for others that may go through or have gone through similar experiences. This process showed me that reunification with my birth mother helped solidify my identity rather than change my identity. What stood out most to me was the sense of recursion and the connection between myself pre and post reunification. I was able to understand what factors, both internal and external, contributed to my sense of identity. This study helps others to look at the larger picture of adoption, reunification, and identity. For those who may have similar experiences or work with people who have similar experiences, such as family therapists, social

workers, and counselors, this study contributes to the development of empathy and understanding with this new type of phenomenon.

Keywords: Evocative Autoethnography, Adoption, Reunification, Identity Development

## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

“We found new discoveries.” These four words would forever change my life. On April, 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 I received an email from Ancestry DNA notifying me that I had a familial match. It was my birth mother. This came as a surprise to me due to the fact that I was placed in a closed adoption as an infant. I never knew my birth parents and only had non-identifying, limiting information about them. My adoptive parents (whom I will refer to as my parents, mother, and father) were always open and honest with me about my adoption. Neither of us can even remember the age I was when they told me I was adopted. It naturally became a part of my story and once I grew to the age where I fully understood what adoption meant, I was happy because I had two amazing parents that loved me and provided me with everything I needed in life.

Even though I had a good life and upbringing, I was missing information about my background, where I came from, and more so, who I came from. I was always interested in finding out more about my background and my birth parents but never to the point where I felt like I was in a state of conflict with myself. I felt secure as a person and considered myself to have a secure identity. Yet, this new experience of being matched with my birth mother through Ancestry DNA brought many new aspects into my life.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore my own development of identity through reunification with my birth mother. Through this reunification I have learned so much about my birth, my birth parents, and myself. I believe this has contributed to the development and evolution of my identity. While my story is unique, there have been

many more like mine in recent years where adult adoptees have been reunited or have had contact with their birth parents, most often their birth mother (Boettcher, 2013).

The story of adoption reunions is a story of many others. This research, my story, provides a look at the larger picture of adoption, reunification, and identity. This is my story of identity development, as an adoptee that was reunified with her birth mother. With the aid of a DNA profiling company, I was able to have this experience which I was able to study to help others that may have similar experiences or help those that may work with people who have similar experiences, such as family therapists, social workers, and counselors.

With the invention of the internet and DNA profiling websites, what was once impossible, or very difficult, is now as simple as submitting saliva to a DNA profiling company and waiting a few weeks for the results and matches (How does DNA Help with an Adoption Search, n.d.). This easier way to explore family backgrounds has created new experiences for adoptees. With the use of Ancestry DNA, I was able to find information, which was never available to me otherwise on my biological family. This new experience has allowed me to gain information about my identity. My hope for this study is that by exploring my own identity development after reunification with my birth mother through DNA profiling, my story can contribute to others having a sense of empathy and understanding with this new type of phenomenon.

In this study I used autoethnography to explore my personal reaction to my experience of identity development after reunification. I was interested in exploring the relationship with myself as an adoptee and myself as a person. Therefore since I wanted to study myself and the background of myself in the larger population I used



autoethnography because autoethnography allowed me to explore my own life-changing experience, how it contributed to my identity, and how it provided insight for others that may go through or have gone through similar experiences.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In this chapter, I introduce the study. In the following sections of this chapter, I define common terms related to adoption, identity, and reunion and provide my experience of reunification with my birth mother. In Chapter II, I review the current literature on adoption, reunification, and identity to illuminate the relevance of this study. In Chapter III, I discuss the means of which I conducted this study, autoethnography. Chapter IV details the results of my research. In Chapter V, I discuss implications, future research, and limitations related to my study.

### **Definition of Terms**

In this section common terms associated with adoption, identity, and reunion are defined. These terms are used throughout this paper and the relevant literature related to these topics are discussed in Chapter II. Definitions are listed in alphabetical order.

**Adoption:** A legal matter in which birth parents permanently transfer the parental rights of their child to individuals who are not the biological parents in order to create a new family that will meet the physical, financial, and developmental needs of the child (Carp, 1998; Freundlich, 2001; Henry & Pollack, 2009; Reitz & Watson, 1992).

**Adoption triad:** The birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the adopted child or adoptee (Sass & Henderson, 2007).

**Adoptive identity:** The way an adoptee understands what it means to be adopted (Fishman & Harrington, 2007; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2007).

Closed adoptions: Adoptions in which identifying information is not exchanged between the birth family and adoptive family, no plans are set in place to get in contact or meet in the future, and if there is any non-identifying information exchanged it is typically very minimal and ceases once the adoption is completed (Blomquist, 2009; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Henry & Pollack, 2009).

Domestic adoption: The adoption of a child from birth parents that reside within the same country as the adoptive parents (Henry & Pollack, 2009).

Foster care adoption: The adoption of children usually removed from birth parents due to parental abuse, neglect, or substance abuse and placed in the foster care system (Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2000; Groza & Rosenberg, 1998; Henry & Pollack, 2009).

Genealogy: The study of one's family history or tracing one's family roots (Askin, 1998).

Identity: One's sense of self, or who one is, how a person is known to themselves and to others (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Burke, 2003; Marcia, 1994; Nydam, 2007; Rangell, 1994; Reitz & Watson, 1992).

International adoption: When adoptive parents adopt a child from a different country (Henry & Pollack, 2009).

Kinship adoption: Children who are placed in the child welfare system to then be placed and adopted by another relative (Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2000; Groza & Rosenberg, 1998; Henry & Pollack, 2009).

Open adoption: Adoptions that involve some degree of contact and communication between the adoptive family and the birth parents and sometimes the adoptee (Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2000; Henry & Pollack, 2009; Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Reunion: When an adoptee and birth parent establish contact, which can be both communication through letters, phone calls, or messages and in-person contact in which information and time together is shared (Reitz & Watson, 1992; Schooler & Norris, 2002).

Searching: The desire and/or actual act to gain information which could be related to one's birth story, genetic or cultural background, or biological family (Blomquist, 2009; Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

Stepparent adoption: When children are adopted by one of their birth parent's spouse (Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2000; Groza & Rosenberg, 1998; Henry & Pollack, 2009).

Transracial adoption: The adoption of children that are racially different from the adoptive parents (Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2000).

### **My Experience**

This study is about how my identity developed after reunification with my birth mother through a DNA profiling website. The following section provides a timeline of information about the events before and during reunification with my birth mother.

Chapter IV explores how these events contributed to my identity development.

I was born in May of 1990 and placed in a closed adoption. While this story is about my experience of being adopted, my story began even before I was born. My parents were unable to have children on their own. My father was married once before and had two biological children before divorcing his first wife and marrying my mother. My father had a vasectomy and even though it was reversed he was unable to conceive with my mother. My mother suffered from extreme vertigo as a result of being struck by lightning which made her nervous to get pregnant. While my parents tried for some time

to get pregnant on their own, they eventually turned to adoption to start their family. My parents went through an almost two year process before they were able to adopt me. This process involved my parents hiring several different lawyers and going through a few different adoption agencies trying to find a baby to adopt. My parents have shared stories with me about their process and why they chose closed adoption. My parents were originally interested in closed adoption. However, an open adoption baby was offered to them at one point and they considered it. They met with the birth mother and she was already a little too friendly and seemed like she would be living off of my parents as well. That experience shocked them and made them feel uncomfortable. They were concerned with having a birth parent intrude on their lives and cause disruptions or problems. After this experience, they only considered closed adoptions.

I was always curious about where I came from and mainly what my birth parents looked like. From non-identifying information provided to my parents, we knew that my birth mother was Korean and adopted from Korea as an infant. My birth father filled out in paperwork that he was American, so it was always a mystery as to what ethnicity my other half was. We knew that they were teenagers when they got pregnant with me so in order to give me the best chance at life they made the difficult decision of placing me for adoption. Being that it was a closed adoption, we did not have any pictures of them and had no way of contacting them. However, my parents told me that when I turned 18, if I wanted to search for my birth parents they would be okay with it.

My 18<sup>th</sup> birthday came around and I was graduating from high school and moving to South Florida for college. I had new adventures in my life and put the task of searching to the side. I thought it would be a long and difficult process since we barely had any

information and my records were sealed. I also was aware that it could result in a negative outcome such as finding out that they were dead, not wanting communication, or not faring well in life. There were moments throughout my early adult years where I would consider starting the search, and even once I went to the hospital I was born at to see if I could find any helpful information, only to find out it was the wrong branch of the hospital. I quickly gave up and a few more years passed on without searching. With the use of the internet, I once searched some online groups that helped people search and find their birth families. There were just too many groups and it was so broad, it seemed impossible, so I quickly gave that up as well.

For my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday, my parents bought me a DNA kit from Ancestry DNA. They had recently done one to learn more about their backgrounds and thought it would help answer the question of what I was from my birth father's side. I spit in the little tube and mailed it off to be tested. In June of 2017, I discovered that I was 53% Asian and 47% European, more specifically 36% from Great Britain. I finally had information on my genetics.

Technically, I am a transracial adoptee. I am half Korean and half British. My mother is Spanish and my father is Czech and English. I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood and went to a private Christian school where the majority of children and families were White. Therefore, growing up I did not consider myself to be transracial. I considered myself to have grown up as White. Physically my features were slightly Asian but I was often mistaken for Hispanic or Hawaiian.

When I got the results back, Ancestry DNA connected me with possible relatives but they were mostly all 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> cousins so I did not bother contacting any of them.

The idea of finding my birth parents did not cross my mind, even though my parents asked if I had connected with any biological family members. I told them Ancestry DNA connected me with some 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> cousins but that I did not reach out to them. While finding out this new information was exciting, I quickly forgot about Ancestry DNA and continued on with my life.

### **Getting Matched**

It wasn't until April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018 that I visited the Ancestry DNA website again. I had gotten an email in my junk email account on April 19<sup>th</sup> but did not check my account until April 20<sup>th</sup>. I usually select all to be deleted and quickly scroll through to see if there is anything important before actually deleting anything. I almost deleted this email but I noticed the heading "We found new discoveries" and decided to open it. Little did I know that I was opening an email that would connect me with my birth mother.

I remember that day so vividly. It was around noon and I was sitting on my couch at home by myself getting ready for work. I opened the email which read "DNA matches. You and another member share DNA. Find out more about this new connection. PARENT, CHILD – IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER, *DNA MATCH*" (Ancestry DNA). My heart dropped, then started racing, and I could barely believe what I was reading. I clicked on the link that said "View this DNA match" and was directed to a page on Ancestry DNA's website that provided me with my birth mother's full name, along with more information confirming how the possibility of being related was beyond strong.

I started freaking out and decided to send her a message through the Ancestry DNA website message board. I think I was in such a state of shock that I quickly sent a

brief message asking if she gave a baby up for adoption in May of 1990. It was very short and to the point. Looking back now, I think I just wanted 100% confirmation and was not thinking of anything else. I quickly realized how blunt my message was and decided to send a follow up message that was a bit more warm and inviting.

I first text messaged my boyfriend and told him “Soooo I think I might have found my birth mom.” He was just as shocked as I was. I left for work around 2:00p.m. and called my parents after my last client. They were surprised, happy, and eager to see what developed. I was constantly checking my email and the website to see if she had written back, but days had passed with no response. I spent the week calling and texting all of my friends and telling them of the news. A week went by, and I decided to write one last letter to her in hopes that it would bring a response. This time the letter was about four times as long as my original ones and I even had several of my friends read it to make sure it was the best possible letter that would invite a reply.

### **Making Contact**

Two days later she responded. April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018 I was getting ready for my friend’s baby shower and checked my emails. I had a notification and found that my birth mother replied back to my message. I was so overwhelmed with emotions. I remember putting my head back to hold the tears from falling because I had just finished doing my makeup and didn’t want it to get ruined. I couldn’t speak so I showed my boyfriend the message, and he embraced me with a hug.

She confirmed that she placed a baby girl in South Florida for adoption in May of 1990 and informed me that she was open to answering any other questions I had and seeing what might develop. That day was the first of many happy, emotional ones to

come. Even as I am writing this now, being reminded of this wonderful experience, my eyes are filling with tears.

What followed next were a few messages back and forth trying to figure out how to best move forward with communication. She told me I could ask her any questions that I felt comfortable asking and that she was “interested to hear about” my life and anything I was “willing to share.” I sent her a message back with some basic background information about where I lived, my relationship status, my education history, and my current job status. I asked to hear about her life as well, with whatever she was willing to provide, and also posed the option of continuing contact outside of the Ancestry DNA website, such as through regular email or text. She wrote back and told me she just retired from the Air Force after 26 years of service and her husband of almost 22 years was still in the Air Force. She provided me with both her email address and cellphone number and said she looked forward to hearing from me.

I remember texting some of my friends and asking them if I should text or email her. I finally decided to text her and that began the start of many personal questions being asked and answered. I remember instantly feeling comfortable talking to her. It was like I had known her for years.

The first question I asked her through text message was if her husband knew about me. She told me he “knew very early on in our relationship.” I remember when I was texting for the first time about this, I was sitting in my car in a parking lot waiting for my next client for work. When she answered this question, my eyes filled up with tears as I was touched by the fact that she was open to him about me before I was even in the picture. I went on to ask if she was ever interested in finding me. She let me know that



she “always wondered” about me and that May was “always difficult” for her, being that May was the month I was born but also the month of Mother’s day. She let me know that she did not go on to have any more children and asked if I had told my parents about us connecting. I told her I had and they were “very happy and excited.”

We continued to ask each other questions and share personal information. She let me know about her medical history and what led her to decide to place me for adoption. She told me “I didn’t want an abortion, I knew that no matter what” and adoption was “the best option at the time” because she “didn’t want us living on welfare.” We texted each other for the next few weeks. We exchanged pictures, information about our families, and our memories from growing up.

### **The Reunion**

The topic of meeting in person came up in our texts and she was open to meeting me as well as my parents. We discussed possibly meeting in person around June or July. Eventually, she asked what our plans were for Memorial Day. We had no plans so we decided that she would fly down to Florida with her husband so we could meet in person. I was so excited that just five weeks after I had first received the email from Ancestry DNA I would be meeting my birth mother in person. I would be able to hug her, to talk with her in person, and continue to develop our relationship.

Friday May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018, I went with my boyfriend to the hotel they were staying at and met my birth mother. We immediately embraced each other and cried happy tears. I got to meet her husband and she got to meet my boyfriend. We sat in their room and watched the video that our partners just filmed of us meeting, and laughed and cried. We took our first picture together and then went out for lunch. I remember feeling so

comfortable with her, and we were able to just enjoy each other's company and continue to bond.

Saturday May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018, my parents came over to my house to meet my birth mother and her husband. They walked in and hugged her. My mom told her "We finally meet after 28 years. We have a sweet daughter, don't we," and my father said to her, "Thank you so much." My heart was full and my eyes were again filled with happy tears.

We went to dinner and when we were driving back to my house my parents told me they also felt like they had known them for years. We all came back to my house and took pictures together. My mother brought pictures from my childhood and gave them to my birth mom. I shared the diary my mother gave me that detailed their journey through adoption and the early years of my life. When it was time for my birth mother and her husband to leave, we gave each other a long hug goodbye and cried many emotional tears together. They were flying back home the next morning. Time had gone by so fast, and we both were not ready to say goodbye and leave each other. However, we knew that we would continue to talk and see each other again in the future. It was the beginning of a very beautiful relationship.

After our initial meeting in person, we continued to text as well as Facetime. We became friends on Facebook and started sharing our photos and our story of reuniting online with our friends and family. Most of her immediate family knew about me prior to our reunification but now she started to tell her other family members and friends that had not known about me.

When we had met in May, my birth mother told me that her best friend was also adopted. She never told her about me because her best friend tried to reunite with her

birth mom after having children of her own. She hoped that at the least she could provide medical history for them and at the best that she may want some type of relationship with her and her grandchildren. Her birth mother provided her with her medical history but did not wish to have any further contact or relationship. My birth mother knew this may be a delicate subject for her best friend but she eventually told her about me after our reunion. Her best friend was happy for her and for us and wanted to meet me. It turned out that so many of her friends and family members wanted to meet me that we planned for me to go to their home in Maryland to meet everyone.

### **Second Reunion**

September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018, my boyfriend and I flew up to Maryland. We stayed in my birth mother's home and got to meet her best friend and her best friend's two daughters that evening that were also staying with my birth mom. A friend of mine from college that lived in the D.C. area came over to visit and also meet everyone. I again felt comfortable and at ease. We laughed and shared stories over wine while I sent my friends and parents back home many pictures.

The next day she invited about 25 family members over to meet me. One of the most special people I met that day was my birth mother's mom. I found out she was the first one to hold me when I was born, as it was too difficult for my birth mother to. She took care of me in the nursery for three days until my birth mom was able to legally sign the adoption papers and I was placed with my parents. As she walked in the door, she embraced me and said "It's so nice to see you again." She brought in my birth mom for a group hug and we cried happy tears together.

I got to meet my birth mother's step-father, two brothers, two aunts, uncle, cousins, second cousins, and more. Everyone was very welcoming and nice. I got to hear more stories about my birth and found out one of my birth mother's aunts had offered to adopt me. My birth mother decided not to choose that as it would have been too hard for her to see her daughter growing up and having "two moms." Numerous pictures were taken, stories were shared, and laughs were had.

### **Third Reunion**

Since I got to meet my birth mother's family, my parents and I invited her to come down for the holidays and meet the rest of my family. Back in May, when they first met my parents, my dad was already pushing for them to come for Thanksgiving and/or Christmas. That is how much they already loved them. My birth mother and her husband decided they would come down and spend Christmas Eve with us in Florida so they could meet my aunt and cousins.

December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 they flew down and the first night it was just us (my parents, my boyfriend and I, and my birth mom and her husband). We went to dinner and then painted Christmas ornaments at home. The next day, my birth mother's husband gave me, my mom, and birth mom a gift that was sent from my birth mom's mother. They were bracelets that had charms saying "There will always be room for your hand in mine." My mom got one in gold, my birth mom got one in silver, and I got one in each. It was a beautiful gift to connect us all. My mother also got a letter from my birth mother's mom that was very personal and thanked her for raising me and detailed my birth. She also included a poem that she had created when I was born. Once again, there were many happy tears. That evening we went out for dinner and my birth mother got to meet my

two cousins and their wives as well as my aunt and my cousin's in-laws. Again, everyone got along and laughs and stories were shared.

Christmas Eve was spent relaxing by the pool, eating good food, taking pictures, and sharing gifts. My birth mom got my mother and I Christmas ornaments that had pictures from our first meeting on it. The back of mine read "2018 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas". Little did I know that my birth mom's mother had already gotten us charm bracelets, but I had also gotten charm bracelets for myself, my mother, and my birth mother as Christmas gifts. The charms had the symbol for adoption engraved in it along with my birth date in roman numerals, my birth stone, and the word "Family" to represent our connection and love. I also got my dad a key chain that had the same engravings. The holiday was a lovely one, and on Christmas morning they flew back to Maryland.

#### **Fourth Reunion**

Since we had met each other's families, it was now time to meet friends. My birth mother and her husband flew down on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019 to attend a party at my house where my friends would be able to meet them. My parents also came and we celebrated my dad and her husband's birthday. We shared the video of us first meeting and everyone joined us in happy tears. After my friends left we went to dinner and continued to celebrate. The night ended with my boyfriend and her husband staying up, playing video games, and drinking whiskey. It was a good day.

#### **Fifth Reunion**

June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019, we flew up for my birth mother's husband's retirement ceremony and party. He had served 30 years in the Air Force. The first night we got to meet several of their friends and my parents got to meet her parents.

The following day was the ceremony. We had reserved seats in the second row which was special, considering their best friends were in the row behind us. I had never attended an Air Force retirement ceremony before so I did not know what to expect. However, I was not expecting to cry as much as I did. Her husband made a beautiful speech in which he thanked us for welcoming them into our family. He said that watching my birth mom and I connect has been one of the “biggest joys of my life.” Reading and hearing these words still brings tears to my eyes. We watched a beautiful slide show in which we were also included. The rest of the day was spent celebrating at their house with family and friends.

My birth mother got gifts for myself, my mother, and her mother. Photo collages of pictures of us with the word “Family” printed. At the end of the trip, while my birth mom and her husband were driving my boyfriend and me to the airport, he gave us challenge coins. These were used among service members as a sign of appreciation. The happy tears appeared again as I was touched that he included us in this very special way. However, I managed to drop one of the coins in between the seats, so now I have to buy the next round of drinks to get it back in honor of tradition.

### **Future Reunions and Other Information**

Growing up, I was the only one in my immediate family that was adopted. I had a third cousin who was adopted internationally through a kinship adoption. I knew one other kid in high school in my grade that was adopted. While I was not surrounded by other adoptees growing up, my birth mother was. She has two other siblings that were adopted, her mother adopted her sister’s son, her stepfather has a son who is adopted, and her aunt has a son whom she and her husband fostered. While the amount of adoptees in

each of our families differ, each person in our family system was impacted by the fact of knowing me and her as an adoptee. For my family, this included my maternal grandparents, my paternal grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. These people were also included in the reunion, showing how adoption affects multiple people throughout the life span.

In my adoption triad, everyone was impacted by loss. My father had two biological children from his first marriage however he felt like he was unable to be the father he wanted to be in that relationship. My mother was unable to have any biological children due to worries related to the health issues and extreme vertigo that came from being struck by lightning at the age of 23. After his first marriage, my father had a vasectomy which, even though was reversed, was not aiding in reproduction with my mother. Therefore they decided to adopt. While they experienced these losses, they discussed my adoption in a positive way that seemed to outweigh any grief and loss they may have experienced from infertility.

My birth mother experienced the physical loss of me, her biological child that she carried for nine months and went through a grueling birth for. Her loss was ongoing as each year she grieved and wondered if I hated her for placing me. Once she married her husband he became an immense source of support for her during these periods of grieving, usually during the month of May.

I experienced loss in terms of information. I did not consider myself to have grieved the loss of my birth parents because I was blessed with my amazing adoptive parents who gave me a great childhood and life. However, I was always curious about what my birth parents looked like and how they were doing in life.

I grew up as an only child, therefore I never had siblings to tease me about being adopted. I was never told I was adopted in a spiteful way or in a way that would make me feel “less than.” In fact, I believe the fact that my parents told and spoke to me about my adoption in a way that was positive and respectful since an early age I was able to take pride in the fact that I was adopted.

My birth mother was transracially adopted as she was full Korean and adopted into a White family. Her adoption was also an international adoption from an orphanage in South Korea to the United States. She was left at the orphanage at what was estimated to be six months old. The exact reasons for why she was left at the orphanage are unknown but it is assumed that her birth parents were unable to parent her. This could be due to being born out of wedlock, living in poverty, or another unknown reason.

My birth mother and I continue to talk on a weekly basis and have plans to meet up again in November of 2019. They will most likely be moving down to Florida in the next year which should provide us even more opportunities to continue our relationship. While this story of my experience details the events of the reunion and my feelings throughout, it lacks the impact it has had on my identity. Overall, I would describe my experience of reunification as a happy one, but how this has allowed my identity to grow and change is unclear. As stated before, this paper looks at how these events have impacted my identity.



## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In order to provide a context for my study, the following section includes a review of relevant literature on adoption, reunification, and identity. Gaps in the literature are addressed as they relate to adoptive identity after a reunification. The following information helps provide background information on these topics and how it relates to my study. This information also helps translate my findings from this study to others that have previously been conducted and add to the literature on these topics.

### **Adoption**

In 2016, 57,204 children were adopted in the United States and of these, 3,573 children were adopted in the state of Florida. Of those adopted, 51.2% were male and 48.8% were female (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Adoption usually occurs because the birth parents have become pregnant without planning to (Clutter, 2014). Unintended pregnancies can occur for numerous reasons such as being in the heat of the moment, having too much alone time with a partner, general impulsivity, being under the influence of a substance, being pressured by a partner sometimes through violence, being raped, or having a lack of contraception (Clutter, 2014). However unintentionally a birth parent comes to be pregnant, they most likely cannot fulfill the responsibilities of raising a child and place the child for adoption (Reitz & Watson, 1992). Birth parents can voluntarily place their child for adoption by making the choice on their own or they may be forced to place their child for adoption against their will (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Reitz & Watson, 1992). This is known as involuntary adoption. Involuntary adoption placements usually occur when the birth parents have abused or neglected their child and parental rights are terminated (Baden & Wiley, 2007;

Blomquist, 2009; Reitz & Watson, 1992). Regardless if adoption placement is voluntary or involuntary, birth parents' lives are forever changed.

While a majority of research has been done on birth mothers, relatively little research has been done on birth fathers (Clapton, 2019; Clapton & Clifton, 2016; Stromberg, 2002). Birth fathers are the “most forgotten party in adoption” (Roles, 1989, p. 59). Clapton (2019) found that even Google was confused when a search for “birth father” ended up with Google suggesting the search term was actually supposed to be “birth mother.” While research on birth fathers is starting to become more prevalent (Clapton, 2019), “birth fathers are about 30 years behind birth mothers in gaining their voices in the adoption process” (Ward, 2012, p. 198). The birth father's role in the adoption process is often invisible, ignored, and minimized (Clapton & Clifton, 2016; Stromberg, 2002). This could be due to the fact that they are still stereotyped as uncaring, irresponsible, inadequate, and often described as simply a “sperm donor” (Clapton & Clifton, 2016; Stromberg, 2002). The myth is also that birth fathers seduce and then abandon or physically, mentally, or sexually abuse the birth mother (Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Stromberg, 2002). Due to the limited research on birth fathers, the majority of this literature review and study will focus on birth mothers.

Adoptive parents have different motivations that lead them to adoption, but providing a permanent home and expanding the family are some of the most common motivations (Malm & Welti, 2010). Other motivations to adopt include experiencing infertility, altruistic reasons, and being exposed to adoption through other family members and friends (Malm & Welti, 2010). Infertility may be one of the biggest motivations to adopt due to the fact that of adoptive parents 70.5% only had adopted

children (Brodzinsky, 2015). In a 2007 survey, motivations to adopt included infertility (52%), wanted to expand family (69%), wanted sibling for a child (24%), had adopted child's sibling (7%), wanted to provide a permanent home for a child (81%), had already formed a bond/loved the child (4%), and related to child prior to adoption (7%) (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). These statistics include foster care, private domestic, and international adoptions. Percentages total over 100% due to participants being able to select more than one answer. Prior to adoption, adoptive parents varied in exposure to adoption. Results indicated that adoptive parents had no prior connection to adoption (24%), was adopted themselves (6%), had a sibling who was adopted (4%), had a relative who was adopted (31%), or had friends who were adopted (35%) (Vandivere et al., 2009). Regardless of the type of motivation or prior exposure to adoption, adoptive parents and adoptive children become a family through a legal process (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). There are many different types of adoption, each with its own unique context and issues. Adoption can encompass private, public, domestic, international, open, semi-open, closed, in-racial, transracial, infants, older children, foster care, and kinship (Pavao, 2007). The following sections will discuss different types of adoption, those affected by adoption, adoption and loss, stigma of adoption, and implications for therapists working with those impacted by adoption.

### **Types of Adoption**

There are several different types of adoption as well as different ways of conducting an adoption. Vandivere et al., (2009) estimated that 2% of the child population was adopted in the United States. Of these adoptions, 37% were through foster care, 38% were private domestic adoptions, and 25% were international adoptions.

Adoptions can be conducted independently, privately, or publicly. Those conducted independently are usually done using an attorney while agencies are used for other types (Henry & Pollack, 2009). Agencies can be both public and private nonprofit and private for-profit organizations (Henry & Pollack, 2009). Other types of adoption include closed, open, transracial, and international. Each of these will be discussed in further detail in the following sections.

**Closed adoption.** Closed adoptions in the United States were the traditional type of adoption, ensuring confidentiality for all members of the adoption process (Pavao, 2007; Pavao, Groza, & Rosenberg, 1998). However, adoption has changed in the last few decades from being primarily closed and confidential to more open with some form of contact and sharing of information (Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, & Scharp, 2014; Grotevant et al., 2007; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant, McRoy, Christian, & Bryant, 1998a; Pavao, 2007). In closed adoptions, the adoptive parents and therefore the adoptee often do not know details or information about the adoptee's birth or birth family (Hays, Horstman, Colaner, & Nelson, 2016). Closed adoptions were created to help protect all members of the adoption triad. The birth parents were thought to be protected from the shame of having an illegitimate child and the grief and loss of placing that child for adoption, the adoptive parents were thought to be protected from any future intrusion from the birth parents that could disrupt their family or the child, and the child was thought to be protected from the stigma of being born illegitimately (Grotevant, McRoy, Henney, & Onken, 1998b; March, 1995). However, this proved to not be the case as Bailey and Giddens (2001) found that birth mothers of closed adoptions actually suffered more than birth mothers of open adoptions.

**Open adoption.** Open adoptions developed when the possible consequences of maintaining secrecy in closed adoptions became better understood. During the civil rights movement of the 1960's open adoption became more prevalent and accessible as shame, stigma, and secrecy started to decrease (Grotevant, 1997; Miall & March, 2005, Spronk, 2010). When secrecy is not a priority, questions and concerns can easily be addressed and information can be provided to help adoptees develop a secure identity (Grotevant, Wrobel, Fiorenzo, Lo, & McRoy, 2019; Jones, 2013). In open adoptions, contact is both supported and encouraged and typically some type of information is shared between the birth parents and adoptive parents. However, the type, frequency, and people involved can vary in each situation and change over time (Clutter, 2014; Siegel, 2012a). Open adoption also includes when information is shared from the adoptive parents to the birth parents, usually through online adoption websites, in which the birth parents choose the adoptive parents (Norwood & Baxter, 2011). Communication usually takes place after the placement and finalization of the adoption and can continue for any duration of time.

Types of communication can range from sending pictures, progress notes, or letters. The exchanging of information can be handled through an attorney, therefore, in-person contact is limited, or it could involve direct contact in which in-person visits are arranged (Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2000; Henry & Pollack, 2009; Reitz & Watson, 1992). There is no one correct way to engage in an open adoption and the degree and frequency of contact will vary over time for numerous different reasons. Areas that could impact contact include losing interest, losing contact information, lack of time or effort, changes in life circumstances, or losing the child involuntarily such as the case of child welfare adoptions (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016; Grotevant et al., 2019; Siegel, 2012a).

While openness in adoption can vary, most open adoptions experience some types of challenges. Challenges can include being denied or excluded from contact which is seen as unhelpful and alienating (Siegel, 2012a). Feelings of pain, hurt, anger, rejection, frustration, and disappointment can occur (Siegel, 2012a, 2012b). Clutter (2014) found that placing a child for open adoption was emotionally hard for birth mothers. Birth mothers often had unresolved issues with the adoption such as grief and loss. They would experience days that would be hard to get through due to overwhelming sadness of not being able to parent their child. Other challenges in open adoption were found to relate to disorders and diagnoses. Agnich, Schueths, James, and Klibert (2016) found that youth adopted from foster care and placed in open adoptions were more likely to be diagnosed with an attachment disorder than those placed in a closed adoption. However, this was not the case for older youth that were privately adopted. Older children placed for adoption were also more likely to be diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder than younger children.

Despite facing challenges, which is an inevitable part of life, open adoption is also viewed as a positive experience by adopted adults and adoptive parents (Siegel, 2012a, 2012b). Miall and March (2005) found that a majority of the population supported open adoption. Open adoption presents the opportunity to develop identity, expand family, and process feelings (Siegel, 2012a, 2012b). Birth mothers of open adoptions described experiencing satisfaction with their decision to place their child (Clutter, 2014). The acronym AFRESH was developed by Clutter (2014) to summarize the themes of benefits birth mothers experienced after placing their child in an open adoption. Birth mothers discussed being able to accomplish certain milestones, have a fresh start, change old and

begin new relationships, process and settle emotions, find support, and heal both physically and emotionally. Clutter found that the benefits of open adoption from the experience of the birth mother outweighed any difficulties associated with the pregnancy, birth, and placement. As a result of open adoption, birth mothers considered themselves to be better people with better lives, perceived their birth children as having wonderful lives, and considered the adoptive family as an extended family.

Siegel (2012a) suggested that one size does not fit all and those involved in open adoption should practice honesty, caution, and discretion. Siegel further explained how openness arrangements should be tailored to each specific situation and adoptees should be empowered to decide what kind of contact is best for them. Appropriate boundaries are encouraged and seeking guidance is recommended as needed. Open adoption arrangements are not set in stone and can be revisited and rearranged as necessary. Overall, Siegel found that open adoptions make family relationships closer and stronger, foster communication and truthfulness, and give family members more experiences to share together.

As can be seen from this section and the prior one, a majority of research has been conducted on open adoptions. This is likely due to the fact of confidentiality and privacy surrounding closed adoptions. Many of these closed adoptions are unable to be identified, located, or recorded for not only personal reasons but also research purposes. The current study can contribute to the gap in literature on closed adoptions.

**Transracial Adoption.** Typically transracial adoption is “the placement of minority ethnic children in white homes” (Barn, 2000, p. 113). Transracial adoption began in the late 1940s after World War II left thousands of children from all over the

world without homes (Simon & Alstein, 2002). Transracial adoption can occur internationally or domestically and be either closed or open (Baden, 2007). In 2007, transracial adoptions accounted for 40% of all adopted children (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). International adoptions accounted for the highest percent, 84%, of transracial adoptions compared to 28% of foster care adoptions and 21% of private domestic adoptions being transracial.

Most literature and research on transracial adoption has been discussed in terms of identity. This topic will be further discussed in the upcoming section “Adoptive transracial identity.”

**International Adoption.** International adoption occurs when children are adopted by families from a different country than the one they were born in (Henry & Pollack, 2009). International adoption was seen as a solution to conflict and crisis (Nelson, 2016). After World War I, many countries were experiencing poverty, national disasters, overpopulation, child abandonment, and the aftermath of war. This led to Americans adopting internationally for humanitarian, religious, and personal reasons (Younes & Klein, 2014). In 2018, there were 4,059 intercountry adoptions to the United States. Of these intercountry adoptions, 47.9% were male and 52.1% were female (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2018).

One of the most popular countries to internationally adopt children from is South Korea. Korean international adoption began in 1953, after the Korean War, and is considered to be the longest running international adoption program. South Korea has had more children internationally adopted from their country than any other country in the world, with numbers estimating over two hundred thousand (Nelson, 2016). This can



be attributed to South Korea having one of the only established programs for international adoption as well as having an increase in poverty, orphans, children born out of wedlock, and a change in cultural beliefs, such as privileging ethnic homogeneity (McGinnis, 2007; Nelson, 2016). Ethnic homogeneity can be defined as a purity of bloodlines and genetics (Shin, 2003). South Korea was hoping to ensure that new generations were full Korean, born to Korean parents. This could be due to wanting to keep cultural customs established and viewing pure Korean genetics as better than mixed. During the Korean War, many Korean women became pregnant by non-Korean men who were serving in the war. This led to greater adoptions from Korea since ethnic homogeneity was privileged and mixed babies were not as accepted (Nelson, 2016).

Studies have been conducted on the impact of international adoption from the perspective of both the adoptive parents and the adult adoptee (Pryor & Pettinelli, 2011; Younes & Klein, 2014). Adoptive parents were found to view and treat their internationally adopted child as biological (Younes & Klein, 2014). This could be due to the fact that most adoptive parents are primarily concerned with developing a secure attachment with their child (Pryor & Pettinelli, 2011). They are not as concerned about areas that could highlight difference such as ethnic background, family history, and developmental characteristics. The focus was on becoming a family by adding a child through adoption not on where the child was adopted from. International adoptees have described their experience growing up as “normal” (Younes & Klein, 2014). When international adoptees have family support and do not experience much ethnic discrimination they tend to have a positive view of themselves (Ferrell, 2018).

International adoption allows international adoptees and their adoptive parents the chance to live normal and happy lives in which they can thrive and feel fulfilled in.

### **Impact of Adoption**

It is estimated that between 20% and 30% of the population is related to an adoptee (Henderson, 2007). This includes birth parents and adoptive parents, but also extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings (Henderson, 2007). While adoption touches many, the adoption triad has been studied the most when it comes to impact, especially as it pertains to benefits and challenges (Passmore & Feeney, 2009). The adoption triad can be considered to be the best source of information on issues related to adoption as they are the main components that comprise an adoption.

One way of understanding the impact of adoption is through gains and benefits. Adopted children have described adoption as the gain of being part of a family and experiencing family life (Soares, Ralha, Barbosa-Ducharne, and Palacios, 2019). Adoptive parents portray the experience of adoption as a positive one (Norwood & Baxter, 2011). They are more likely to view it as a gain rather than a loss since they gained a child and started or expanded their family. Adoptive parents also view the birth mother as a good parent and respect the birth mother's autonomy with regards to open adoption and ongoing contact (Norwood & Baxter, 2011). They were able to understand that just because the birth mother was not able to parent the child at the time of birth it did not mean the birth mother was a bad person or could not be a good parent. Viewing the birth parent in a good light allowed the adoptive family to gain a good relationship with the birth parent which overall affected the adoption in a positive manner. As

previously mentioned, birth mothers found open adoptions to be beneficial as it allowed them to have better lives, their children to have better lives, and to be included in the adoptive family (Clutter, 2014).

Adoption has also been seen as a gain in terms of an alternative method to becoming a parent. Adoption has been described as both a valuable alternative to pregnancy and a form of desirable parenting (Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, & Scharp, 2014; Norwood & Baxter, 2011). These beliefs go against the dominant discourse of adoption as a second best form of parenting or as a last resort to parent. For example, those that are faced with infertility have been known to look to adoption as a way to start a family. Some view this as a last resort but as these studies show it is also viewed as simply another option. With today's technology there are so many different ways to start a family such as through in-vitro fertilization, surrogacy, and adoption. One way is not necessarily better than another; they are all viable and valuable options. Therefore, adoption can help those that want to parent and start a family do so.

The other way of understanding the impact of adoption is through loss and difficulties. Soares et al. (2019) studied common themes of losses experienced by adopted children. Losses included the loss of birth family and difficulties communicating openly about adoption with family and peers (Soares et al., 2019). Difficulties may occur when a child is adopted at a later stage in life. This was found to be related to the child being exposed to adversity for longer periods of time than children adopted early in life. The later-adopted child was found to have problems developing trust and more feelings of uncertainty about the future. These results emphasize the importance of support for those impacted by adoption to increase gains and minimize losses and difficulties.

While a majority of impact is related to the adoption triad, support from others is important when minimizing negative impact to the adoption triad. Passmore and Feeney (2009) found that other people can influence adoptees' perception of their search and reunion experiences. If other people are supportive of an adoptee's decision to search the adoptee may be more likely to start the search process. However, if other people are not supportive in an adoptee's search it could lead the adoptee to feel guilty. For example, an adoptee may be told by an outsider that they should appreciate the family they have and not cause trouble by searching. This statement could lead the adoptee to question their reasons for searching and ultimately prevent them from starting the search process. In the same regard, reunions between adoptees and birth parents can also have an impact on the broader family network outside of the adoption triad as well as family and community members. As reunions occur and connections are made between a birth parent and adoptee, connections with others in their network can occur such as connecting with friends and family members of the adoptee or birth parent. This could either bring a sense of joy or inspire others that are impacted by adoption to start their own search process or it could bring up feelings of resentment if others have had a negative experience with adoption. It could also bring up feelings of guilt in others that have not yet searched. Koskinen and Book (2019) suggested that the whole adoption triad receive support during the search and reunion process since some of these impacts are hard to predict.

### **Adoption and Loss**

While adoption provides the opportunity for a new family to be formed, it is most often formed from loss. Each of the members of the adoption triad are impacted by some type of loss when an adoption takes place (Bailey & Giddens, 2001; Nydam, 2007;

Schooler, 1998). For those who have adopted their own kin, known as kinship adoptions, the adoptive parents typically experience some type of personal loss such as the death of their child or relative or the loss of a relationship with the birth relative due to their inability to parent the child (McGinn, 2007). Outside of kinship adoptions, adoptive parents usually experience infertility and therefore lose the ability to have their own biological child. Birth parents lose the child born to them which can often result in a lifelong grieving process. Birth parents may never know what happened to their children and often suffer the loss alone. The adoptee experiences the loss of biological kin and background information such as medical history and racial identity (Bailey & Giddens, 2001; McGinn, 2007; Nydam, 2007; Schooler & Norris, 2002).

### **Stigma of Adoption**

Adoption has often been considered to be something that was to be kept secret. It was surrounded with stigma, especially towards the birth parents. Secrecy was thought to protect both the birth parents and adoptee from illegitimate and shameful pregnancies. The birth father was often known as the “‘irresponsible boy’ who left his pregnant girlfriend,” while the birth mother was often known as either the “bad girl” or “unfortunate girl” who got pregnant at a young age (Henderson, 2007). Birth parents often experience feelings of shame, fear, terror, and denial (Baden & Wiley, 2007). Adoptees often face the stigma of being different (Kaye, 1990; Simmonds, 2000). Typically siblings tease each other and use adoption as a joke to put the other person down (Grotevant et al., 2007), as if being different and not of biological kin was something bad. It was a way of saying to an adoptee or non-adoptee, “You’re different, you’ll never fit in” (Kaye, 1990). Bonds-Raacke (2009) surveyed college students and

found they have a more positive attitude towards a couple having a biological child than a couple adopting a child. This stigma of biological children being preferred more than adoptive children and teasing of being different and not fitting in could lead to the adoptive child questioning their identity, reinforcing their difference, and heightening the possibility of future rejection by parents, extended family members, and peers (Simmonds, 2000).

### **Understanding Adoption**

For the adoptee, there are many different ways one can come to understand their own adoption. Typically, this depends on the age the child was adopted and the developmental age of the child when told (Groza & Rosenberg, 1998). With younger children, typically placed for adoption at birth, there are no memories of the birth family. However, with older children, typically adopted from foster care or placed in kinship adoptions, there are memories of the birth family. In either situation, the task of helping the child understand their adoption usually falls on the adoptive parents.

Adoptees placed as infants typically do not have the cognitive ability to fully understand what it means to be adopted, even if the adoptive parents try talking to them about it. However, once the child becomes older and their cognitive abilities develop, they begin to understand what it means to be adopted. Many of these children placed as infants, knowing no other type of family, have become accustomed to their place in the adoptive family and therefore accept it even if they still do not fully comprehend it (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Regardless of the age of the child, it is important for adoptive parents to address the adoption from the time the child is placed with them and continuously throughout the adoptee's life. How and what the adoptive parents tell the

adopted child will depend on the adoptee's age, needs, and history (Henze-Pedersen, 2019).

**Adoption stories and entrance narratives.** Adoptees are usually told about their adoption through what is known as an adoption story or adoption entrance narrative (AEN). AEN's teach adoptees what adoption means, where and how they fit into the family, and why they were placed and adopted (Hays et al., 2016; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). An adoption story is constructed by the adoptive parents and usually highlights how the child was "chosen" and is "special." Backstories can be included in the adoption story that detail the reasons the adoptive parents adopted and their journey through the adoption process (Baxter et al., 2014). Adoption stories can also include the birth story, but this becomes difficult to include if the adoption was closed or if information provided was incomplete, missing, or unknown (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Adoption stories are likely to be told repeatedly to the adoptee, other family members, and outsiders. Each time the story is retold, new meanings can develop (Norwood & Baxter, 2011). AEN's are complex, multidimensional, and important to adoptees' self-concept.

As adoptees evolve in age and comprehension, AEN's tend to be adapted to address any complexities (Baxter et al., 2014). If adoptive parents have any type of information about the birth parents, such as why the child was placed for adoption, it will likely be included in the story. Generally, birth parents are framed in a neutral or positive light as loving people who simply could not take care of the child (Hays et al., 2016; Lousada, 2000). Common themes found in AEN's include fate, rescue, openness, deception, forever, difference, reconnection, chosen child, chosen parents, and birth parents and child as family (Hays et al., 2016; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Adoptees that

had adoption stories focused on being chosen reported having higher self-esteem and generalized trust (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011).

While adoptees usually come to some understanding about their adoptive status, many experience some type of uncertainty during the process. Uncertainty could pertain to the meaning of their adoption, birth parents, or adoptive parent's reactions. Colaner and Kranstuber (2010) found that adoptees were able to manage any uncertainty with their adoptive status when adoptive parents were able to discuss their adoption story, empower adoptees to confront their uncertainty, and normalize the adoption within their family. While adoptive parents try their best to create adoption stories, it is not clearly understood how adoptees internalize these stories and integrate them into their identity (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). This study further helps illuminate how AEN's are internalized by adoptees as I look at my own adoption story and how it has impacted my identity over time as related to reunification.

### **Implications for Therapists**

According to Soares et al. (2019) therapists working with any of the members of the adoption triad should be educated on different types of adoption, the impact of adoption, and possible problems and key issues with adoption. Soares et al. (2019) also recommends that adoption therapists be aware that adoption is a lifelong process and can affect each member of the triad in different ways and at different times. Therefore, a "one-size-fits-all" approach is not recommended. In order to avoid this approach, Grotevant et al. (2007) and Porch (2007) suggest that each intervention be carefully tailored to each member of the triad and their specific context. Adoption therapists are encouraged to be understanding, sympathetic, empathetic, sensitive, systemic,



encouraging, and non-pathologizing (Pavao, Groza, & Rosenberg, 1998; Sass & Henderson, 2007; Soares et al., 2019).

When working with birth parents, Baden and Wiley (2007) encouraged therapists to recognize that the impact of the adoption and loss of the child can affect the birth parent at any point throughout the rest of their lives. Negative impacts usually appear throughout life during special events and holidays such as birthdays, Mother's day, Father's day, and other events that hold significance (Baden & Wiley, 2007). Passmore and Feeney (2009) suggested that therapists also help birth mothers through contact and reunification with adoptees, when issues of sharing information pose difficulties for the birth mother or the adoptee. Adoptees and adoptive parents can be assisted by therapists when searching and reunifying with birth parents by clarifying feelings, exploring expectations, and planning for different scenarios that could occur during the process (Lifton, 2007; Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003).

Overall, therapists working with members of the adoption triad can help normalize and destigmatize adoption. It could benefit the therapist to be well educated on all different issues related to adoption so as not to constantly be educated by the client/s. Therapists that are more educated in the different aspects of adoption tend to be better equipped to help adoption triad members resolve any problems they may face throughout the life cycle (Pavao et al., 1998; Sass & Henderson, 2007).

### **Identity**

It seems that there is no single agreement as to what the term "identity" means. Different fields such as psychoanalysis, psychology, family therapy, social psychology, developmental psychology, political science, and sociology all seem to define identity

differently therefore making identity more of a construct than an actual thing (Burke, 2003; Erikson, 1968; Galliher, McLean, & Syed, 2017; Giorgi, 2017; Grotevant, Bosma, de Levita, & Graafsma, 1994; Marcia, 1994).

Erik Erikson is most known for his work on identity and identity development. Erikson (1968) described identity being formed throughout different life cycles and stages. Each of the eight stages require one to work through conflicting psychological tasks. These tasks could either help or hinder identity development. Tasks and stages include trust versus mistrust in infancy, autonomy versus shame and doubt in toddlerhood, initiative versus guilt in preschool years, industry versus inferiority in middle childhood, ego identity versus identity confusion in adolescence, intimacy versus isolation in young adulthood, generativity versus stagnation in middle adulthood, and ego integrity versus despair in late adulthood.

For the purposes of this study, I explore adolescence and adulthood due to their relevance for the exploration of Chapter IV. Erikson (1968) emphasized adolescence as the period in which identity is explored through different experiences, often known as the identity crisis. Erikson marked this period as a crisis due to the adolescent finally having the psychological, mental, and social maturity to go through this stage. Erikson described adulthood as the period in which one figures out how to take care of those that helped shaped their identity, such as parents, caregivers, extended family, and friends. Adulthood includes giving love and caring for others but also receiving love and care from others.

Following the works of Erikson, Marcia (1994) described identity as having a coherent sense of self. Past, present, and future contexts are combined as well as one's social context to form the idea of how a person understands him or herself as well as how

others understand him or her (Grotevant et al., 2007; Marcia, 1994; Triseliotis, 2000). In order to understand one's identity, aspects such as values, beliefs, interests, careers, relationships, mannerisms, personality, expectations, and physical characteristics are combined to form one's sense of self (Josselson, 1994; Kiecolt & LoMascolo, 2003; Graafsma, 1994; Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Burke (2003) identified social, role, and personal categories of identity. Social identity refers to how we identify with the groups we belong to, role identity refers to the different roles we may hold in life, and personal identity refers to unique biological aspects as well as our experiences. Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig (1992) also defined categories of identity to include the physical, psychological, and social self. The physical self includes one's appearance and the psychological self includes one's personality and intelligence. These two concepts could fall under Burke's idea of personal identity. The social self includes how we see ourselves in relation to others as well as how we think others see us, which can also be tied to Burke's social identity. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on identity as it relates to social, role, and personal categories as described by Burke and Brodzinsky et al. as their definitions are clear and comprehensive.

Identity development is an ongoing, life-long process. There are times when development goes through open phases of exploring, reviewing, and reconsidering and times when development goes through consolidation phases of integrating (Grotevant, 1997). While Erickson viewed adolescence as the key stage of identity development, our identity changes as time goes on, experiences expand, and contexts change (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Nydam, 2007; Schooler, 1998). Being connected with ourselves and others increases our identity development (Josselson, 1994; Marcia, 1994). When we consider

ourselves to have similarities with others or similarities with ourselves in different contexts or periods of time, we form a subjective experience of sameness or coherence. Identity involves a sense of fitting together how one defines themselves as well as how they are defined by others (Graafsma, 1994; Grotevant et al., 2007).

A relational sense of identity involves growing in relationships with others. Relationships in which a person is affirmed, allowed to express themselves, consider their own and other's needs, resolve conflict, and sustain connection contributes to the development of identity (Josselson, 1994). Another way to view identity from a relational lens is by thinking of identity as a system (Fish & Priest, 2011). Family therapists have described identity development as a relational and systemic process (Berg & De Jong, 1996; Combs & Freedman, 2016; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Minuchin 1969; White, 2007). Identity develops out of one's relationships, interactions, transactions, and conversations with others (Berg & De Jong, 1996; Combs & Freedman, 2016; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Minuchin, 1969; Minuchin, Reiter, & Borda, 2014). These influences from others not only shape one's identity but one's identity also shapes others (Minuchin, 1969; Minuchin et al., 2014; White, 2007). Identity is a systemic, circular process between self and other, each contributing to the other. Minuchin (1969) described the family as one of the most significant systems that shapes one's identity. However, identity is also developed in other systems such as school, neighborhood, and peer groups. Identity is who one is in relation to society (Minuchin, 1969). This definition of self is not static. It is constantly changing and expanding through time and contexts (Berg & De Jong, 1996; Combs & Freedman, 2016; Minuchin et al., 2014; White, 2007).

## **Adoptive Identity**

The concept of identity is not a new phenomenon; it has been researched for many years. As adoption research has grown, there has been a focus on the identity formation of adoptees and how this compares to the identity formation of those who are not adopted (Freundlich, 2001). Adoptees have the added task of incorporating an extra component into their identity. The component of having two families; the adoptive family which is known to the adoptee and the birth family which is often unknown to the adoptee needs to be incorporated into a coherent sense of self (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Schooler, 1998; Siegel, 2012b). Generally, identity includes areas that one has a choice in such as occupation, values, relationships and areas that one does not have a choice in such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and adoptive status. Adoptees must “come to terms” with the primary factor that they cannot choose, adoptive status (Grotevant, 1997).

Other components that can be added into an adoptee’s identity and make identity development more challenging include race and ethnicity. This becomes especially difficult for an adoptee to incorporate into their sense of identity when their race and ethnicity differ from the culture they are adopted into (Younes & Klein, 2014). Adoptive identity becomes a complex task when these factors are present, compared to those who are not adopted.

While adoptees do not choose to be adopted, they do choose how they make meaning of their experiences. Each adoptee’s life experiences will be unique. Therefore, adoptees must develop an understanding of what adoption is and what it means to them to be adopted (Grotevant, 1997; Soares et al., 2019).

Adoptees engage in an identity process where they try to integrate their adoption into their overall sense of identity. Adoptive identity is influenced by factors within an individual such as temperament and self-esteem, factors within a family such as parent's attitudes and quality of relationships, and factors outside of the family such as relationships with birth families, peers, and the community (Brodzinsky, 2011).

Grotevant (1997) summarized an identity process for adoptees that includes an initial state of unawareness or denial followed by disequilibrating experiences that may throw the person into a state of crisis, doubt, or exploration. This process may repeat itself over the life course, each time bringing the potential for renewed and expanded integration of one's sense of self. Therefore, adoptive identity is always changing and rarely ever constant (Koskinen & Book, 2019).

Adoptive identity can range from positive and secure to negative and insecure and anything in between. Some parts of one's adoptive identity may be positive and secure while other parts may be negative and insecure. Just as each individual is unique so are adoptees' identities. The way each adoptee makes meaning of and forms their identity will be personal (Soares et al., 2019).

Adoptees can struggle to develop a sense of self and come to a coherent understanding of their adoption when they are placed in a closed adoption, when they struggle to connect with their adoptive family, or when information such as birth, medical, and cultural history is lacking (Groza & Rosenberg, 1998; Nydam, 2007; Reitz & Watson, 1992). When an adoptee does not have information about their background it can lead to questions that may never be answered. Questions such as "Who am I?", "Where did I come from?", and "What do my birth parents look like?" explore genetic

and biological backgrounds. Questions such as “Why was I placed for adoption?” and “Did/do they care about me?” explore feelings of self-worth and the meaning of adoption (Triseliotis, 2000). This can lead to adoptees viewing themselves as “not whole” and “missing a piece” of themselves (Henze-Pederson, 2019). Adoptees feel as if they do not know who they are because of the lack of information provided to or shared with them. They are left on their own to fill in the gaps. If any of these questions are answered, the adoptee may reevaluate their identity and incorporate the new information into how they view themselves, how they view themselves in their family, and how they view themselves in relation to others (Kiecolt & LoMascolo, 2003; Schooler & Norris, 2002).

Adoptive identity formation can be seen as a difficult task due to several factors. Adoptive identity has been described as “fragile” due to the lack of information that prevents adoptees from fully achieving a coherent identity (Lifton, 1998). Others have viewed the adoptee as missing a piece of their identity when background information or contact with birth parents is limited (Grotevant et al., 1998a). Adoptees may also feel as though they do not fit in with their adoptive family, biological family, or both, or do not know who they are since biological information and connections with biological kin is not present (Kiecolt & LoMascolo, 2003). Due to these reasons, adoptees tend to view themselves as “different” (Grotevant, 1997; Henze-Pederson, 2019; Kaanta, 2009; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011; Soares et al., 2019). Adoptees tend to identify themselves as “different” since their life story began differently from those children who were born into their biological families (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). They may feel “uncomfortable” like an “outcast” or “other” if they are different physically, culturally, biologically, or racially from their adoptive family (Grotevant, 1997; Henze-

Pederson, 2019; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Essentially, these adoptees believed they were not like other kids (Kaanta, 2009).

Also, when adoptive families lack support for and communication with the adoptee it can lead the adoptee to feel different since they feel like they have to keep their adoption a secret and hide any questions or struggles they may have with being adopted (Henze-Pederson, 2019; Kaanta, 2009; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). This can then lead adoptees to feeling lonely, confused, disappointed, and cut off from important information that can help them connect with themselves and others. It can also create shame within the adoptee because they feel like they cannot talk to others about their adoptive status (Soares et al., 2019). They may also feel like if they do try to bring up adoption in conversation with their adoptive parents that they may hurt their feelings. Lack of communication or withholding information from adoptees leads adoptees to feel burdened with having to figure out their adoption story and identity on their own (Dunbar, 2003; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). Sometimes, even when information and communication is present, adoptees can still experience difficulty with understanding their adoption. When they struggle with feeling comfortable talking about their questions with adoptive parents or see their peers having different experiences from them, this again leads adoptees to believe that they are different. Adoptees also tend to think they do not belong when there is deception from their adoptive parents (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). When adoptive parents withhold information or lie to adoptees about their adoptive status or background information it may further imply that they are different and something to be kept secret. This again leads to more shame and feeling as “other.”



Adoptees often identify themselves as being “abandoned” (Richardson, Davey, & Swint, 2013; Fall, Roaten, & Eberts, 2012; Henze-Pederson, 2019; Kaanta, 2009; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Adoptees tend to view themselves as abandoned due to being “given up” or “relinquished” by birth parents that could not or chose not to raise them (Fall et al., 2012; Jones, 2013; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). They feel as if they were unwanted, rejected, discarded, and thrown away and often worry about being rejected or abandoned again by their adoptive family and peers as if they are not good or good enough child (Brodzinsky, 2011; Dunbar, 2003; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Kaanta, 2009; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Soares et al., 2019). This identity can lead adoptees to have difficulties developing secure attachment and trust with other people, especially caregivers (Richardson et al., 2013).

While adoptees may develop these negative identities of themselves they also tend to develop positive identities. Most of these positive identities come in contrast to the negative ones discussed above. Many adoptees view their adoptive identity as “normal” (Coloner & Kranstuber, 2010; Siegel, 2012a). These adoptees describe being adopted as a natural process and something they have always known about since their adoptive parents tended to have open communication with them about adoption (Coloner & Kranstuber, 2010; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Adoptees have also viewed themselves as being “chosen” (Jones, 2013; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011; Lousada, 2000). They described having a sense of pride for being picked and wanted by their adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2011; Kaanta, 2009; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). This led to adoptees feeling special, unique, and good, like they belonged and were part of a family that specially picked them (Kaanta, 2009; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011; Lousada, 2000; Soares

et al., 2019). Adoptees also felt fortunate and lucky to have been chosen and placed with loving parents (Siegel, 2012a). They also felt special when they thought about their birth parents choosing their adoptive parents to raise them (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). This led adoptees to consider themselves to be compassionate when they could understand that their birth parents were not bad people, they simply could not parent them and therefore picked the best parents to fulfill that role (Siegel, 2012a).

While some of these factors mentioned above may make identity development difficult for adoptees, as previously discussed, identities are constantly changing and never come to be fully formed. However, the task for the adoptee becomes a more difficult lifelong journey as new relationships are formed through marriage, parenthood, or reunification with birth parents or as searching for answers comes up empty (Koskinen & Book, 2019; Palmer, 2011).

For some adoptees, searching for answers to identity questions can lead to both empowerment and disempowerment. On one end, finding answers can lead to more questions or concerns if the adoptee struggles to relate with the birth family due to cultural or personal differences. On the other end, finding answers, whether helpful or not, can lead the adoptee to fill in gaps, feel complete, and take ownership of their identity in whatever form it may be. Information about the past can help adoptees form a coherent sense of identity and better understand who they are in the present (Henze-Pedersen, 2019; Palmer, 2011; Schooler & Norris, 2002).

Reunification with birth parents also contributes to an adoptee's identity. Koskinen and Book (2019) and Passmore and Feeney (2009) studied adult adoptees experiences after being reunified with a birth parent. After reunification, adoptees felt like

they belonged and connected with their birth families (Koskinen & Book, 2019; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Adoptees were able to learn more information about their adoption and background from their birth family which helped them to feel more connected with themselves and their birth family. A sense of belonging and connection with birth families was also stronger when there were problems in the adoptive family such as lack of communication or lying about information about the adoption. Learning more information about birth families and noticing similarities both physically and personally led to adoptees feeling like they belonged and fit in. Finally having answers to previously unanswered questions helped dispel the secrecy and uncertainty of the adoption. Adoptees also were able to feel less guilt when they were reunified with their birth families (Koskinen & Book, 2019). It helped adoptees to know that their birth families were alive and doing well. Adoptees were also able to thank their birth families for placing them into loving, caring homes and forgive them for making the difficult decision to place them for adoption. Adoptees were also likely to describe their new relationship with their birth family as a friendship or personal, familial relationship which lead to further connection and belonging (Jones, 2013; Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003; Passmore & Feeney, 2009).

However, not all reunions led to positive and secure identities. Some adoptees felt like they were strangers in the birth families (Koskinen & Book, 2019). Adoptees were unable to connect with their birth families due to reasons such as different cultures and values, lack of interest, or current and past trauma. This led to adoptees feeling a lack of attachment and connection with their birth families. When adoptees also had problems with connection and attachment with their adoptive families, this further confirmed the

idea that they were different and unwanted. There was a sense of feeling unfamiliar in both families, with nothing to connect to or grab a hold of for a coherent and stable sense of self.

**Family and adoptive identity.** Families play a key role in a child's identity development. In adoptive families, this can often be difficult when adoptees are left without "the necessary building blocks" of identity that come from the family (Nydam, 2007). If adoptive families withhold information such as the adoptive status of the child or background information on the birth family, it can cause disruptions in the adoptee's sense of identity (Henry & Pollack, 2009). As previously discussed, this can lead adoptees to view themselves as different, other, lonely, confused, disappointed, cutoff, burdened, not belonging, and missing a piece of themselves. However, if adoptive families can be truthful and accepting of the birth parents and any information related to them, the adoptee can more easily integrate this information into their identity. Nydam (2007) encourages adoptive families to talk openly and honestly with adoptees about their birth parents and birth story in a way that is caring and respectful to both the adoptee and the birth family. This can help the adoptee to create a solid foundation and identity even if information is incomplete (Blomquist, 2009; Nydam, 2007; Soares et al., 2019). As mentioned before, when these factors are in place, adoptees tend to view themselves as normal, chosen, picked, wanted, special, unique, good, lucky, fortunate, and like they belong.

**Adoptive transracial identity.** Race has been considered a social construct in which skin color is attributed to identity with a certain group (Nelson, 2016; Richards, 2000). Race can have a strong influence on one's personal identity, especially when one's

race is different from others. For transracial adoptees, the task of identity formation becomes difficult due to the fact that their racial background differs from their adoptive family and is usually noticeable. These adoptees are more easily identified by outsiders as being adopted due to the stark contrast in outward appearance (Nelson, 2016). Identity formation is also difficult for transracial adoptees adopted internationally as they must integrate the fact of losing racial connections but also the culture of their birth country (Camacho-Gingerich, Branco-Rodriguez, Pitteri, & Javier, 2007). Transracial adoptees have identified themselves as being out of place and feeling as if they do not fit in (Younes & Klein, 2014). This is due to the fact that they are physically different from their adoptive families and are growing up in a country and culture that is different from the one they were born in. However, being a transracial adoptee also has its benefits with identity development. Transracial adoptees have described themselves as blessed, honored, lucky, grateful, and loved. They describe being blessed with being exposed to more diversity and culture and are grateful to be able to appreciate diversity in others from their own experience.

Palmer (2011) developed a theoretical framework to understand the journey a transracial adoptee takes, known as the dance of identities. The dance is between three different identities, their racial, White cultural, and transracial adoptive identity and how adoptees move between and among these connected identities. Palmer (2011) focuses on White cultural identity due to a majority of transracial adoptees being raised in White cultural families. However, transracial adoptees can grow up in other cultures that are not White. Often, when transracial adoptees do not know about their different racial identities or are unable to engage in them, they can feel incomplete. Adoptees may also deny or

disregard certain parts of their identity which can also lead them to feeling incomplete or disconnected. Adoptees may be unable to engage in their racial and cultural identities due to a lack of cultural events or representation in their community. This could include a lack of restaurants, grocery stores, shopping centers, cultural centers, or churches that represent an adoptee's race or culture. In order to dance with their different identities and come to a more coherent sense of self, adoptees may search for birth information, try to reunify with birth parents, or try engaging in cultural events in their community. These activities can help adoptees to explore, engage, and reflect on their racial, White cultural, and transracial adoptive identity. It can also help the adoptee to feel like less of an outsider and form more positive connections with each of their identities. Palmer stated there is no one way to dance through the identities but each adoptee takes their own journey, engaging and reflecting each identity. It is up to the adoptee to discover what it means to be a racial, White cultural, and transracial adoptee. This can be a complex task, but when adoptees understand the complexities of each identity and realize that there are no definitive answers to one's identity they can begin feeling more secure. There are no definitive answers to the dance of identities because it is a journey and always changing. However, once an adoptee begins to take ownership of each of their identities and define them in their own way they become empowered, no longer searching for answers, meanings, or approval from others.

***Korean transracial adoption.*** While many individuals of different racial backgrounds can be adopted by families of different races, for the purpose of this paper, I focus on Korean transracial adoptions in the United States, as this was both mine and my birth mother's experience. Korean adoptees are often able to "pass" as White. This can

both help and hinder Korean adoptees as they are more likely to fit in with their adoptive family and community but lose their connection with their cultural and racial background. Passing allows one the privilege to escape racial discrimination and engage in the advantages of the majority racial group. Korean adoptees may vary between racial identities, the dance of identities, as their life experiences change and they explore their racial identity (Nelson, 2016).

Palmer (2011) found that most Korean adoptees naturally accepted their White middle-class family culture without question and considered it almost unavoidable. Many felt they could not claim a Korean cultural identity due to the fact that they were raised in a White culture (Nelson, 2016; Palmer, 2011). Korean adoptees often know they are ethnically and racially Korean and they hold onto this piece of information as it is often the only amount of background information they may have about their birth family and origins. With race as a social construct, the dilemma becomes between identifying as an Asian or Korean American or as a White American (Nelson, 2016). For those that connected with their Korean culture and heritage, food was a way to connect. Adoptees that were able to engage with Korean food felt less of an outsider and more connected to their Korean culture (Nelson, 2016; Palmer, 2011).

**Birth parent identity.** While most of the research on identity in the context of adoption has been on the adoptee, some research has been conducted on the identity of birth parents. As previously discussed, most research on birth parents has been conducted on the birth mother rather than the birth father. Even though information on birth father identity is limited, it can be assumed that birth mothers and birth fathers go through some similar experiences with identity development after placing their child for adoption

(Passmore & Feeney, 2009). A majority of birth parent identity revolves around the grief and loss of placing their child for adoption (Bailey & Giddens, 2001; Clapton & Clifton, 2016). Birth parents usually feel like a part of them is missing since they no longer have their child in their lives (Clapton, 2019; Ward, 2012). They feel a sense of guilt and powerlessness and feel like they abandoned their child which can lead them to view themselves as invisible, inadequate, uncaring, and irresponsible (Clapton & Clifton, 2016; Stromberg, 2002). This can lead to the birth parent suffering constantly or for long periods of time (Bailey & Giddens, 2001) and thinking that “they can’t get on with their lives” (Nydam, 2007, p. 446). They also tend to question their role as a parent (Clapton, 2019; Ward, 2012). They feel as if they are a parent since they created a child yet also feel as if they are not able to give themselves that title since they are not parenting that child.

Not all birth parent identities are negative. Some birth parents are able to gain a positive identity out of placing their child for adoption. Birth parents have viewed themselves as accomplished after reaching certain milestones in life that may not have been doable if they decided to parent their child (Clutter, 2014). Milestones could include finishing school, getting a degree, starting a career, and improving financial situations. Birth parents also felt like they were able to better themselves after the adoption not only by accomplishing milestones but by bettering their relationships with family and significant others, improving overall health, and becoming more mature. Birth parents also viewed themselves as grateful (Docan-Morgan, 2014). Birth parents were grateful to have new opportunities and beginnings after the adoption. They were also grateful towards the adoptive parents for providing their child with a better life.



**Genealogy.** When adoptees lack information on their family history and genealogy, it can cause problems with identity development. Genealogy is a way to explore one's identity, especially for adoptees where each new piece of information fills in gaps that were once thought to always remain a mystery (Howe & Feast, 2001; March, 1995; Triselotis, 2000; Wegar, 1997). Whether through a personal search of persons or using a genealogy test, one tries to piece together their past, locate other relatives, and complete their family tree in order to explore and better understand their identity (Askin, 1998). While anyone can conduct a genealogy search, adoptees typically search for their birth parents in order to better understand their family history and roots. Genealogy allows adoptees to search for information to help them answer questions about their biological and medical history and connect with biological family members (Grotevant et al., 2007; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Wiley, 2017). The field of genetics has grown and is now popular with both adopted and non-adopted people. However, there is a lack of research on this new phenomenon, specifically as it relates to those in the adoption triad. This study contributes to the gap in literature on genealogy as it relates to adoptive identity and reunification.

### **Searching**

The search for one's birth parents could be minimal and short or detailed and long but overall it aids in the adoptee's development of sense of self (Bailey & Giddens, 2001; Lifton, 2007). Searching can be conducted quite literally by locating and examining documents to searching on the internet or it can be conducted more meaningfully by the questions one poses to themselves or others. Questions are usually the foundation of identity formation such as "Who am I?", "Where did I come from?", or "What do they

look like?” Searching can be considered a physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual quest. When searching is understood in these ways, adoptees can be understood as beginning to search the moment they discover they are adopted (Askin, 1998; Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Lifton, 2007; Schooler, 1998).

Adolescence is considered a life phase when adoptees’ interest in their birth family becomes more active (Koskinem & Book, 2019). Adolescent adoptees start to become curious about birth parent’s features, circumstances of their adoption, and the fate of their birth families. Questions such as “Where do my appearance and genes come from?”, “Why was I put up for adoption?”, and “How are my birth parents doing?” begin to be pondered. It is a time when adoptees start to talk more openly about their adoption with their adoptive family, in hopes of finding answers to some of these questions. Adult adoptees continue to reflect on these issues as well as the meaning of the missing information, especially as adult adoptees become parents and start their own families (Koskinem & Book, 2019). Adoptees have expressed that missing information that can affect one’s identity and sense of self could affect their own parenting. Adult adoptees could then hesitate to get in committed relationships, marry, and start their own families due to these concerns. They feel like they need to resolve these issues before starting their next chapter in life to ensure as smooth and easy of a transition as possible. However, life happens and adult adoptees become partners and parents without ever fully resolving these issues. When adult adoptees become parents it can trigger questions to come up related to “their birth family, roots, and the meaning of genetic ties in kinship and biological continuity” (Koskinem & Book, 2019, p. 231). It can also lead adult adoptees

who are parents to reflect back on their earlier years, sometimes comparing their experiences growing up to their own children's development.

### **Reasons for Searching**

There are many reasons an adoptee or even a birth parent may decide to search. Generally, those that search are not trying to cause harm to anyone and are not trying to replace their adoptive family with their birth family, but are trying to find more information to help them understand who they are (Blomquist, 2009; Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Searchers may hope to find further non-identifying information, medical history, biological characteristics of birth parents, or answers about their birth and adoption such as why they were placed for adoption. Some search only for information while others search with the hopes of establishing contact and in-person meetings. Adoptees typically search for answers related to medical and genetic history as well as why they were placed. Birth parents usually search to find out if their child is happy and to provide answers as to why they were placed (Bailey & Giddens, 2001; Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2000; Sass & Henderson, 2007; Schooler & Norris, 2002).

While searching can be viewed as a positive experience that can improve one's identity or sense of self, it can also bring up difficult situations and emotions. The impact of discovery will not only affect the adoptee but their adoptive family system as well as their birth family system (Reitz & Watson, 1992; Schooler & Norris, 2002).

The idea that adoptions were closed to protect all members of the triad suggests that information that was withheld would be considered "bad news" that would cause pain (Henderson, Sass, & Carlson, 2007). While this may pertain to some families, it is not the case for all families. Adoptees may also feel a sense of conflict if searching leads

to a birth family member as the adoptee may feel they have to choose between their adoptive family and birth family. Conflict could also be seen as difficulty managing and balancing the emotions, wants, and needs of all involved in a search and reunion. However, whatever new relationships may be formed, they are usually seen as in addition to and not in replace of the existing family (Triselotis, 2000). No matter how painful or difficult, the search and reunion process is seen as an important part of identity development and will result in different meanings for each adoptee (Koskinen & Book, 2019; Pavao, 2007).

### **Reunion**

Contact and reunions between adoptees and birth parents have become more common than in the past (Muller et al., 2003). A majority of the increase has been seen with those placed in closed adoptions as previously closed adoption records have started to be opened (Miall & March, 2005; Muller et al., 2003; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). 68% of those adopted in private domestic adoptions had post-adoption contact with their birth family while 39% of foster care and 6% of international adoptions had post-adoption contact with their birth family (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009).

Key issues usually addressed in reunions include the reasons for adoption and the identification of shared characteristics (Reitz & Watson, 1992; Schooler & Norris, 2002). Reunions are considered to be intense, emotional, complicated, and usually navigated through a trial and error process (Bailey & Giddens, 2001; Burke & Orlandi, 2014). Burke and Orlandi (2014) described it as “the past colliding with the present” (p. 177).

While reunion can be seen as a disruption in the lives of all involved, it also provides benefits for all involved. For the adoptee, answers can finally be gained about

their origins, background, and reasons for being placed and a new journey of identity development can begin that can lead to a more coherent identity and a sense of continuity in life (Howe & Feast, 2001; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). For the birth parents, questions that led to feelings of guilt or uncertainty can be answered. For the adoptive parents, answers about medical history of their children can be acquired and an acknowledgement that “love is neither bought nor sold, but nurtured, and the foundation of love their family was built on is not shaken by a reunion” (Bailey & Giddens, 2001, p. 19).

Miall and March (2005) found that a majority of the population, regardless of adoption status, supported birth reunions to some degree with the majority of benefits pertaining to the adopted adult. A majority of the population also supported the release of confidential identifying information to adult adoptees that could help lead to reunion. Howe and Feast (2001) found that even if contact had ceased, most searchers felt that the contact had been worthwhile and satisfying.

### **Stages of Reunion**

Each initial reunion is only the beginning of what is a unique journey for each individual involved. Reunion involves the negotiation of relationships, roles, and contact (Lifton, 2007; March, 1995; Reitz & Watson, 1992). While each reunion experience is different, stages of reunification have been developed. Reitz and Watson (1992) discussed the stages as deciding to search, learning the birth name, locating the other person, reunion contact, and integrating the reunion experience. This seems to be a general outline of what can occur when one first begins searching and ends with reunion.

Bailey and Giddens (2001) also discussed stages of reunification but went into greater detail in describing each stage. Bailey and Giddens (2001) developed ten stages that generally occur with reunification in adoption. They mention that not all adoptees may go through every stage and stages can occur out of order. Stages include search, emotional conflict, identities revealed, initial contact, acceptance or rejection, the first meeting, honeymoon phase, post-honeymoon, resolution, and post-reunion.

Searching involves the decision to find out more information. This can start with first asking adoptive parents for any information they may have. It can then develop into looking at outside resources such as birth records, internet searches, or hiring an investigator.

Emotional conflict involves a range of feelings. It can often include doubt as sometimes searches end up with dead ends or the discovery of false information. Emotions can range from angry, sad, frustrated, depressed, happy, satisfied, and joyously overwhelmed. Each step forward can lead to a new emotion.

Identities revealed does not always occur for every searcher. However, when an identity is revealed, new emotions are developed and possibilities arise. This stage can involve stress as one must now decide to move forward with contact or not.

Initial contact occurs once one decides to move forward with the information they have discovered about the person's identity. As previously discussed, contact can occur in different forms. It can be through telephone, letter, in-person, or through a third party.

Acceptance or rejection is discovered after initial contact has been made. Was the contact received or rejected. If contact is rejected at first, there is a possibility that the person could change their mind in the future. The person who rejected contact could later

decide to respond back and show some form of acceptance. Acceptance can vary in form. Acceptance could be the acceptance of providing information but having no other or future contact or it could be acceptance of all questions and the desire for future contact and relationship.

The first meeting can be different for everyone. It can be hard to predict what will happen and what the outcome will be. Bailey and Giddens (2001) recommends that everyone try to be prepared for anything and to keep expectations in check. Just because an initial meeting is arranged does not mean that future meetings are desired or will occur.

The honeymoon phase happens during the beginning of the meeting stage when everything is new and exciting. This phase can include follow up meetings and additional contact. This stage can include introducing other family members, significant others, and friends to the new member. The relationship will be tested, negotiated, and expanded in this stage.

The post-honeymoon phase can include second-guessing as one tries to figure out what the other person thinks and feels. This can occur when contact may change or new situations occur. This process usually involves each member realizing that amount and type of contact does not automatically determine the type or quality of relationship. Towards the end of this phase, members feel confident and comfortable in their new relationship.

Resolution occurs when emotional conflict decreases and the relationship can continue to develop in a calm manner. Issues with oneself or the other can be resolved. Forgiveness may occur but is not necessary to still experience resolution.

Post-reunion involves periods of reflection and gratitude. The reunion becomes a part of the person's everyday life. New traditions can be developed to help blend and merge the expanded family. Visits can occur randomly throughout the year or specifically for special events such as birthdays, holidays, and life events. While post-reunion is usually more calm and settled, issues and conflict can still arise as they do with any family and relationship. However, these can usually be resolved with ease as the relationship has been established and communication has been maintained.

Bailey and Giddens (2001) suggest for all those who may be involved in a reunion experience that reunion aerobics are exercised. Reunion aerobics include exercising caution, compassion, responsibility, and patience. These aerobics are needed due to the fact that reunions are unique, unpredictable, develop over time, and cannot be controlled.

### **Impact of Reunion**

Whether a reunion is categorized by in-person contact that continues to grow, one time contact, or contact through letters or phone, impact on the adoption triad is inevitable. Reunions can have a positive impact on the adoption triad. Passmore and Feeney (2009) studied adoptees that met with both birth parents and found that positive birth parent characteristics, similarities between adoptees and parents, resolution of identity issues, supportive behavior from others, and resolution of expectations helped to facilitate reunions. Reunions led to the gaining of information that facilitated identity resolution and helped adoptees develop a stronger sense of belonging. Other studies focused on the relationship between birth mothers and adoptees. Most adoptees felt close to their birth mothers and described the relationship as a friendship, especially when they noticed similarities in lifestyle, value, and appearance (Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003).



Adult adoptees were satisfied with their contact and relationship with their birth mother and described the experience as positive.

Factors that helped a reunion develop into a positive impact included when the adoptive mother-daughter relationship was secure and adoptive mothers were confident in their roles (Richardson et al., 2013). When adoptees were raised in homes in which open communication about adoption occurred, adoptees were better able to balance the relationship between their birth mother and adoptive mother (Richardson et al., 2013). This balanced relationship between mothers led to adoptive and birth mothers sharing meals, speaking to each other on the phone, and attending family functions together (Richardson et al., 2013).

Reunions can be joyous occasions but they can also have a negative impact on the adoption triad. As previously discussed, when adoptive mothers feel confident in their roles and have a secure relationship with their daughter, reunions with birth mothers tend to be positive. However, when these factors are not in place, adult adoptees can struggle to manage the relationship between their birth mother and adoptive mother and the impact it has on their relationships. Adoptees may start to feel like they have to choose one over the other (Richardson et al., 2013). For the minority that were not satisfied with their reunion, a lack of interest from the birth mother, discrepancies in lifestyle and values, and secrecy related to their adoption such as disclosure to others or information related to birth father, led adoptees to view the reunion as negatively impacting their lives (Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003). Issues such as negative birth parent characteristics, personality differences, barriers to the reunion process, and unsupportive behavior from others tended to negatively impact and hinder reunions.

Passmore and Feeney (2009) studied adoptees and what factors helped facilitate reunions with both birth parents. They found that birth mothers were viewed as “gate keepers” since they often held information related to the birth father. If birth mothers were reluctant to provide important information it could hinder the relationship with the adoptee. Adoptees were more likely to develop a personal relationship with the birth mother than the birth father and male adoptee participants tended to view their birth father as a stranger (Passmore & Feeney, 2009). This could be due to the fact that birth fathers may have had a history of abusing the birth mother or other birth siblings (Passmore & Feeney, 2009).

Docan-Morgan (2014) explored Korean international adoptee’s experience after their initial reunion with their birth families. Adoptees wanted to relieve their birth families of any guilt. They conveyed to their birth families that they did not need an apology and forgave them for placing them for adoption. Adoptees shared information explaining how they were raised well, lived good lives, and were thankful for being adopted. Adoptees had a number of questions for their birth families. Questions usually pertained to the background story of what led the birth family to place for adoption, family history, medical information, families’ current situation, and if relevant, information about the absent birth parent. Adoptees were also curious to find out if they had similarities with and bore any resemblance to their birth families. Physical similarities seemed to symbolize a “deep, inextricable connection, and a sense of . . . biological place” (Docan-Morgan, 2014, p. 361). Other similarities seemed to relate to personality such as shared interests.

Birth families were found to apologize, express love, convey gratitude toward adoptive parents, and offer advice (Docan-Morgan, 2014). Birth parents were found to repetitively say “sorry” and apologize for placing the child for adoption while also expressing deep love for the adoptee. A deep sense of gratitude was also expressed towards the adoptive parents. Birth parents were thankful for the adoptive parents giving the adoptee a good life. Birth parents shared information such as reasons the adoptee was placed, family and medical history, and their current living situation. Advice such as being a good child, doing well in school, staying positive, and getting married was given from birth parents to adoptees.

Reunions involved extended touch, exchanging gifts, going on outings, learning culture, and performing symbolic family acts (Docan-Morgan, 2014). Extended touch included holding hands or giving hugs for long periods of time and with great intensity. Gifts exchanged from birth parent to adoptee tended to hold a special significance such as matching jewelry, money, or clothes. Gifts exchanged from adoptees to birth parents typically involved photos and albums to help depict how their lives were growing up. Outings to places such as restaurants, shopping, and trips to other places allowed for extended time together. This extended time together allowed for family members to teach each other about their culture and the things they enjoyed doing. They were also able to partake in symbolic activities such as taking pictures together.

In Chapter II, I have presented past and current literature on adoption, identity, and reunification. As previously mentioned, there is a gap in the literature on closed adoptions, genealogy with adoptees, and the combination of these two areas as it relates to adoptive identity and reunification. Chapter III will describe the methodology I used to

conduct my research. The use of autoethnography will be explained as well as how I collected and analyzed my data.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

The following section explains the methodology I used in this research project. A description of my research question, participants, and self-of-the researcher are provided. I detail the steps I took throughout the research process which include data collection, analysis, and the writing of results. Ethical concerns are also discussed. I gained approval from Nova Southeastern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before starting the research process listed below.

### **Research Question and Qualitative Research**

In this study I explored how my identity as a person and as an adoptee changed after reunification with my birth mother through a DNA profiling website. For this study, I used qualitative research because it allowed me to explore my own experiences and how these have contributed to my identity. My experiences are related to the world of adoption and reunification. This area of study has been intriguing to me since it has brought so many new things into my life. As Mason (2018) states, "Qualitative researchers should be intrigued by the world they are investigating; they should be fascinated, puzzled, and enquiring about it" (p. 10). Since I was a young child, I had the desire to search for my birth parents and hoped to meet them. I was interested in hearing their stories and finding out more about where I came from. Once I found my birth mother and reunited with her I was intrigued as to how this experience shaped my identity. At the time of reunification, I did not think about how this would shape me and change my identity. I was merely just soaking everything in. Since then, I have looked back on my experiences but only on a surface level. I recognized this experience was a joyful one filled with many happy tears but I had not yet figured out the answers to my

question, how has my identity changed after reunification with my birth mother. This made qualitative research appropriate for my research question since “no qualitative researcher should feel they know the answer already” (Mason, 2018, p. 10).

Qualitative research does not use an “evidence-affirming” approach but rather allows the researcher to “engage with the world they are researching in an investigative way” (Mason, 2018, p. 11). Qualitative research tends to be more explorative, subjective, and descriptive than quantitative studies, which tend to be more confirmative, objective, and explanatory (Chenail, 2011). This exploratory method allows the researcher to share their unique perspectives without being limited by traditional quantitative research methods (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). A qualitative research method allowed me to share my unique experience while also exploring and investigating my identity. Chenail (2011) suggests that qualitative research methods be kept as coherent, clear, and simple as possible to avoid complicating things that do not need to be complicated. The research topic is usually a complex matter, therefore, the methodology should be kept simple. For this reason, I relied on Chang (2008) for the main foundation of my methodology so I could keep a coherent, clear, and simple approach to my research study.

**Autoethnography.** Autoethnography has become a popular qualitative research method, especially in the social sciences (Lapadat, 2017). With its roots in anthropology, autoethnography combines the methods of autobiography and ethnography to analyze and interpret cultural phenomenon (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). Ethnography includes the writing and analysis of a culture while autobiography details the personal experiences of one’s life (Lapadat, 2017). Ethnography also studies the experiences of others that are often unknown or unfamiliar to the researcher (Chang, 2008). In autoethnography, the

researcher is very familiar with the experience since they have lived it. However, just because the researcher is familiar with an experience does not mean they do not engage in collecting, verifying, analyzing, and interpreting data (Chang, 2008). With these two methods of autobiography and ethnography combined, autoethnographers “dig deeper into their memories, excavate rich details, bring them onto examination tables to sort, label, interconnect, and contextualize them in the sociocultural environment” (Chang, 2008, p. 51).

According to Witkin (2014), autoethnography helps create empathy in others by enriching understandings, expanding awareness, increasing sensitivity, providing insights, and giving opportunity for stigmatized labels to be challenged. Autoethnography focuses on the self and uses one’s personal data to connect contexts between the self and others (Faith, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Faith et al. (2010) described autoethnography as qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious. Autoethnography is qualitative because it looks at the meaning surrounding an event rather than an explanation for an event. It is self-focused by using the personal stories of the author rather than the stories of others. Autoethnography is context-conscious by connecting it to the human experience and the wider sociocultural experience.

Since I looked at my own experiences and how they were meaningful to me, especially as it pertained to my identity, autoethnography was an appropriate qualitative research method to use. I also tie my experience into the larger cultural context and human experience of adoption. Autoethnography can help me to connect my experience with others because it helps one to understand how their story may be unique but it is always connected to a larger context. Autoethnography has not only helped me

understand myself better but it has also helped me recognize how the society and cultures that I am a part of have contributed to my sense of self.

*Insider experience.* As mentioned before, autoethnography uses one's personal experiences as data (Chang, 2008). In order to engage in autoethnography, one simply must be a member of the sociocultural world they plan to study (Anderson, 2006). Therefore, almost any experience from one's life can be explored through autoethnography (Chang, 2008). An autoethnographic researcher has an insider perspective, which is "contextualized in experience, culture, and history" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 593). Autoethnographers focus on their own experiences rather than the experiences of others. The attention is directed toward the self. Instead of putting a spotlight on others to highlight their experiences, autoethnographers place the spotlight on their own experiences. By "turn[ing] the spotlight on themselves", autoethnographers have allowed difficult topics and experiences that were once hidden to be studied and understood (Lapadat, 2017, p. 593).

While autoethnography is considered to have an insider perspective, Witkin (2014) describes how autoethnography also includes an outsider perspective. The researcher must look back at past experiences, as an outsider, and dig into the meaning of that experience based on both their past and current context. The researcher interprets their own experience in order to gain a richer understanding than the one they may have had in the past when the experience first occurred.

In this study I used my own personal experiences as data. These experiences include growing up as an adopted person and being reunified with my birth mother. I turned inward to explore how these experiences shaped me and my identity but also



turned outward to examine them for deeper meaning and understanding. This helped me connect my own experiences to the larger sociocultural experience of adoption and reunification.

***Sociocultural experience.*** Using inside experience and incorporating an outsider perspective to analyze personal experiences allows the researcher to gain better self-understanding (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008). While autoethnography is very personal and self-centered, it is also broad by expanding the self to the sociocultural contexts of others. We cannot know who we are without knowing others (Chang, 2008). We learn values, norms, and customs from others. This shapes our idea of self. Chang (2008) described how the self is a part of a cultural community and culture is a product of interactions that occur between self and others. In fact, in autoethnography, one comes to understand others through self (Chang, 2008). Self-understanding comes from the “intersection of biography and society” in which one understands how their personal experiences are shaped by the sociocultural contexts in which they live (Anderson, 2006, p. 390).

Autoethnography is a systematic and intentional approach that constructs meaning and value in the sociocultural worlds involved in the author’s story (Anderson, 2006; Faith et al., 2010). Even though autoethnography places the researcher as both the main character and the narrator in the story, that story is not isolated and is tied to a sociocultural context (Witkin, 2014). By richly describing and analyzing an experience, autoethnography allows both the researcher and readers to “correct cultural misunderstandings, develop cross-cultural sensitivity, and respond to the needs of cultural others effectively” (Chang, 2008, p. 54). This is also achieved when autoethnographers

can “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in doing so, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 276).

Many autoethnographers explore their identity and how it has developed in a specific sociocultural context (Faith et al., 2010). Autoethnographers analyze their personal experiences and how those experiences were made possible by being part of culture or by having a specific cultural identity (Ellis et al., 2011). According to Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015), “autoethnography acknowledges how and why identities matter” (p. 19). I chose to use autoethnography to not only explore my own identity, but to also explore how my experience could add to others that have gone through similar experiences or those that work with or study these types of experiences. Autoethnography allowed me to “take more responsibility for and greater care in representing [myself] and others” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 19).

***Evocative and analytic autoethnography.*** Two main types of autoethnography are evocative and analytic (Witkin, 2014). Analytic autoethnography focuses on improving theoretical understandings while evocative autoethnography focuses on emotionality and sympathetic understanding (Anderson, 2006). Anderson (2006) describes evocative autoethnography as seeking not absolute truth but the author’s truth. Analytic autoethnography is “grounded in self-experience but reaches beyond it as well” (p. 386). Analytic autoethnography tends to include data collection and analysis of others, usually from interviews. It then analyzes the connections between the researcher’s own data and the data of others. Evocative autoethnography tends to only use data from the researcher and not from others. While evocative autoethnography tends to only focus on data from

the researcher, this does not eliminate the experiences of others. Since one does not exist in isolation, the experience of others will be included in evocative autoethnography to help connect one's experience to the larger cultural context. For this paper, I used evocative autoethnography since I was searching for understanding through my personal story and how it could emotionally move others and help them develop a sense of empathy and understanding with people who have been adopted and/or reunified with a birth parent (Witkin, 2014). When a story is told with emotion and written with aesthetic it has the potential to change people's perspectives (Lapadat, 2017). I explored how I understood my identity and how others could understand adoption and adoptive identity, especially after a reunion. Therefore, since I am not focusing on a theoretical understanding, this autoethnography takes an evocative form.

***Benefits and limitations.*** Chang (2008) discussed several benefits of autoethnography. Autoethnography is described as researcher friendly. Since autoethnographers use their own experiences as data, they have direct and immediate access to information that can be investigated in depth compared to researchers who study others and have to wait to collect information and then analyze it as an outsider. It is also reader friendly in that the writing style is usually more engaging than traditional scholarly writing. Autoethnography creates a better cultural understanding of self and others and has become very useful for those who work with or study human relations in multicultural settings such as educators, social workers, medical professionals, clergy, and counselors. Autoethnography can also be a therapeutic experience not only for the author but also the readers (Ellis et al., 2011). By diving deep into personal experiences,

ones that are often difficult to talk about or research, and analyzing them for better understanding, one can process difficult feelings in a way that becomes healing.

While there are many benefits of autoethnography, there are also limitations that come with autoethnography. Ellis et al. (2011) described how autoethnography is often criticized for trying to combine the arts with science. Critics have discussed how autoethnography is both too artful and not scientific and too scientific and not artful. Autoethnography could be too artful, evocative, and personally focused that the personal experience is not transferred to the sociocultural context (Lapadat, 2017). It could also be too scientific or analytic and lack any emotional aspect that helps create empathy and understanding. Autoethnography strives to create a balance between both the arts and sciences; however, this can be difficult to achieve for some.

Chang (2008) details five pitfalls to look out for when engaging in autoethnography. The first way to tell if autoethnography is being conducted properly is to make sure there is not an excessive focus on the self. The experience of others should be included as this tying to the wider cultural context is the “ethno” part of autoethnography. Second, simply narrating one’s experience is not considered autoethnography. One must engage in deep analysis and rich cultural interpretation of the data. Third, autoethnographers can often rely on their personal memory as the main source of data. In order to decrease the amount one is questioned on the reliability of this data, external data such as documents, artifacts, and interviews should be used in combination with personal memory data. Fourth, ethical standards can often be overlooked since the main subject of autoethnography is the researcher. However, as mentioned before, one does not exist in isolation. The story of self includes the stories of

others. Ethical standards, such as confidentiality, should still be upheld when it comes to autoethnography. Finally, if these issues are not addressed, the writer should consider if the term “autoethnography” is appropriate to describe their study. A different description, such as autobiography, may be needed.

### **Participant**

In this study I used myself, my experiences, and my memories to explore how my identity was shaped through reunification with my birth mother through DNA profiling. While I am the main person involved in this study, my personal story and experiences have not occurred in isolation. My family members and friends have been included in my stories. This will be further discussed in the ethics section.

### **Self-of-the-Researcher**

Since this study analyzes myself and my identity, it is important to give background information on who I am. This section will help to position myself as both the researcher and the subject. The following is how I view and identify myself prior to analysis.

I am a 29 year old, female, of Korean and Great British biological decent. I was born in Florida and adopted at birth. My adoptive parents raised me in Florida. I would consider myself to be raised as White with some Hispanic influence. My father is Czech and English and my mother is Spanish and Cuban. They were both born and raised in the United States. The Hispanic influence in my life comes from my mother’s cooking. Overall, I was raised in predominately White, upper-middle class neighborhoods and attended a private Christian school from first grade to twelfth grade. My parents are religious and believe in God and Christianity, however, we never attended church. During

my childhood, they supported me in my faith and allowed me to attend church with friends if I chose. Now, I would describe myself as a Christian who is more spiritual than religious. I do not attend church but I do pray and believe in God.

My father was married prior to marrying my mother and had two children from his previous marriage. My father is currently 82 years old, so his children are in their 50's and 60's. My mother was never married before my father and did not have any children before me. After his divorce, my father did not keep in regular contact with his children. Therefore, I was raised as an only child. I never met his children but my mother and father told me about them when I was young. I believe being raised as an only child helped me to view my adoption as a positive experience. I did not grow up with siblings that were biologically from my parents so I did not have to deal with a physical reminder that I was different.

I currently reside in Florida. I have been in a relationship with my boyfriend for a little over seven years. We have a dog and a home together and plan to get married in the next few years. He has been extremely supportive throughout the entire reunification process with my birth mother. Together, we have made the decision to not have children. I have discussed with my boyfriend and others that if we ever decided we wanted to have children and we felt like we could not have children safely on our own because of our age, we would consider adoption. I had such a positive experience with adoption that I would be happy with that method of expanding our family. But, the likelihood that we will expand our family with human children is low; expanding our family with fur children is another story.

I am currently in my third year of the Ph.D. program at Nova Southeastern University for Marriage and Family Therapy. I obtained my Master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Nova Southeastern University in 2017. I have been working in community mental health for the past two years providing therapy to children, adults, and families experiencing mental health problems. I also run groups for adult sexual offenders. In my work with community mental health I have worked with clients that are adopted. Some were in therapy for issues related to their adoption and others were in therapy for non-related reasons. Working with adopted people has shown me even more how lucky I am to have the experiences I did growing up and contribute to me continuing to view my adoption as a positive experience. This also motivated me to complete this study to add to the research for those working with adopted persons, especially as technology and DNA profiling websites continue to rise.

### **Data**

For the purpose of this paper I have decided to primarily follow Chang (2008) as a guide for my data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations due to Chang having one of the most comprehensive guides for conducting autoethnography. I have also included Adams et al. (2015) for additional guidance. According to Adams et al., (2015), "Autoethnographers sometimes begin projects with personal experiences that [they] want to understand more fully, deeply, and meaningful" (p. 47). In order to reflect on my personal experiences I collected both internal, raw, and external data. The following sections detail these different types of data.

**Types of data.** In autoethnography, data is usually text based rather than numbers based as is common in quantitative research methods (Chang, 2008). Internal data is data

that is collected from the researcher's personal memory, raw data is data that is collected in the moment, and external data is collected from materials such as interviews, documents, and artifacts (Chang, 2008). Using these three types of data will help ensure accuracy and validity in autoethnography. If one relies too heavily on internal data, the research may seem less scientific since it can sometimes be hard to trace back memories. Therefore, I used internal, raw, and external data to improve the accuracy and validity of my study.

*Internal data.* For this study, I used my personal memory data as one form of data. I used the following ways of collecting personal memory data for this study to increase reliability. Personal memory data is a type of internal data since it comes from within a person and their own memory (Chang, 2008). Chang (2008) considers personal memory data to be the "building block of autoethnography" because rich details of the past can give us a look into the present (p. 71). Even though it is a "building block" it can also be a flaw. Memory is not perfect and can often be unreliable. Memory can be selected, limited, distorted, and unpredictable. Some memories stand out more than others and recollection of exact details can be difficult at times. Memories can bring up both positive and negative emotions. Due to these possibilities, memory data has been questioned as the reliability of memories can falter.

One way to help improve the reliability of memories is to chronicle the past (Chang, 2008). One way to do this is to create a timeline of different events and experiences. Placing memories in chronological order can be used for an entire lifespan or for more time-limited events such as particular phases in one's life. Another way to chronicle the past is to examine annual, seasonal, weekly, or daily routines in one's life.



Chang (2008) stated, “Information on personal, familial, and societal routines is useful in discovering sociocultural patterns intertwined with your life, community, and society” (p. 75). I created a timeline of events that have surrounded my adoption including the process of arranging my adoption, being adopted, and being reunified with my birth mother and birth family.

Another way to improve reliability of personal memory data is to take an inventory of the self (Chang, 2008). This can be done by first creating thematic categories that are relevant to the study. Then, the researcher explores their own memory and picks out details of information that are related to the different thematic categories. This collection process should be written down and then evaluated and organized. Themes can be organized based on importance to the study. Some themes that could be used for self-inventorying include rituals and celebrations. I took an inventory of myself by looking at rituals and celebrations throughout my life such as different holidays and special events. Since reunifying with my birth mother, we have celebrated some holidays and special events together. This inventory helped me to look back and compare these events from the past with events that have happened after my reunification.

Finally, increasing reliability of personal memory data can be done by visualizing the self (Chang, 2008). Using kinship diagrams can help one to visualize themselves and their family relationships. Kinship diagrams are charts that depict members of the family and types of relationships using different symbols and lines. It can help distant memories to become more coherent and help memories become more organized. The diagram can be contextualized with background information such as dates and locations to help further self-reflection. I visualized myself by creating a kinship diagram that traced both my

adoptive and birth family relationships. This helped me look back on my experiences and explore my memory of them and the meanings that developed from them.

**Raw data.** Self-observational and self-reflective data is considered to be raw data (Chang, 2008). It is considered to be raw data since it is collected in the present, which can make the data more rich and vivid. This type of data collection can help with gaining cultural perspectives on oneself. While self-observational data is factual data collected about what is happening in the moment, self-reflective data is introspective data about present experiences. I used the following types of self-observation and self-reflective data for my study to help me focus not only on the past but also on the present. Chang (2008) discussed how self-identities do not always remain constant and can change over time depending on different experiences and contexts. This type of data helped me analyze myself over time and in the present.

Self-observational data can include behaviors, thoughts, and emotions as they occur in the moment (Chang, 2008). This record of data can help highlight changes and continuities in one's life. Self-observation can be recorded using a narrative format which is more open-ended, allowing the researcher to write in a free manner and include rich details. This format of recording does not limit the length or format of data and therefore does not inhibit the researcher very much. Another way to record self-observation is through the use of a pre-structured recording form. This can help increase speed of collection and lead into analysis as data can be more easily coded based on the structure of the form. I engaged in self-observation through the use of both narrative and pre-structured writing about my thoughts, behaviors, and emotions at the time.

Self-reflective data is collected from the introspection, self-analysis, and self-evaluation of who or what someone is (Chang, 2008). Using a field journal can help record private and personal thoughts and feelings related to the research process. Field journals can be used separately as well as in conjunction with self-observational data. Themes that can be explored through self-reflection include personal values, preferences, cultural identity, and cultural membership.

Personal values and preferences are shaped by culture (Chang, 2008). According to Chang (2008), “cultural values are what you are encouraged to strive for and are encoded in moral standards by which your behaviors and thoughts are publicly and privately sanctioned” (p. 96). Understanding personal values and preferences can help with the understanding of social attitudes and beliefs. In order to collect data on cultural identity and cultural membership, Chang (2008) recommends developing a culture-gram. A culture-gram is a “web-like chart” that helps one to visualize themselves in their social and cultural realms. The culture-gram helps you to “see your present self from multiple perspectives in terms of social roles you play, people groups you belong to, diversity criteria by which you judge yourself, and primary cultural identities that you give to yourself” (p. 97). I was self-reflective about this process by using both a field journal to explore my values, identity, and cultural context in the moment and a culture-gram to explore my social roles, cultural groups, and sociocultural identity.

***External data.*** External data comes from sources such as individuals, textual artifacts, and visual artifacts (Chang, 2008). Internal and raw data can be very subjective as it comes from the researcher’s memory and perspective. External data helps to provide

additional perspectives and contextual information that can help with subjectivity. I used interviews of individuals, textual artifacts, and visual artifacts for data in this study.

As Adams et al., (2015) mentioned, “We often begin our work by talking with others, sharing and learning about the experiences that capture our attention, and exploring our own and others’ memories of these experiences” (p. 77). Individuals can be interviewed to help provide information that can confirm, complement, or reject internal or raw data (Chang, 2008). Interviews of individuals can also help the researcher to improve their memory, fill in gaps, collect new information, validate current data, and gain other perspectives.

Interviews can be conducted using an unstructured, structured, or semi-structured format (Chang, 2008; Kajornboon, 2005). Unstructured interviews allow for more flexibility for both the interviewer and interviewee (Chang, 2008). They are usually more casual than and not as direct as a structured interview due to not having a detailed plan of questions to ask (Kajornboon, 2005). This can be good for the interviewee as they can discuss more details and be more open about their experiences. However, it can be difficult for the interviewer to gather relevant information since there is no guide with questions. Structured interviews can help the researcher to stay on topic and close to the data (Chang, 2008). This is accomplished because the interviewer asks the same planned questions to all interviewees and has more control over the information gathered (Kajornboon, 2005). While this can be beneficial to effective data collection it can also hinder the process by skipping over any questions that may arise throughout the interview which could lead to more relevant information. Semi-structured interviews provide a nice balance between the two with a set plan in place but also room for flexibility if something

new develops (Kajornboon, 2005). The interviewer can be prepared with a set list of questions but can choose to skip over some questions or add in additional questions in the moment. This is important because new ideas and areas of inquiry that were not originally considered for the interview could appear during the interview. Also, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews helps the interviewer to dig deeper into specific areas of inquiry if needed. Interviews can also be conducted in-person or indirectly such as over the phone, through mail, or use of the Internet. While conducting interviews I used semi-structured interviews to allow for organization but also flexibility. The interview questions were similar for each person involved in my story and were written to help fill gaps in my story, validate my story, and collect new perspectives. The questions consisted of general prompts so each person could share their story without being restricted but still provide information related to my adoption, reunification, and identity. The interviews were conducted both in-person and indirectly through FaceTime.

Textual artifacts are documents that are written formally and informally (Chang, 2008). Textual artifacts help to enhance understanding of self and context. Formal textual artifacts may include official documents such as birth certificates, diplomas, official letters, certificates, or announcements. Informal textual artifacts may include newspaper articles, programs, letters, essays, journals, text messages, and emails. Personal textual artifacts such as letters, journals, text messages, and emails help preserve thoughts, emotions, and perspectives at the time of documentation. This is helpful in autoethnography because this data is “untainted by [the] present research agenda” (Chang, 2008, p. 107). I collected both formal and informal textual artifacts such as my

adoption papers and records, letters, journals, text messages, emails, and social media posts that pertained to my adoptive identity and reunification process.

Visual artifacts refer to any type of physical representation of one's life (Chang, 2008). They are non-textual and often tell stories about the past or present. Visual artifacts can include photographs, gifts, and videos. Visual data can complement textual data and sometimes have a bigger impact and impression on viewers since it is tangible compared to personal memory data or raw data. When revisiting visual artifacts, memories can be triggered, experiences can be relived, and social contexts can be examined. I collected visual artifacts such as photos, videos, and gifts. These helped me revisit my experiences and explore the meanings behind them.

**Collecting and Managing Data.** Chang (2008) describes how the research process is never linear and often research steps overlap and mix. The data collection process can often overlap with the data analysis process. Data management includes the collection of data but also the analysis and interpretation of data during the coding and sorting process. While the research process is often a cyclical one, for the purpose of clarity, I will describe the research steps of data collection, management, and analysis in a linear format.

Having a plan for data collection helps improve the effectiveness and efficiency of a study (Chang, 2008). As data is being collected it is helpful to label and organize each piece so it can be easily identified during analysis. Labeling and organizing can also help identify what is redundant, lacking, or irrelevant among the data. Data should be collected and organized into categories. These categories are referred to as data sets, which include one collection strategy within a set timeframe. For example, a primary

label can be given to a data set that includes how the data set was collected such as time, data, recorder, collection techniques, and data source. A secondary label can be used to identify contextual information such as main actors, topic, geographical information, or timeframe. Generally, labeling should identify who, what, where, and when to help organize and classify.

After collecting and labeling data, logging data can be helpful for organization (Chang, 2008). Using a computer-based classification system can help data sets to be coded and sorted according to particular research needs. When all data sets can be organized by a log that can be sorted according to a code, it can be easier to engage in data refinement. Data refinement includes identifying what data sets are redundant and less important and need to be reduced and which data sets are lacking and need to be expanded upon.

I used the computer program Word to log my data. I used this program to label and organize my data with primary and secondary labels identifying who, what, when, and where of the data. This helped me see which data sets were lacking and needed more data and which were redundant and needed to be reduced.

**Analyzing and Interpreting Data.** Chang (2008) emphasizes the importance of analyzing data for gaining cultural understanding. “Autoethnographic data analysis and interpretation involve shifting your attention back and forth between self and other, the personal and the social context” (Chang, 2008, p. 125). Rather than simply focusing on the events of my life and creating an autobiography in which the foundation is in the storytelling, autoethnography includes an explanation of how events and experiences in my life can be pieced together to explain cultural tenets and experiences of others.

Data analysis requires the researcher to stay close to the data and dissect the information (Chang, 2008). Data interpretation focuses on connecting the dissected data and finding cultural meanings that go beyond the data. Meanings must be searched for and formulated in the researcher's mind through the interpretation phase. Interpretation of data is essential in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Chang (2008) recommends zooming in and out of data for analysis and interpretation. Zooming into data helps with analyzing the details of the collected data. Zooming out helps pull the researcher away from the minute details to see the entire data and the context. Zooming out and interpretation helps the researcher see how this case is related to others, connected to its context and culture, and how the past is connected to the present.

During the initial reading of data, the researcher should keep memos of their thoughts related to repeated topics, emerging themes, salient patterns, and mini and grand categories. This can help with the coding and organization process mentioned previously.

Chang (2008) recommends ten strategies for analysis and interpretation:

- (1) Search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns;
- (2) look for cultural themes;
- (3) identify exceptional occurrences;
- (4) analyze inclusion and omission;
- (5) connect the present with the past;
- (6) analyze relationships between self and others;
- (7) compare yourself with other people's cases;
- (8) contextualize broadly;
- (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and
- (10) frame with theories. (p. 131)

I used Chang's (2008) approach of zooming in and out to analyze my data while logging memos to record topics, themes, and patterns. Using Chang's (2008) ten



strategies for analysis and interpretation helped me discover categories that related to my identity and the understanding of adoptive identity after reunification and the sociocultural context of adoption. In order to record my memos I used Word to help label, organize, and analyze my data.

**Assessing Data.** Ellis et al. (2011) discussed how autoethnographers can account for validity, reliability, and generalizability in their research. In order to achieve validity, the story should be coherent. It should evoke a feeling in readers that the experience described is lifelike, believable, possible, and could be true. To achieve reliability in which the researcher/author is seen as credible, an autoethnographer should use multiple types of data but most importantly external data and interviews of other individuals to aid in the story. Finally, generalizability is achieved if readers are able to determine if the story speaks to them about their own experience or the experiences of others they know. This will tie into validity and how coherent and evocative the story is.

### **Ethical Concerns**

Confidentiality is often difficult to maintain when writing autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Lapadat, 2017). By writing about the self, one inevitably writes about others (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). To protect privacy, an autoethnographer could use pseudonyms for others mentioned in the story or create composite figures of others. However, if this is not ideal nor possible, Chang (2008) suggests that the consent of those involved in the story is obtained. Since the majority of people mentioned in my story are so closely connected to me, it would be hard to conceal their identities. Therefore, I obtained written consent from all main individuals mentioned in my study and limited identifying information when possible.

As Adams et al. (2015) mentions:

Doing autoethnography can create personal and professional risks and vulnerabilities. These risks and vulnerabilities also are felt in the way participants and readers/audiences *respond* to an autoethnographer's representations of personal/cultural experiences. Because autoethnography requires us to examine our identities, experiences, relationships and communities, the *personal* risks of doing autoethnography can be significant. (p. 63; emphasis in original)

The personal and professional risks of autoethnography can be difficult to predict (Lapadat, 2017). By sharing the deeply personal, autoethnographers not only open up their own lives to public scrutiny but also the lives of others mentioned in their story. I weighed both the risks and benefits of this research project. Focusing on the benefits both for myself and for others helped keep any personal risks minimal and allowed me to feel safe. I discussed my goals and potential consequences “with other researchers and consult[ed] accounts of ethical considerations written by others” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 62). This allowed me to go back and forth between my specific case and general guiding principles and make the best decisions possible by considering both accounts. It helped me figure out what to include and what to leave out so there was minimal negative impact to myself and others. Another way to minimize negative impact to others is by talking to them about my writing and getting their consent, as previously mentioned, to include the experiences and statements related to them in my story. Those who were mentioned in my work read it and did not have any oppositions to it.

Lapadat (2017) discussed how autoethnographers not only write about others in their stories, but often maintain ongoing relationships with those individuals. Therefore,

autoethnographers can often get caught with wanting to present an authentic self or story while protecting the well-being of others and maintaining relationships.

Autoethnographers can struggle with telling stories of pain, hurt, betrayal, family drama, and loss especially when it includes others (Faith et al., 2010). It can be difficult to balance the relationship with an individual so as not to make them seem merely like a data source (Ellis et al., 2011). It is recommended that autoethnographers show their work to others implicated in their story (Ellis et al., 2011). This can allow the individuals to respond and discuss how they feel about being represented in the story. This form of acknowledgement of the feelings of others can help to reduce any negative effects that may come from producing a deeply personal story through autoethnography. By acknowledging their feelings, thoughts, and importance, any negative effects that could occur can be reduced through acknowledgement and discussion. I shared my work with those implicated in it so they had the opportunity to respond and discuss their feelings and thoughts related to it.

### **Writing Results**

Autoethnographies are written in a narrative format which can reach a wider audience than traditional research writing (Lapadat, 2017). Autoethnographers should write in a way that is aesthetic and evocative (Ellis et al., 2011). This can be done by finding patterns of cultural experience and then detailing the patterns through storytelling in which characters and plots are developed. The main character in autoethnography is the researcher (Anderson, 2006). The researcher's own feelings and experiences are detailed in the story to help the reader understand the social and cultural aspects of the research. Chang (2008) describes the writing process as evoking "self-reflection and self-

analysis through which self-discovery becomes possible” (p. 41). Autoethnographers “write about how they made sense of their experience at the time and how they are making sense now of how they made sense then” (Witkin, 2014, p. 8). The past is woven into the present and the present is contextualized by the past (Chang, 2008). It is a constructive interpretation process in which the researcher’s personal perspectives are included and the researcher is transformed through self-analysis (Chang, 2008). The researcher is “framed in the context of the bigger story, a story of the society” (Chang, 2008, p. 49).

I wrote my research in first-person voice. As Adams et al. (2015) states, “First-person narrators invite readers to put themselves inside the action and in the minds, hearts, and bodies of the narrators” (p. 78). Adams et al. (2015) suggest that the following questions are considered while shaping one’s story: What story are you telling about yourself and your fieldwork? What does your experience suggest about culture? What does the culture/context teach you about your experience? What is your role in shaping the possible meanings of your story?

I allowed themes to “grow out of the writing process . . . to allow writing to be a process of inquiry” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 82). Once I addressed these questions and developed themes, I organized my results in the form of an evocative narrative. In order to ensure trustworthiness and rigor in my research and results, I followed the five criteria posed by Le Roux (2017). Le Roux (2017) stated that subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility, and contribution can help in the evaluation of rigor in autoethnographic research. In order to attend to subjectivity I kept myself actively involved in the research and writing process. I engaged in self-reflexivity by attending to

my role in the research but also the wider historical and cultural context. In order to have my work resonate with others I engaged the audience by connecting with them on an intellectual and emotional level. I reported in an honest and straightforward way to increase my credibility. I attended to my self-reflexive process and made sure to contribute my personal experiences and ideas to the wider public allowing for social change.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Who am I? The profound question we all ask ourselves at some point in our lives. If you were to ask me this question prior to analysis I would have responded by listing the various parts of my identity such as a female, adoptee, Korean-English American, therapist, only child, etc. Surface level labels that described my social and cultural roles but very few that described my personality. I could describe myself fairly extensively but not intensively. There was no depth to my identity labels. They were terms I listed off without giving much thought to. Often these labels came from society and other people and were accepted by me and integrated into my identity without much reflection. Through this analysis I struggled to identify how I came to accept these labels both pre-reunification and post-reunification. How did I make sense of them, especially after being reunited with my birth mother? How did I live my life in a way that confirmed these labels? What did it mean to me to hold this label? Where did this label come from? I had to dive deeper into self-analysis for a more intensive understanding.

As I zoomed in and out of data analysis, going between extensive and intensive analysis, I began to notice themes and patterns that related to my identity. This process of analysis, going back and forth between my pre-reunification and post-reunification identity, allowed me to bring deepness to my descriptions. I was able to go back and look at the data for examples of these identity labels. This helped me to create rich and thick descriptions and bring my identity to life. I was able to create a clear picture of who I was pre and post reunification. What stood out to me most was a connection between my sense of self pre-reunification and post-reunification. Through this analysis, I was able to connect the present with the past which led me to an epiphany! There was recursion with

each identity label and my pre and post reunification process was the same. This helped to enhance my identity qualities and further confirmed their existence.

Through my analysis I discovered twenty-five identity labels for myself. While most identity labels fit into this recursive structure, there were some that did not. The following details my findings related to my identity development pre-reunification and post-reunification with my birth mother. For clarity, first I will discuss my pre-reunification identity. I will first define each identity term and then provide examples of where and how that particular identity developed. Next, I will discuss my post-reunification identity. I will provide examples of how these identity terms have appeared through the reunification process. I will also discuss how my post-reunification identity has been connected to and enhanced from my pre-reunification identity. Finally, I will discuss several identity roles that have developed from this analysis and reunification and discuss how these personality traits helped me navigate these roles.

### **Pre-Reunification**

#### **I am Connected**

*Connected (adjective): Joined or linked together, related by blood or marriage*

*Join (verb): To put or bring together so as to form a unit*

I see myself as connected because I have seen my adoptive family as family. My adoptive family and extended family members have always used inclusive language to help me feel connected. I was never called “the adopted child” or “the adopted cousin” so I never felt separated from or different from my family. I was a member of my family as a daughter, granddaughter, niece, and cousin. Being included in this way allowed me to live my life without having to second guess if I was a part of the family. I was never confused

with who I was or who was a part of my family. We were linked together by our family labels and that was all that mattered. I never questioned my family member's loyalty towards me. They never gave me a reason to doubt that I didn't belong. Instead, they embraced me with open arms.

Another way I connected with my family was by celebrating holidays and special occasions together. I remember I always had a birthday party growing up. My parents would plan my party and make sure it was everything I wanted from the type of party, theme, and presents. Often, my cousins and aunts would attend, showering me with gifts and love. I remember for a few years in a row I wanted a pool party at our house for my birthday. There is one picture that shows me being throw into the pool by my cousin and my other cousin and my father standing by and smiling. A visualization of this is presented in Figure 1. I would ask them over and over again to throw me in the pool and each time they obliged. This is a happy memory for me and shows me that my family was involved in my life and would do things to bring joy into my life. These birthday celebrations helped me feel like I was a part of a family and created wonderful memories. We celebrated every Thanksgiving and Christmas together, mostly at my parents' house but occasionally my aunt's house. We connected by eating good food, playing games, and sharing gifts with each other. The house would be filled with family members and friends that talked with me, played with me, and loved me. These moments helped me feel included growing up. I was part of a family unit that was formed out of love.





*Figure 1. Family Pictures*

### **I am Accepted**

*Accepted (adjective): Regarded favorably: Given approval or acceptance*

I have always felt accepted with my family. I never thought I didn't belong or that I was a black sheep because I was adopted. This comes from the fact that my parents always accepted me for who I was, even before I was born. This is shown through my mother's adoption journal entries. For example, my mother wrote on August 9th, 1989, "We want you to 'fit in' with our family. We don't want you to be so different that you will have problems adjusting into society." Growing up I do not think I had problems adjusting into society or into my family because my parents made sure to accept the fact that I was adopted but not highlight it in a negative way. They noted differences such as the fact that I was Korean but did not talk about it in a way that made me feel ashamed. It was celebrated and I was celebrated. This made me feel more normal, that my differences could fit in with their family. I think their words and actions helped me to accept the fact that I was adopted as a positive thing and adjust to this information so well.

My mother also wrote about finally being matched with a birth mother stating "If all goes well this child will be ours!" I was my parents' child. I never felt like they did not accept me as their daughter, as their own flesh and blood. I never said "you are not my

real parents” out of anger towards them. They were my parents and I was their daughter. It was acknowledged that we were a family unit and we loved each other.

While my parents accepted me even before I was born, they continued to accept me after adopting me. Several days after my adoption, my mother wrote “You are everything we expected and more.” This was something that was repeatedly told to me growing up. Hearing this helped me feel like I belonged because I made them happy and proud. It was nice to know that I was not a disappointment and that I continued to be everything my parents wanted and needed in a child. For example, a childhood Valentine’s Day card from my parents read, “From the lucky mom and dad who are so very glad we’ve got her.” As each day and year of my life went by I was constantly reminded of how I was a part of their family through cards and statements like these. My parents always praised me and cheered me on as their daughter. I believe I was able to flourish because my parents saw me in such a positive light. They approved of my decisions in life and accepted me for who I was.

### **I am Open and Genuine**

*Open (adjective): Characterized by ready accessibility and usually generous attitude, free from reserve or pretense, willing to hear and consider or to accept and deal with*

*Genuine (adjective): Sincerely and honestly felt or experienced, actual, true*

I do not remember a specific time or day when I was told I was adopted. My parents told me it was something they always talked about with me since I was a baby. It was never a secret or something to be revealed in a shocking way. Adoption was a part of our family language from the very beginning. It was always incorporated into conversations which is why I probably cannot remember a defining moment for when I

was told I was adopted. However, I remember being around middle school age and coming to a better understanding of what adoption meant. I thought of it in a rational way. I willingly told people my birth parents were too young when they had me so they placed me for adoption. I did not have a negative emotional reaction towards it. I embraced it. It was not a big deal for me because I loved my parents and my life. It was easy for me to say “I’m adopted.” In fact, it was often the fun fact I shared during introductions where you had to share three interesting facts about yourself with the class. It was something I was proud of and it made me feel unique, especially since I only knew about two other people who were adopted during my childhood.

I would also share social media posts on my adoption day commenting how I was happy, proud, and thankful to be adopted. On May 19, 2013 I wrote “23 years ago I was blessed to be adopted by my parents! Couldn’t have asked for a more loving family! Happy adoption day to me!” A visualization of this is presented in Figure 2. I was not ashamed of being adopted. It was something I was willing to share with the world and people that were not in my immediate circle of friends and family. I was honest and sincere with my thoughts and beliefs about adoption. I think this helped me talk about it and share posts about it so easily. It is easy to be free with your words and actions when you are being true to yourself rather than hiding, denying, or lying.



*Figure 2.* Social media post

I would talk about being adopted with new people I met without reservations. The conversation would often start by people asking what I was in terms of my background and culture. I would tell them I was half Korean and half White. I could have just left it at that but I would always follow up with an explanation that I did not really know what my White half was because I was adopted. I explained how I knew from my adoption paperwork that my birth mother was Korean but my birth father only filled out his information as American, so there was some speculation about what that really meant. People would often have follow up questions for me and I always answered them honestly and without hesitation. I was happy to talk about being adopted because I felt like I could spread a positive message about it and challenge the idea that it was a negative thing. People often expected me to have a horror story about finding out I was adopted, so I was glad to share my experience with them and challenge their assumptions.

### **I am Respectful**

*Respect (verb): To consider worthy of high regard: Esteem, to refrain from interfering with*

Being respectful to others helps me feel like I am making my parents proud. My parents treated me with love and respect and it helped me feel accepted rather than different or an outcast. They taught me how to always be respectful by telling people please and thank you, picking up after yourself, offering to help, and asking permission. They taught me things that would help me support others rather than hurt or cause problems for others. When I went over to a friend's house I always made sure to clean up after myself and ask the parents what I could do to help such as setting the dinner table. This became natural for me because it was something I was surrounded by at home. I had chores and responsibilities to do and I respected my parents by following their directives.

My parents respected me by loving me and caring for me. They never hurt me or caused problems for me. I felt safe and secure with them. I respected them by being a good daughter. For example, I never used the fact that I was adopted as an insult to them because I appreciated the fact that adoption was a special thing that involves special people. I have always valued my parents and have always seen them worthy of high regard. They are the world to me and I don't think I could have been raised any better. By teaching me how to be respectful, they shaped me into a person they were honored to call their daughter. For example, my mother wrote a card for me in 2003 for an award I won stating, "Words can never say how proud I am today. . . . You are growing up complete with character, good morals that can't be beat." A visualization of this is presented in Figure 3. This shows me that my parents saw me as a good person, someone that was worthy of their love and admiration. I was developing into a person with good morals, one of those being respectful of others.

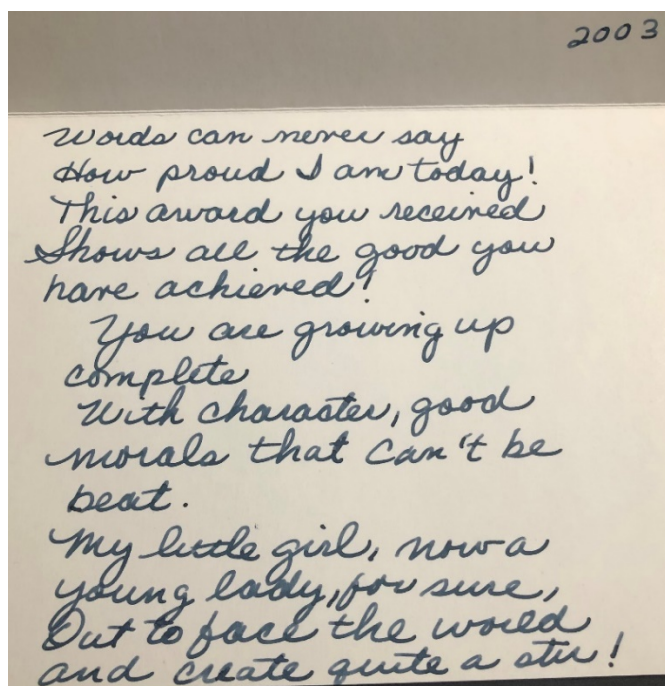


Figure 3. Card from mother

## **I am Supported**

*Supported (verb): To promote the interests or cause of*

I see myself as supported because my parents have supported me throughout my entire life and continue to do so. For a little over a decade, my parents attended every dance recital I had starting when I was three years old. It was nice to know that I had family in the crowd rooting me on and my mother backstage helping me with costume changes. After the recital, I was given flowers and taken to dinner to celebrate my performance. My parents attended all of my dance competitions, often traveling to many different cities to cheer me on and help me prepare for competition. These things helped reinforce my love for dance because I had my parents encouraging me. It was also something special because not all dancers had their parents travel with them and support them for competitions. When I entered college, I joined my school's professional dance team. My parents travelled four hours to see me perform at the school's football and basketball games. This was significant because it was something my teammates' parents wouldn't do even though they lived by the college. It showed me my parents were dedicated to encouraging me in all of my endeavors. Nothing would stop them from showing me how much they believed in me.

My parents have always endorsed my dreams and goals. Since I was so passionate about dance when I was young they offered to buy me a dance studio if I wanted to pursue becoming a dance teacher. While I loved dance, I decided to pursue a different career and went to college for psychology. My parents were happy as long as I was happy and doing what I loved. They showed this by providing for me financially through all my years of schooling. This is something that not everyone is able or willing to do for their

child. For example, some parents will not pay for their child's college if they are not majoring in a field that is approved by them. Someone who wants to be an art major instead of a lawyer may have to pay for their college on their own because their parents do not approve even though they could afford it. This makes me feel grateful that my parents have been able and willing to provide for me in this way.

In my opinion, good parents should support their child or children. My parents have supported me in every aspect of my life growing up and more. For example, they have embraced my boyfriend and the relationship we have. He is invited to holidays and events and treated as an equal member of the family. They see him as my partner and someone who I will spend my life with. Because of this, my parents even helped the two of us buy a house. This shows me they believe in our relationship and approve of the person I choose to be with.

As adoptive parents they also supported me in searching for my birth mother. In high school there was another student in my class who was adopted. I remember his parents told him if he wanted to search for his birth parents he could when he was eighteen. When I spoke to my parents about this they supported me in the same way and also said I could search for my birth parents when I was eighteen. I was okay with waiting until I was eighteen and did not view this as a negative thing. I was focused on finishing high school and enjoying my high school years so I was not in a rush to search for my birth parents. Also, I felt at eighteen I would be more mature and emotionally ready to handle any possible negative outcomes from searching. I never felt like my parents were angry about my interest in searching. It was something they were hopeful

for as well and welcomed the opportunity. This showed me that I could turn to my parents for guidance and help when the time came to search.

### **I am Loved**

*Love (noun): Strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties, affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests, warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion*

Growing up I always felt loved. Looking back through my mother's journal shows me how I was loved even before I was born and even before I knew what love was. My mother wrote in her journal on March 31st, 1989, "We want you to feel loved and secure." On June 17th, 1989 she wrote "I love you Jessica. Words cannot express the joy you have brought me. . . I thank God often for allowing me to be your mother. I couldn't be happier." A visualization of this is presented in Figure 4. Other entries include "I love you dearly", "You are lovable and good", "I love you Jessica", "he (my grandfather) loved you as much as mommy and daddy do", and "You are the love of my life, always." These entries show me that I was loved so deeply, in a way that cannot be broken, an unconditional type of love. These words of expression seemed to be spontaneous and not forced or fake. They were said with intention and not just because it had to be said as a formality. My parents really wanted me to know how much I was loved and they made sure I never doubted or forgot it.



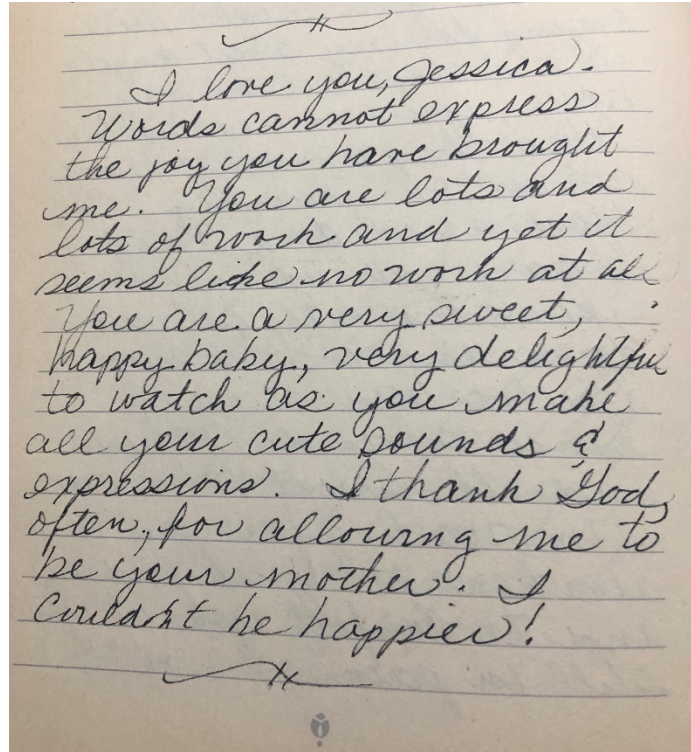
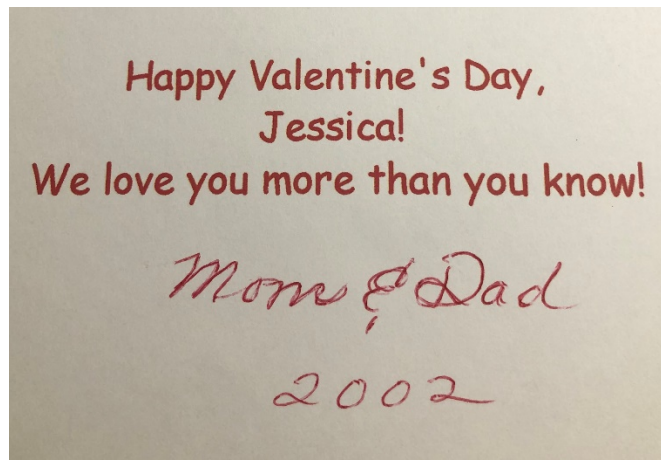


Figure 4. Mom's journal entry

While it is typical that most parents love their children and often tell them they do, it was wonderful to hear it so often and in a way that I felt was genuine and sincere. As a child and young adult my parents always told me they loved me. Both my mom and dad always said they loved me when we said goodbye or good night to each other. They also told me they loved me during times of celebrations such as my birthday or holidays. For Valentine's Day in 2002, my parents wrote on a card, "We love you more than you know!" A visualization of this is presented in Figure 5. On a card for my 26<sup>th</sup> birthday it read, "You mean the world to us . . . you are loved so much . . . having you for a daughter has been one of life's greatest gifts . . . love you always." For my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday my card read, "I have a great imagination, but I can't even imagine that anyone could love their daughter more than I love you." These words and phrases filled me with joy knowing

how admired I was by my parents. I was never left to wonder if they loved me because words like the ones above were often expressed.



*Figure 5. Valentine's Day card*

It didn't always have to be a special occasion to say "I love you." It was something that was expressed in high moments and in regular every day exchanges. Saying "I love you" was not just a cordial comment from my parents. It was more than that because it was also shown through their actions. Actions such as checking in on me, telling me they are thinking about me, supporting me through good times and bad, sending cards, and giving gifts. It was a combination of both words and actions. For example, when I moved away for college my mother started to text me every night to check in, see how my day was, make sure I was safe, and tell me goodnight and that she loves me. It is something we still do to this day over ten years later. It is comforting to know that my parents care about me and want me to know how much I mean to them. It feels good to have someone love you unconditionally and be so devoted to making you happy.

### **I am Lucky and Blessed**

*Lucky (adjective): Happening by chance*

*Blessed (adjective): Bringing pleasure, contentment, or good fortune, of or enjoying happiness*

I see myself as lucky because I was not aborted. Abortion would have been a viable option since my birth parents were teenagers when they got pregnant with me. They were young, still in high school, and not ready to be parents. Having an abortion would have allowed my mother to continue in high school without much disruption. However, this was not their choice and for that I am blessed because I was given the chance of life and I was fortunate enough to be adopted by two amazing parents. I was raised with love and everything I needed. My mother wrote in her journal on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1992, "You are a lucky kid. Everyone dotes on you." My family was particularly fond of me and often expressed this by giving me gifts, playing with me, and making me smile and laugh. I was thrilled to have so many people that loved me in my life. As I got older this continued and I believe this led me to have a stable and comfortable life.

I view myself as someone who has experienced a lot of positive things and has had a lot of privileges in life. I think this makes me able to be more optimistic since I have not had a lot of negative experiences in my life to change or distort the lens I view the world through. For example, I have not experienced much loss in my life. My maternal grandparents passed away when I was four years old. My paternal grandfather was dead before I was born and my paternal grandmother passed when I was thirteen years old; however, most of my memories with her was visiting her in a nursing home. Since I was so young when my grandparents died it did not affect me as negatively as it may have if I was older and had more time and memories with them. I did not get to have a long relationship with my grandparents but rather than viewing this as unfortunate, I focus on the time we did get to spend together and the few memories that I do have with

them, all of which are happy ones. Besides these losses all of my other immediate family members and friends remained alive and a part of my life. I think this has allowed me to enjoy life without much pain which is something that other people may not have been able to experience. I am able to look for the good in situations, in life, and in others. I think this makes me able to bring positivity into the world and to focus on the silver lining that others cannot see.

### **I am Grateful, Thankful, and Appreciative**

*Grateful (adjective): Appreciative of benefits received*

*Thankful (adjective): Conscious of benefit received*

*Appreciation (noun): A feeling or expression of admiration, approval, or gratitude*

Since I am so lucky and blessed I have a lot to be grateful for: two amazing parents, a wonderful childhood, birth parents who gave me the chance at life, a welcoming extended family, my education, and my health. I believe I have acknowledged these things in my life and not taken them for granted. I view myself as someone who is grateful because I have always been appreciative of my parents. I would often tell them this by writing cards to them for their birthday and holidays. I wrote my mother messages on cards such as, “I love you very much and hope you enjoy your birthday because you deserve it for all you do for me. I am so thankful you are my mom”, “there are not enough words to thank you for everything you do for me”, and “I could not ask for a better mom and I am always so thankful that I have you in my life! Thank you for everything that you do for me!” For my father I expressed to him in a card, “Thank you for always loving and supporting me in all I do!” A visualization of this is presented in Figure 6. While these are sayings children often tell their parents, I truly meant what I

said. People often say you cannot choose your family, but they chose me and for that I am thankful because I would not be who I am today without them. They shaped me into a respectful and responsible human. They guided me through life and helped me stay on a good path. They have provided me with everything I needed in life and more. I express my gratitude towards them not only on special occasions but on regular days as well because I admire their actions and sacrifices.

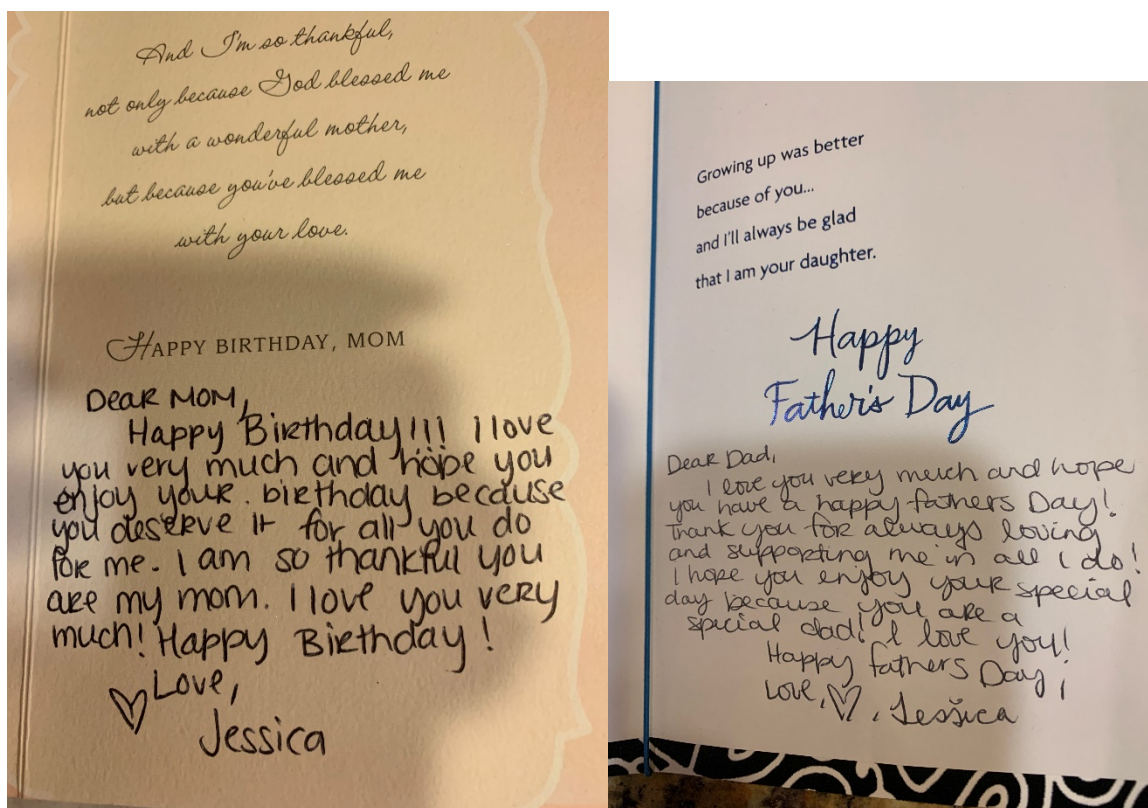


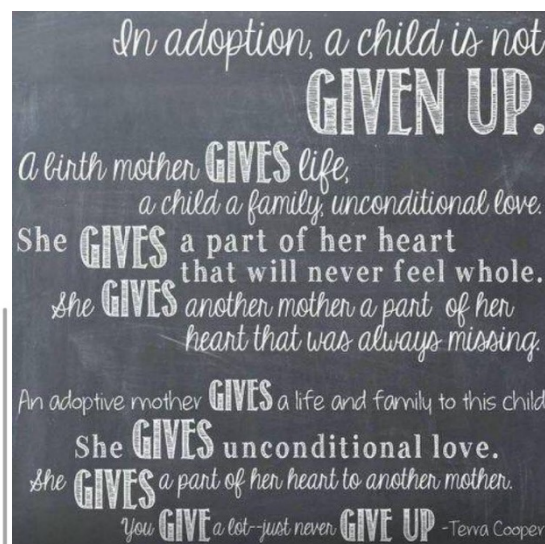
Figure 6. Cards to parents

### Post-Reunification

#### I am Connected

I was first connected with my birth mother through Ancestry DNA. This was just the beginning of a deeper connection to come. Throughout the first few weeks we got to know each other through emails and texts. We first shared general information through

email about our lives such as the places we lived, our relationship status, and our current jobs. We then progressed to more detailed information about our childhoods which included pictures and videos. We discussed things we had in common and characteristics we shared such as being social butterflies, planners, and very organized people. After a few days of texting I told my birth mother “I’m happy we got to connect and hopefully start to make up for the last 28 years and return the gift you gave me by sharing my life with you now.” It meant a lot to me that she was willing to take the time each day to text with me. I asked some difficult questions and she answered them which allowed us to bond on a deeper level. Every day we texted and shared more information with each other. On my adoption day, I shared on social media, “May 19th has always been a special day for me—my adoption day. This year is even more special because this year I’ve connected with the woman who gave me life. A month ago, through Ancestry.com, I was matched with my birth mother, and a week from now we will be meeting in person.” In the same post I included a picture of a quote about adoption. A visualization of this is presented in Figure 7. I was so happy and I wanted to share with the world that I made contact with my birth mother and would be meeting her soon. It was a way for me to join with others and share in the excitement and joy.



*Figure 7. Social media post*

A few days later we finally met in person. It was amazing to finally hug the person who gave birth to me. Being in each other's presence solidified our reunification and our connection with each other. It made it real and it felt natural. On that same weekend, my birth mother got to meet my parents. We went to dinner and bonded over good food and good wine. A visualization of this is presented in Figure 8. On the car ride home, my parents told me they felt like they had known my birth mother and her husband for years. This shows just how easy it was to get to know them and how great everyone got along with one another.



*Figure 8. Picture of dinner with family*

As the months went on we continued to meet up with each other in person. I got to meet her immediate family members and her best friend. After that weekend I wrote on social media, “Never would I ever expected to not only meet my birth mother but then all of her family and be loved and welcomed by them as well. This weekend was perfect.” By then, some of her family members had already become friends with me on social media and replied with comments such as “Can’t wait to spend time with you again”, “welcome to the madness”, and “we love adding a feisty young woman who is super smart and full of love into our family.” My connections were expanding and bringing more joy into my life.

One of the most memorable reunions was for her husband’s retirement ceremony where I got to meet more extended family members and some of their best friends. In his formal retirement speech he mentioned “Watching Amy and Jessica reconnect over the last year has been one of the biggest joys of my life.” He also shared this part of his speech on a social media post along with a picture we took together after the ceremony. A visualization of this is presented in Figure 9. This brought a bunch of happy tears to my eyes as I was not expecting to be mentioned in his speech. His words were touching and showed how all of our relationships with each other were meaningful. At the end of that wonderful weekend I wrote a post on social media, “Hearing your wonderful speech and everyone’s stories about you brought tears to my eyes (lots of tears, was not prepared for that). Being reconnected with Amy has been so amazing, but even more so because I also got connected with you! Cheers to your retirement!” Meeting my birth mother has been an amazing experience. It has been wonderful to finally have some answers to questions about my background and to see the similarities we share. It has also been amazing to



gain another person in my life, her husband, who has been incredible with the amount of patience and support he has provided for both my birth mother and me.



*Figure 9. Social media post with quote from speech*

Thinking about how I am connected to so many people makes me feel loved and special. I think being connected with family has allowed me to appreciate how lucky I am. I have been raised by two amazing parents who I feel connected with and accepted by. My birth mother thought about me every day, since the day I was born until present day, and now we have a relationship along with extended family and friends. It feels amazing to be connected with so many people who I care about but also care about me. It shows me I am accepted. Being connected helps me feel like I fit in. I view myself as someone who is joined with people beyond just blood. It is not just because of blood that I am connected with people but because of who I am as a person. This makes these connections that much more genuine and special. Who I am and how I am as a person allows me to make deep relationships with people out of love, kindness, and caring. I

think this makes me more understanding. I can understand how someone can have a deep connection with someone who is not related by blood or marriage. Blood and marriage is only one way to be linked and it can often be shallow. The connections I have made are deep and real. They are not forced. I see myself as connected because I have been accepted by my birth mother and her family. My birth mother is the only one related to me by blood yet that has made no difference in forming relationships with her family. I am able to interact with them in a way that is meaningful which helps to deepen that connection. At first the relationship is just based on a title (this is my daughter, this is my friend) but then through my actions it deepens beyond just cordialities. I am able to connect with myself by realizing that I am proud about who I am and how I am able to join with others.

### **I am Accepted**

Not only have I been reunified with my birth mother and her family members but I have been accepted into their lives and families. I didn't have to change who I was to be a part of their lives. Each time I shared a personal piece of information with my birth mother it brought us closer together rather than pushing her away. She embraced every aspect of me as did her husband. Her husband became part of my life which is something he did not have to do. I had no biological connection with him yet he treated me as someone special because I was special to his wife. On two occasions I texted him, "Thank you for being such a support for Amy and so accepting of me" and "you have been so open and accepting of me and supportive of the relationship between Amy and I, and for that I thank you." One text was sent after the weekend we first met in person and the other was sent on father's day. I sent these messages to him because it was important

for me to show my gratitude towards him. I was entering into his relationship with his wife and embarking on a journey that was intense and emotional. He could have kept his distance and wanted nothing to do with me, but instead he embraced me with open arms.

Through each step of my reunification journey I often shared posts and pictures on social media. Each post received many likes and comments from friends and family. People congratulated us and commented how happy they were and how much they loved us. I replied to their comments stating, "I am truly grateful for the openness, acceptance, and kind words I have received!" At the end of 2018, the year we first connected and met, I posted on New Year's Eve "It has been so wonderful and amazing to be accepted and loved by so many people!" It had only been several months and I already felt embraced by so many people. Some were people that I had reunified with and others were people that were there by my side watching it all unfold.

Thinking about how I am accepted makes me feel like I belong. Being adopted, I think being accepted allows me to see myself as a member of my family and not as an outsider or someone who is different. It feels validating to be accepted by my family and by my birth mother and her family. It shows me that I am someone who is not only accepted but is fully embraced and loved. It shows me that people (my parents, my family, my birth mother, my birth mother's family and friends) view me in a positive light and approve of me being a part of their life. Being accepted helps me feel like I matter. I view myself as someone who is connected with people. I am someone who is regarded favorably by people and that people want to include in their life. I think this makes me strive to be the best person I can be. I am someone who makes a difference in other people's lives and is enjoyable to be around. I see myself as accepted in my families

because I am included. I am not thrown to the side or disregarded. My life matters, my opinion matters, and I am celebrated for me being me. This helps me to feel confident both inward and outward. Realizing I am accepted allows me to connect with others since I know how it feels to be acknowledged and accepted and how it can make a difference in someone's life. It is important for me to interact in this way because no one should feel like they are excluded or rejected. After reunifying with my birth mother and her family I felt even more accepted. It is nice to know that I can fit in to both families. I didn't have to choose and I wasn't left out or kicked out of either one. I was welcomed by both. I like being accepted, especially by both families. It shows me that I value family (blood and non-blood). I value connection. I am accepted and I accept them.

### **I am Open and Genuine**

Throughout the beginning stages of our reunification, my birth mother and I shared a lot of personal information with each other. However, it did not immediately start out like that. I first wrote her three emails through the Ancestry DNA website before she responded to me. I believe my final email attempt to establish contact with her shows how I genuinely expressed my intentions to her and was open to any type of communication and relationship by stating:

I am not sure if you got my previous messages but if so I hope they did not cause you any unwanted stress or pain. I write one more time in hopes of confirming if you are my birth mother or not. . . . In no way did I intend to find my birth parents through this process. It may have been something even you were not anticipating to happen, and if so, I can imagine that this is a shock for you and something that you never wished to have happened. . . . I just felt like I had to reach out and see if I could find more answers and information. I always knew I was adopted from a very young age and I was always open and curious to know more about my birth parents. I mainly just wanted to know what they looked like and just see what they were doing in life. I feel like DNA is pretty convincing but a part of me is still hoping for a final piece of closure which would just be a statement from you

confirming if you are my birth mother . . . I would be happy to share more about this and my life with you if you would like.

I wanted to show her that I was willing to meet her where she was comfortable. I didn't want to push her and was willing to consider other options for moving forward. I described how I came across the Ancestry DNA kit and that I was not intentionally looking for her or looking to cause problems. I wanted to show her that I was someone who was safe to talk to and would not cause her problems. I was willing to share whatever information she needed to feel comfortable enough to confirm that she was my birth mother. My words helped her feel at ease because a day later she responded and from there our relationship took off.

As we began to text with one another, I asked some difficult questions about her experience with placing me for adoption. She explained that it was not easy for her and she felt a lot of pain and sadness throughout the last twenty-eight years when she thought about me. She told me in a text message that her "sadness is changing to happy thoughts. The fact that you are so open is making this easier." This comment allowed me to continue to be vulnerable with her and share personal information because it was helping her to open up and share with me. As we continued our talks we were both honest and genuine in our communication. We told each other about the good and bad in our lives which helped bring us closer. Since I was able to be open with her, she was able to trust me and open up with me.

Thinking about how I am open makes me feel like I am a welcoming person. I think being open is important when trying to form a relationship or connection with someone. It feels vulnerable to be open but when it is reciprocated by the other person it makes the feeling of vulnerability less scary and intimidating. It shows me that I can be

open and reach out to people in a way that is more genuine and honest than being closed off or reserved. Being open helps me feel more flexible when I am not only open about my own self but open to possibilities. I view myself as someone who can see multiple sides of a story or situation. I am open to multiple suggestions and possibilities. I also view myself as someone who is willing to share my life story with people without much hesitation. I think this makes me easier to connect with. I see myself as open because I have been able to share my experience of being adopted before and after reunifying with my birth mother. I have been able to be open about my thoughts and feelings about the situation in a way that has been honest and personal. I see myself as open because I do not put my needs or wants first in situations with other people. I take their needs and wants into consideration by hearing them out, using tentative language, and considering possibilities. I do my best to meet my own needs while not crushing the needs of others. This helps me connect with myself by exploring my own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and coming to a deeper understanding of myself. Realizing I am open makes me connect with others by forming deeper connections and being more empathetic with people. It is important for me to interact in this way because I believe you should treat others how you want to be treated. If I want people to be open and honest with me and form deeper, more meaningful relationships I also need to be open and honest with them. If I want my needs to be considered and attended to, I also need to attend and consider other people's needs and be open to other possibilities. I like being open with people by sharing my life and being open to possibilities. I think it is part of what makes me a good therapist. Personally it helps me feel more confident in myself knowing that I can be open and vulnerable and be accepted for who I am.

Thinking about how I am genuine makes me feel caring. I care about being honest and sincere. I think being genuine is important when establishing a relationship with someone. It feels authentic to be genuine. It shows me that there is no shame in being your true self. Being genuine helps me feel like I am being true to myself and not living a lie. I view myself as someone who is open and willing to share with others. I think this makes me able to connect with people and have good relationships. I see myself as genuine because I try to be human in my interactions, meaning that I try to express my feelings in a sincere way but also try to hear other people's feeling in a sincere and thoughtful way. I interact with others in a genuine way by being honest and taking accountability for my life. This helps me connect with others by being vulnerable. It is important for me to interact in this way because it is how I would want others to interact with me. I do not like when someone is fake or when someone lies. As humans, we all lie and make mistakes and I understand that no one is perfect and I will be hurt by people. However, when it becomes a pattern or habit in a relationship I tend to get uncomfortable and no longer tolerate it. I feel like it is imbalanced and unfair if I am being open, honest, and genuine and the other person is not. Being genuine makes me feel satisfied knowing that I can be myself and I am proud of being myself.

### **I am Respectful**

Throughout this reunification I have been respectful of everyone involved. I respected my birth mother from the very beginning by expressing to her in an email that I was okay if she did not want to have a relationship by stating:

If this is all you provide I will be happy with that and will leave you alone. If you do not wish to have a relationship with me, I completely understand that and will respect that. If you are open to talking more I would look forward to that. I also

know that you may need time to process all of this, possibly discuss it with others, and decide what is best for you.

I did not want to pressure her into something she was not ready for. I wanted her to feel comfortable. I made this statement because since she had not reached out to me I had no idea how she was feeling. I considered many possibilities and wanted to honor wherever she was at.

Eventually, my birth mother was able to contact my birth father to let him know she had found me and to see if he wanted to meet me. As she waited for his response she checked in on how I was doing with this new development. I texted her:

I also understand that you guys chose a closed adoption so me coming into your lives is not something that was ever planned before so I have to respect that as well as if he doesn't want to be a part of it.

As much as it would have been nice to meet my birth father and have closure with that side of my biological family, it was something that I did not feel entitled to. They signed up for a closed adoption and I respected that decision because they could have chosen to abort me instead. I was okay with not having communication or contact with my birth father because he had already given me enough. He created me and gave me life. I did not feel like he owed me anything and therefore I was able to respect his decision with communication and contact.

Thinking about how I am respectful makes me feel proud. I think being respectful is part of being a good person. It feels comforting to know that I can respect people and not put them in uncomfortable situations by pushing the boundaries. It shows me that I can keep a balance between my own needs and wants but also the needs and wants of others. I view myself as someone who does not want to cause problems for someone. I think this makes me a caring person. I want to add positive and helpful things to



someone's life and not interfere in a negative way. I see myself as a respectful person because I think about how someone may feel based on my actions. I consider their perspective and try to put myself in their shoes. Realizing I am a respectful person makes me connect with myself by appreciating the kindness in myself. This helps me connect with others by understanding that everyone deserves respect. It is important for me to be respectful because I do not want to cause harm to anyone. I want people to be happy and to feel loved. Without love and respect, I probably would not have been the person I am today. Being respectful to others helps me feel confident in myself and satisfied with myself that I can bring a little more good into the world by small gestures that show respect. It shows that I value human connection because if you are not respectful you hinder yourself from forming a positive connection with someone.

### **I am Supported**

Throughout this reunification process, I have been supported by so many people. My parents, my boyfriend, and my close friends have stood by my side every step of the way. They reached out to me by phone to see what new things happened and to see how I was doing. My mother texted me while I was waiting to hear a response to my emails stating, "How are you feeling about all of this?" When my birth mother first responded to my email, I told my mother and she asked me what I was feeling and stated "I'm very happy for you." My best friend helped me through the beginning stages of messaging her and helped me feel confident with my messages to her. She stated in a text message to me, "I love you so much so like I can't even imagine how you're feeling. Like I'm feeling all the joy you are!" As I continued to share updates with her she texted me, "I'm glad that it's positive for you. I'm so happy for you." Having my parents' and friends'

support was important to me and made the reunification process easier. I could rely on them for guidance and their words of encouragement helped me keep moving forward.

There were many other people beyond my immediate family and close friends that reached out to tell me how happy they were for me and how they loved hearing my story. Some comments on social media stated, "I love following your story as I'm about to embark on the journey of adopting my two foster children!", "Wow!!! This is so wonderful I'm so happy for you", "Congratulations", and "What a beautiful reunion." I expressed my gratitude through social media posts stating, "Thank you to everyone who has reached out and been supportive" and "Thank you everyone for all the love and support for both Amy and I." Having so many people be a part of this reunification has been special. It has allowed me to take risks and continue to grow my relationship with my birth mother.

Thinking about how I am supported makes me feel loved. I think having support from others helps me feel accepted and like I am on the right path. It feels encouraging to be supported. It shows me that other people care about me and that I have an impact on them. Being supported helps me feel grateful. I view myself as someone who receives a lot of support from others but also gives a lot of support back to others. I think this makes me well-balanced, a good therapist, and helps keep me sane. I do not give all of myself to others to the point of exhaustion without also filling my own cup and accepting help and support from others. My parents support my relationship with my birth mother. My birth mother cares about our relationship and my goals in life by encouraging me and congratulating me on my accomplishments, as do my parents. Friends and extended family have all expressed support, happiness, and love surrounding my reunification by

meeting my birth mother and sending messages to us through text and social media. Knowing that I am supported by so many people helps me to interact with others in a positive way. It helps me deepen my connections with people. This allows me to continue trusting myself to keep going for my goals. Even if I have doubts in life or make mistakes, I have people who support me no matter what. Realizing I am supported makes me connect with others by being appreciative. It helps me to give back and reciprocate. It is important for me to do this because as they say “it takes a village.” We have to help each other. We can’t just take everything for ourselves. It shows me that I value community.

### **I am Loved**

“Love” was the word that came up the most on my timeline. A word search of “love” showed 36 results while most other words that I chose to identify with showed an average of 2 to 6 results. And in most of those results it was a word that was truly meant as a deep, caring love, not one that is just thrown around without any true meaning behind it. After meeting my birth mother’s family I wrote two social media posts stating, “Love is the greatest gift that one generation can give to another . . . Our hearts are full” and:

To be brave is to love unconditionally without expecting anything in return. Never would I ever expected to not only meet my birth mother but then all of her family and be loved and welcomed by them as well.

A visualization of these are presented in Figure 10 and 11.



Figure 10. Social media post



Figure 11. Social media post

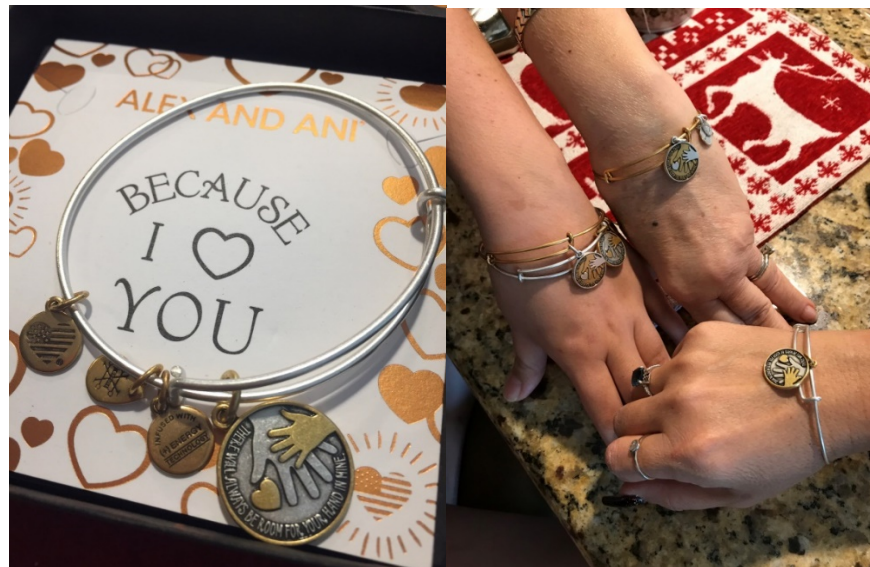
Family and friends replied to my posts stating, “It’s hard not to love you”, and “Such beautiful, strong, and loving women.” These expressions conveyed that people

care about me. The best gift was that they accepted me for who I was and welcomed me with open arms. They were warm and inviting and that is all I could have asked for.

Love was shown to me beyond just words but also through gifts. My birth mother's mother wrote a beautiful letter to my mother for Christmas and included a poem that she had created on the day I was born. In the letter it read:

I spent most of 48 hours in the nursery with your sweet baby. I got to feed her, rock her, sing to her, change her, comfort her . . . My feelings were more that I would take care of her for you . . . Thank you for sharing her back with us. So much love – so much strength . . . You know that the more people that love her the better . . . When we first hugged in September I felt that the circle was certainly unbroken.

Along with the touching letter she gifted matching bracelets to my mother, my birth mother, and me with a charm on it that read, “There will always be room for your hand in mine.” The packaging in the box it came in stated “Because I <3 (love) you.” A visualization of this is presented in Figure 12. The letter, poem, and bracelets were thoughtful and meaningful and were all signs that I was loved. The amount of affection expressed through these items brought many happy tears to my eyes.



*Figure 12. Bracelets*

For Christmas, my birth mother's mother also sent me Christmas gifts and letters. The gifts were representative of traditions she did with her other grandchildren such as reading books together and an advent calendar. A visualization of this is presented in Figure 13. These letters and gifts showed me how much she thought about me and wanted to include me in her life. She took time to put these gifts together and wrote letters explaining the meaning behind them. Her actions showed me that I was admired by her and someone special to her.

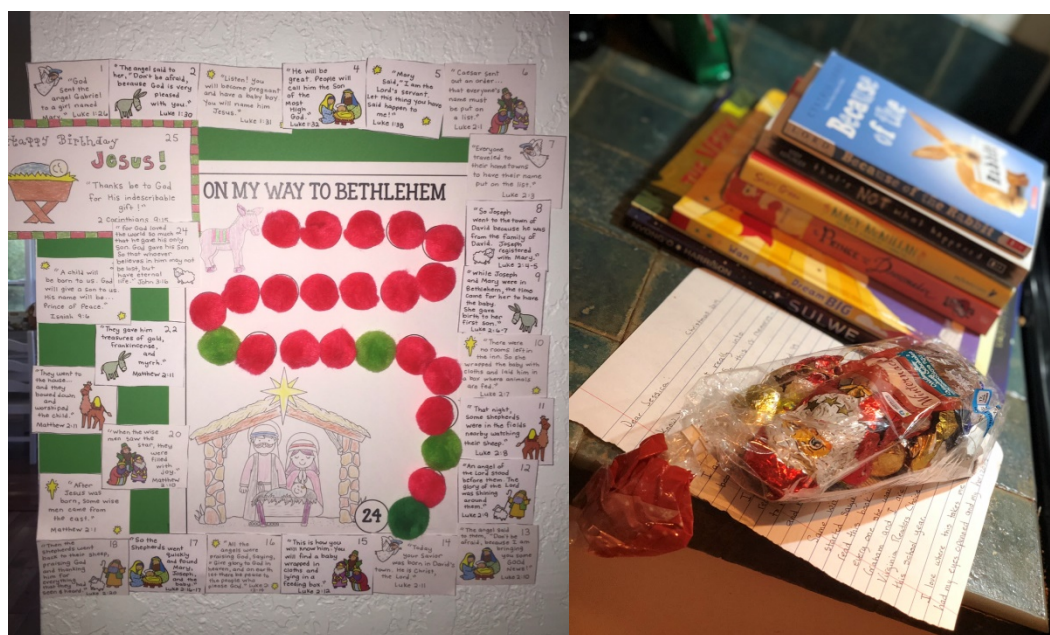


Figure 13. Christmas gifts

Thinking about how I am loved makes me feel supported. I think a lot of the love I have received is the type of unconditional love that is deep rooted. It allows me to connect with those who love me in a meaningful way. It feels wonderful, amazing, and reassuring to be loved, especially by people I care about. It shows me that I have people who care about me, support me, and want to be in my life. Being loved by so many helps me feel accepted and special. I view myself as someone who is very lucky to be loved by so many people. I think this makes me a happier person knowing that I am surrounded by

so much love. I see myself as loved because I am often told it and shown love through actions and gifts. Understanding how much I am loved helps me be grateful and appreciative of all I have. It allows me to connect with others by wanting to share that love and spread it. Being so loved by others tells me that I am a good person with a lot of good qualities to love. It brings me confidence in myself knowing that I am loved for who I am.

### **I am Lucky and Blessed**

As I look back on the events of my reunification a lot of things stand out to me and make me feel lucky and blessed. First, the timing of all of this was during a good point in my life. I was stable, ready, and able to embark on this intense, emotional journey. I couldn't have asked for better timing as I had a good job that allowed me flexibility in my schedule, I was settled in to a routine with graduate school, I had a secure relationship with my boyfriend for support, and I felt independent yet supported from my parents. Second, the fact that I was able to be matched with my birth mother when I was not even searching, contact her, meet her, and establish a relationship with her has been more than I could have ever hoped for. Third, I am fortunate that my parents were open to the reunification process and were also able to meet and establish a relationship with my birth mother and her friends and family. This has made my reunification process easier as I have had them by my side supporting me and enjoying the memories being made. Finally, even though I have not been able to reunify with my birth father there have been steps taken that I consider to be a blessing. Since my birth father has a very common name and my birth mother had not kept in touch with him, it was a miracle that my birth mother was able to find his contact information and speak to

his parents. Through a conversation with his parents my birth mother was able to find out that he is married and has a daughter. Thankfully, his parents stayed true to their word and passed the message onto my birth father who returned my birth mother's call. While he did not want to contact me or meet me, he at least informed her of that so I did not have to keep wondering and waiting. He also provided her with his medical history. It would have been nice to meet him face to face and have more information from him but I feel fortunate enough to have the information that I have on him. It is more than I could have ever asked for and for that I am thankful.

Thinking about how I am lucky makes me feel grateful and blessed. I think a lot of my life can be described as lucky but I do not think it is solely luck. I think a lot of the blessings and good things in my life have happened because of intentions. My birth mother prayed for me, her mother prayed for me, and my parents prayed for me. While I am not extremely religious I cannot help but attribute the luck in my life to the power of prayer and the influence of a higher power. At the same time, a part of it does seem to be luck. It was by chance that my birth mother and I both did the same DNA kit. It was by chance that we both did not select for our connections to be private. It feels unbelievable at times to be so lucky. It shows me that I have a lot to be thankful for. It confirms that I can continue to trust in the timing of things and sometimes closed doors are opportunities for bigger doors to open in the future. Being lucky helps me feel safe, like everything will work out how it is supposed to. It helps me to further believe in the power of positive energy and thoughts. If I am able to think positive and put good intentions out for myself it will come in time. It has helped me to be more mindful and grateful and I have been able to practice more meditation, mindfulness, and gratitude. Realizing I am lucky makes



me connect with others by helping them to see the other side of things. I am able to point out that no one knows the future but we can focus on the possible positive outcomes to live life with a little more ease. This is something I do with both friends and clients. It is important for me to interact with people in this way because it is something I truly believe in. We can prepare for the worst but hope for the best. Being lucky helps me to feel confident that things will work out for me. If I do not get something that I want, I am able to trust that something better will come instead.

Thinking about how I am blessed makes me feel grateful. I think I have been blessed throughout my entire life. It feels humbling to be blessed. It shows me that I have a lot to be thankful for. It shows me that I am more fortunate than others. Being blessed helps me feel like I need to continue living my life, make something out of it, and continue enjoying all of my blessings to the fullest. Realizing I am blessed brings me feelings of joy and happiness. It makes me want to share that joy and happiness with others. Being blessed brings a huge sense of satisfaction to my life, knowing that I have so much to be thankful for. It shows me that I value happiness. It makes me feel special when I look at how blessed my life is.

### **I am Grateful, Thankful, and Appreciative**

Throughout the events of my reunification I have expressed gratitude in different ways to different people. On Mother's Day, I texted my birth mother, "I wanted to take the time today to thank you for making one of the hardest decisions of your life. . . . I am so thankful to have found you and have this beautiful relationship develop." While we were planning for them to come down to meet my extended family for Christmas, I texted my birth mother, "So excited and so thankful you guys are taking the time to come down

for the holidays . . . I really do appreciate it.” For my birth mother’s birthday, I texted her “I’m so grateful that you were born and wish I could be with you to celebrate!” On social media, I have written posts to all my friends and family stating things such as, “I am truly grateful for the openness, acceptance, and kind words I have received!”, “I have always been thankful towards her for choosing to place me up for adoption, as it has blessed me with amazing, loving parents”, and “I am so thankful that my birth mother and her husband have been so open and receptive to both me and my parents.” These words of appreciation show that I do not take what has happened for granted. I am aware of the amount of love, support, and acceptance I have received and it only feels right to acknowledge it.

Thinking about how I am thankful and grateful makes me feel special because I have so much to be thankful and grateful for. I think part of being thankful and grateful is being able to see the good in things. I believe that I am an optimist. Not only can I see the good in things but I appreciate the good. It feels refreshing to be grateful. It brings an energy and light into my life like a breath of fresh air. It also brings happy tears to my eyes. In the last year I have practiced meditation and mindfulness. A lot of this includes gratitude. There have been moments while doing a guided meditation where I pay attention to the small and big things in my life that are so special and which I am so grateful for that it creates an energy that is light and happy and is so powerful that happy tears form in my eyes. For example, there was a mindful movement meditation I attended and the instructor had us bring our attention to our feet. She had us thank our feet for all the places they have taken us, for the people they have allowed us to meet. This brought me to think of how my feet have taken me to meet my birth mother and her friends and

family. As I focused my attention on this my eyes became watery with happy tears. It shows me that I am aware of my blessings in life and that I am not spoiled and ignorant of the gifts that have been given to me in life. Being someone who is thankful helps me feel aware and alive. The fact that I am able to acknowledge the good in my life helps me to feel alive in a way that I can appreciate my life as it is now but also for what it may be in the future. I am able to be mindful of my own experiences but also experiences that occur around me and outside of me. Gratitude allows me to connect with others by extending that love and appreciation with them. Telling others I am thankful for them and appreciate them helps me to connect with myself and with them. It is a way to reach out and bring a little more light into the world.

### **New Roles**

Throughout this analysis, I have been able to identify different personality traits that were established pre-reunification and enhanced post-reunification. These personality traits have helped me navigate different roles in my life. Some of these roles have been present pre-reunification but emerged more vividly post-reunification. The following is a description of these different roles and how they impact my relationship with myself and others.

#### **I am Korean-English American**

Thinking about how I am Korean-English American makes me feel proud. I think finally knowing my background has brought a sense of closure to my life. I can finally answer the question of “Where did I come from?” It shows me where I came from, my ancestry, and heritage. I view myself physically as more Korean than English but more culturally English and American than Korean. I did not grow up surrounded by Korean

culture. The first time I remember having Korean barbeque was during my Master's program for a project on my cultural identity. My parents tried to bring in Korean culture during my childhood such as having kimchi present for Christmas but it was not something I took to and therefore did not stay present in my life. Korean culture was not shunned or portrayed as something to be ashamed of in my life, it just was not overtly present in my life. While I do have Asian and Korean features I have also been mistaken as Hispanic, Hawaiian, and other Asian nationalities. I grew up in a predominately white-middle-class neighborhood and school. This is why culturally I identify as American with some Hispanic influence due to my mother. Holidays would feature Cuban and Hispanic cuisine but also mix in some Italian and American cuisine. I like being able to identify as Korean-English American now. It shows that I am a mix of cultures and I can be proud about each one.

### **I am a Granddaughter**

Thinking about how I am a grandchild makes me feel loved. I think being a grandchild, for me, is different than it is for most other people. It feels strange but comforting to be a grandchild. It shows me that no matter the time or circumstances I have been loved and cared for by grandparents. Being a grandchild helps me feel like a part of a family. I view myself as someone who is adored by her grandparents. I think this makes me feel more loved and connected. I see myself as a grandchild because I remember small moments with my maternal grandparents and my mother has always reminded me of how much they loved me and how they would have done anything for me. I see myself as a grandchild because I now also have another set of maternal grandparents through my birth mother. I am my birth mother's mother's first grandchild.

She held me and took care of me in my first three days of life. She created a beautiful poem because of me. Realizing I come from these past generations helps me connect with myself by appreciating what was built for me and established for me before I could even appreciate it and acknowledge it. Recognizing that I am a granddaughter makes me connect with others, such as my grandmother and my family, by creating memories and establishing connections of unconditional love.

### **I am a Half-sister**

Thinking about how I am a half-sister makes me feel conflicted. I think it is odd to know that someone shares half of my DNA besides my birth parents. At the same time I think it is awesome and a gift. It feels weird to be a half-sister because I have never been a sister to anyone in my life, even more so a big sister, which I believe has more responsibility. I have no idea if my half-sister even knows about me but if she does and was open to meeting me and starting a relationship, I would be open to it. It makes me feel nervous to think that this could happen because it brings in a different dynamic to reunification. With my birth mother, it was easier to connect because she did not have any other children. I think it is simpler because it is one less person to consider. However, if my birth mother did have children I would have been open to meeting them and forming a relationship with them. But since this is not the case, I have not been in this position before so it is new and intimidating. We may be complete strangers and have nothing in common besides shared genetics. If my birth father did not marry an Asian woman I find it unlikely that we will share many physical similarities but I could be wrong. It also makes it complicated because I believe her mother is not thrilled with the idea of me, based on what my birth father's parents reported to my birth mother. I would not want to

be a part of a malicious or difficult relationship or reunification. I would not want to cause harm to anyone, so if her mother would not want her to meet me I would respect that. However, if or when she was eighteen and decided to reach out to me on her own I would be open to that. Being a half-sister shows me again that labels only go so far. There is no relationship behind this label, no connection, and no meaning. However, this could change in the future. I still view myself as an only-child because this is how I was raised. Yet, if relationships were formed in the future this label could have more meaning in my life.

### **Additional Perspectives**

As part of my analysis I interviewed my parents, my birth mother and her husband, my boyfriend, and my birth mother's mother because they have been a part of my story and could contribute information about my identity that could confirm, complement, or reject the data I had collected. Through these interviews I was able to further confirm and complement the findings from the data because the interviewees' statements were very similar to my own views and were statements I agreed with. I believe these interviews improve the subjectivity of the findings because rather than having only my own perception I now have the perception of others to complement and confirm my findings.

Overall, the interviewees thought the reunification was positive for me and everyone involved. There were statements made such as "Everyone's happy all around," "I think this was a very easy process, amazingly easy," "A great all-around experience," "I think it's made all of our lives better," and "It was seamless. It was super easy." These statements allowed me to confirm that this experience really was amazing.

While the reunification was a positive experience it also affected me in a helpful way. My parents described how the reunification made my “life fuller” and “more whole as a person.” My parents stated, “You found out who you are” and “where your roots are from.” Other interviewees made similar statements such as “It’s closed a lot of loops,” “It’s completed that circle,” “puts your mind at ease,” “fills in a lot of gaps,” “answered a lot of questions,” and “You felt a little more complete.” While I had felt like I had a secure identity, there was always a missing part. This reunification allowed me to fill in that missing part, find answers to questions, and develop a more secure and complete identity. The reunification was described as “life changing” and “a relief to have that piece of the puzzle of who you are and where you came from.” Since others have noticed these things about me, I am able to more clearly acknowledge them for myself. This allows me to further appreciate the benefits I have received as a result of this reunification.

The reunification has also allowed me to create more relationships with both family members and friends. Throughout the interviews, comments were made such as “You have like an extended family now,” “You now have a whole new family that you have been able to fit right into,” and “You have a whole other set of family. You have more of them now. A lot more. A lot more family.” It was pleasing to hear how the people closest to me also acknowledged my expanded family. They could see how I accepted my birth mother and her family as my own family and vice versa. This helps me to feel connected with all members of my family.

While the reunification has been seen as a positive experience that has allowed me to connect with more family, it has not seemed to change me. Those that knew me

before the reunification, such as my parents and my boyfriend, did not think it had much of an impact on my identity. They made statements such as “I think you’re still you, I think you’ve always been that way,” “I think you’re still Jessica, but you were all that before. That hasn’t changed,” and “I don’t think you’ve changed that much at all.” While there may not have been a noticeable change to others, I do not view this as a negative or as something that would reject the data. I think this further enhances the recursion of pre and post reunification. It shows that who I was before reunification continued after reunification. For me, I believe that not changing is a positive thing as it shows I have been able to remain consistent with who I am. I have not changed but have further grown in who I am.

When I asked interviewees to describe me, most mentioned characteristics such as “intelligent,” “thoughtful,” “great personality,” “level-headed,” “marvelous,” “remarkable,” “well rounded,” “very nice,” “social,” and “likeable.” However, as it pertained to the reunification and what qualities they noticed in me, interviewees stated I am “not judgmental,” “warm,” “thoughtful,” “caring,” “open-hearted,” “compassionate,” “welcoming,” “loving,” “accepting,” and “kind.” They felt that I was “willing to ask the difficult questions” and “willing to share” my life with them which was “refreshing.” They felt like I had “courage” because they “didn’t know if everyone could be able to do that” in terms of reaching out to their birth mother and opening the possibility for reunification. I was also described as “willing to accept her (my birth mother) for who she is and the decisions she made.” I am viewed as “treating people with dignity and respect” and “willing to better understand.” I “wasn’t judging any of” them and had “a very accepting manner.” I was “very understanding” because there were “a lot of



variables” that I “took into account.” These statements complement my characteristics of being open, genuine, and respectful.

I also asked what qualities of mine seemed to help with the reunification process. My birth mother stated “I think your compassion and caring and your open-heartedness” made the reunification process easy. My boyfriend thought my “email was really good for her (birth mother)” since it was “probably really complicated for her as well” and allowed me to show her that I “had it all together.” My birth mother’s husband described how “in each gradual email it became more and more clear to her (birth mother) that you had a good head on your shoulders and that you were just searching for answers” and “we could tell that this was a genuine reach from you to discover more about who you are.” He also thought my “ability to be able to reach out and be so understanding” helped my birth mother to respond and connect with me. It felt humbling to be acknowledged in this way. I think these statements match my views of myself as being open, genuine, and respectful.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis has allowed me to dig deeper into my own identity and helped me discover who I am and what I value. This process has solidified my identity more than it has brought about an identity change. I have been able to recognize the personality traits that were developed from my childhood and understand how they have paved a road for me throughout the reunification process. While I discovered several other personality and identity traits, I decided to only include the ones listed as they all were a part of the recursive process between pre-reunification and post-reunification. These were the ones that best described my identity before, during, and after the reunification.

As I reflect on all of these expanded identities I feel stable and secure knowing that I have a solid foundation of identity to stand on. It was not an easy process and at first I was only looking at the surface level of my identity. However, as I continued to ask myself difficult questions I was able to go deeper in my analysis and discover where these identities came from, how they impacted me, and what it truly meant for me to be me. This reunification process and analysis has allowed me to be proud of the person I am. I feel confident knowing that I have these traits to help me through any difficulties I may face in life. It is encouraging to see how everything has come full circle from my birth and adoption to my reunification. I feel complete.

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS**

In the previous chapters I have discussed my purpose and the importance of this study, the relevant literature on this subject, the methodology I used in this study, and the results of this study. This chapter includes a discussion of the current literature and how it relates to my findings. Also in this chapter, I discuss implications, suggestions for future research, and limitations of the study.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore my own development of adoptive identity through reunification with my birth mother. Qualitative research and autoethnography allowed me to explore my own experiences and relate it to the world of adoption, reunification, and identity. I discovered that who I was pre-reunification played a significant role in who I was during and after reunification. Reunification solidified my identity and provided me with a stronger sense of who I am. This has allowed me to feel more secure and confident in myself. It has also shown me that I am proud of who I am and what I value.

While I consider myself to have had a successful reunion with my birth mother, reunification did not happen with my birth father. Even though I was not reunified with my birth father, I do not view this as unsuccessful because I have been provided information about him and contact has been made with him through my birth mother. The door is now open for him and his family if they wish to establish a connection in the future. The primary identities discussed in Chapter IV may be challenged by others given this situation with my birth father. I do not view it as a challenge to my identity and do not believe it takes away from my identity because I view myself as having an

overabundance of acceptance, connection, and love with my birth mother, her husband, and her extended family and friends. I also do not believe the lack of reunion with my birth father changes my identity because from the beginning I was mainly interested in knowing what my birth parents looked like and what they were doing in life. Having a personal relationship with my birth parents was never something I felt like I desperately needed in life. I was able to obtain some of this information through my birth mother. She provided me with pictures of my birth father when they were in high school and information about him when they were together. When my birth father returned my birth mother's phone call, I was able to obtain a little more information about what his life was like now. I found out he is alive, married, and has a daughter. I also found out medical history information. This is all more than I could have asked for and therefore it did not affect me or my identity negatively. Meeting my birth father in person would likely provide more information and add to my identity but I feel confident that my identity would remain fairly stable especially since I have explored how my personality has aided me in reunification with my birth mother.

The idea of possibly reunifying with my birth father in the future allows me to view myself as someone who is hopeful and patient. Thinking about how I am hopeful makes me feel like I have good intentions for myself and for others, such as my birth father and his family. I think being hopeful keeps me going in life by being able to look forward to something. I think it helps me to focus on the good in life and in people, hoping that the best will happen. It feels encouraging to be hopeful. It shows me that good things do happen and the whole world is not against me. Realizing I am hopeful makes me connect with myself by instilling a sense of purpose in my life and a desire to

go after what I want. This helps me connect with others by allowing me to see the good in people, to be considerate of other people's needs, and to believe that people can change. It is important for me to be hopeful because without hope, life seems to fall flat. It seems to be mundane.

Thinking about how I am patient makes me feel confident in myself that I can get through difficult things calmly. I think being patient has allowed me to manage any anxieties in my life with ease. It feels comforting to be patient, knowing that with patience things will come in time. It shows me that I am a relaxed person and can be calm during stressful times. I view myself as someone who believes that things will work out how they are supposed to and being patient is a way to let things work out and trust that process. I think this makes me confident in myself and my own choices but also in the world and the universe. If something is meant to be it will happen when it is supposed to. If it doesn't happen, it was not supposed to happen. Being patient allows me to understand what I can control in a situation and what I cannot. Being patient helps me to connect with myself and ground myself. This then allows me to be a grounding presence and sense of calm for others. It is important for me to be patient because it helps me to manage my own stress but also the stress of others. I think this is what makes me a good friend but also a good therapist. It also helps me to manage the situation with my birth father and view it in a positive light.

### **Current Literature and Results**

The current literature predominately focused on open adoptions and identity development. There was a gap in the literature as it pertained to closed adoption, genealogy, and the effects of these on adoptive identity and reunification. Also, a

majority of the literature was a result of researchers studying adoptees from an outsider perspective. This study added a different perspective, an insider perspective, to the current research and literature as I researched my own identity development as an adoptee that has gone through the reunification process. My reunification process allowed me to gain information and answer questions that helped me to better understand myself. As discussed in the current literature, after a reunification, adoptees can reevaluate their identity with the new information to help develop a broader and deeper view of themselves (Henze-Pederson, 2019; Kiecolt & LoMascolo, 2003; Palmer, 2011; Schooler & Norris, 2002).

Adoptees tend to experience adoption in a positive way when they see themselves as being a part of a family and experience family life (Soares et al., 2019). I have been able to see myself as an included member of my adoptive family which has helped contribute to my sense of connectedness and acceptance with my adoptive family. A big part of this inclusion can be attributed to the fact that I was able to “pass” as White and fit in with my adoptive family racially and culturally (Nelson, 2016). This is typical as Palmer (2011) discovered that most Korean adoptees were able to naturally accept the White culture of their adoptive family. I also believe that I was able to accept my adoptive family and their culture because they accepted me for who I was. Since I was an infant when I was adopted, it was easier for me to accept my adoptive family and their culture since I did not have knowledge of anything different. Most adopted infants tend to accept their adoptive family and their place in the family even if they do not fully understand their adoption (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

The literature recommended adoptive parents talk with adoptees in a respectful way to help create a secure foundation for identity (Blomquist, 2009; Nydam, 2007; Soares et al., 2019). Further, adoptees were better able to manage uncertainties with their adoption when adoptive parents could share their adoption story and normalize the adoption (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010). When adoptive parents can have open communication with their adopted children about adoption, adoptees are more likely to view their adoptive identity as “normal,” a natural process, and something they have always known about (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). My parents were able to talk with me about my adoption in a way that allowed me to feel connected, accepted, lucky, supported, loved, and respected. This fits with the findings (see Blomquist, 2009; Nydam, 2007; and Soares et al., 2019) where adoptees whose adoptive parents talked to them about adoption openly, honestly, and respectfully viewed themselves as normal, chosen, picked, wanted, special, unique, good, lucky, fortunate, and like they belonged.

Connection has been shown to increase identity development (Josselson, 1994; Marcia, 1994). After being reunified with my birth mother I was again able to experience a connection with her and her family. I was able to gain information from my birth mother, her mother, and extended family members that allowed me to deepen my understanding of myself.

Adoptees that connected with their birth families tend to feel like they belong and are able to connect more with themselves after learning information about their adoption and background (Koskinen & Book, 2019; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). In addition, adoptees are able to thank their birth families for placing them into loving homes and

develop personal relationships with their birth families which leads them to a sense of connection and belonging (Jones, 2013; Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). I was able to convey my gratitude towards my birth mother in the very early stages of our reunion. I believe it allowed us to be open and grow closer with one another.

This study helped me recognize that I have been open and genuine with both my parents and my birth mother throughout this reunification process. From the beginning I was able to express my intentions to my birth mother in order to help her see who I was and what I wanted. Blomquist (2009) and Brodzinsky et al. (1992) found that adoptees did not want to cause harm to anyone during their search and reunification process. Adoptees were not trying to replace their adoptive family but were trying to find out information to help them better understand who they are. I was able to express to my birth mother in some of my first messages to her that I did not want to cause her any stress or pain. I told her that I was looking for answers and information but was open to sharing and connecting further if she wanted.

When I was first notified of matching with my birth mother, I quickly shared this information with my parents. I kept them informed on all the steps I was taking and each part of the reunification process. I feel like I was able to be open with my parents about all of this because I was always supported by them, especially as it related to searching for my birth parents. Passmore and Feeney (2009) found that adoptees were more likely to start the search process when they had support from others. Support from others was also found to minimize negative impacts related to search and reunification. I was supported by my parents, my boyfriend, my friends, and my extended family. They were



all eager to hear about my story of reunification and were there to provide me support and encouragement through each stage of the reunification.

Being supported by so many allowed me to feel loved, lucky, blessed, and grateful. This fits with the study by Younes and Klein (2014) in which transracial adoptees described themselves as blessed, honored, lucky, grateful, and loved. These adoptees felt grateful to experience more diversity and culture in their lives and have a greater appreciation for diversity in others. I have been very grateful for my experiences and how it has exposed me to so many different types of people. Most importantly I was connected with my birth mother and through her I was able to meet extended family.

After a reunification, birth families have expressed love for the adoptee and conveyed gratitude towards adoptive parents (Docan-Morgan, 2014). My birth mother explained in her first message to me how she thought about me every day and prayed I had wonderful parents that loved me unconditionally. Throughout our relationship she has expressed how grateful she is to my parents for giving me the world and everything I needed and more. She has also told me and shown me how much she has loved me through her words and actions such as checking in on me, sending gifts, and saying she loves me. This has contributed to my sense of being loved and has allowed me to feel lucky and grateful to have so much love surrounding me from my birth mother, my parents, my friends, and extended family. Siegel (2012a) found that adoptees felt fortunate and lucky to be placed with their adoptive parents. Their adoptive parents were loving and allowed the adoptee to better understand the circumstances of their adoption. This led adoptees to be more compassionate towards their birth parents since they could better understand that their birth parents could not parent them and picked the adoptive

parents to best fill that role. This is very similar to my experience. I understood from a very early age that my birth parents were young and not able to parent me. I knew that I had loving parents that provided me a great life. This helped me to feel lucky to have been born and blessed to have been placed with such amazing parents. I was grateful towards both my birth parents for making that decision and my parents for raising me with such love and care. Adoptees find further connection and belonging when they can thank their birth families for placing them into loving, caring homes (Jones, 2013; Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003; Passmore & Feeney, 2009).

Overall, this study has allowed me to re-discover myself. My results, the characteristics of my identity, have always been present in my life. This is shown from my pre-reunification identity. However, reunification and research has allowed me to dig deep within myself and bring these jewels of identity to the surface. I have been able to go beyond the surface level definition and descriptions of myself, almost like dusting off the dirt from the jewel with my happy tears from the reunification. My happy tears have allowed me to clearly see who I am. Passmore and Feeney (2009) discussed how reunions lead to gaining information that facilitates identity resolution and helps adoptees develop a stronger sense of belonging. I believe I have done just that.

### **Implications**

This study has produced both implications for myself, others practitioners such as family therapists, and the use of autoethnography. For myself, this study has provided me with a strong sense of who I am. This has allowed me to feel more confident with myself and others. I am able to trust that my actions are meaningful and purposeful. I do things that I believe are for my best interest and in the best interest of others. I value the well-

being of both myself and others. I care about family and community. I hold openness and honesty with high importance in relationships. I noticed that who I am stays constant and I can rely on myself as different situations occur in my life. This study has allowed me to connect deeper with myself and my loved ones such as my parents and my birth mother. I have gained a more profound sense of confidence that reassures me that I can face any difficult situation and navigate through it.

This study impacted me on both a personal and professional level. I do not believe that it necessarily changed me, but rather enhanced me. Personally, as mentioned before, I developed a stronger sense of myself. While doing the study, I was able to enhance my view of self which then impacted how I analyzed and assessed my results which led to further development of my sense of self. This sense of recursiveness was present not only in my results but also in the process itself. I was able to bring in data from the past and relate it to my present which then allowed me to look back on the past in a deeper way. This deeper sense of self allowed me to view myself as a professional in a different way. As a therapist, I believe I have improved by ability to empathize with others and remain curious about one's context. I am able to stay hopeful for a client's progress but also acknowledge their struggles and know that not everyone has a happy story like mine.

Through this study, I discovered how important openness, honesty, respect, and understanding are with an adoptee's identity development. This may be beneficial for mental health workers to keep in mind when working with adoptees, adoptive families, and birth families. From the very beginning my parents were open and honest about my adoption. They spoke about my birth parents and my adoption in a respectful way that framed them and their choice in a positive light. Therapists working with adoptive

families may benefit from encouraging adoptive parents to create adoption stories for their adopted children that describe the birth parents and adoption process in a respectful manner, as this can lead to higher self-esteem and generalized trust for the adoptee (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Therapists could help adoptive families create adoption stories that honor the birth family, the adoptee, and the adoptive parents by helping adoptive families navigate the various emotions and details related to the adoption. I believe that because my parents created an adoption story for me and talked about adoption with me from the very beginning in an honest and respectful way I was able to create a foundation upon which I could build my identity in a safe and secure way.

Therapists that work with birth families may focus on issues such as grief and loss, contact and reunification, sharing information, and managing expectations and feelings (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Lifton, 2007; Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). My birth mother went through a lifelong grief process. She expressed to me how every year during the month of my birthday which is also the same month as Mother's Day it would be a very difficult month for her. She also had the difficult decision of reaching out to me and responding to my messages as this was unknown territory for her. As we began to communicate, she was able to open up and share information related to my adoption and my birth father. We both had to then manage our expectations and feelings around my birth father and if he would be a part of this reunification. As a therapist, it would be beneficial to help birth parents to navigate the grief process beyond just the initial adoption period. Providing psychoeducation on the lifelong process of grief and how anniversaries and holidays can trigger difficult emotions and memories could help birth parents prepare to manage these situations.

Therapists could serve as a neutral and unbiased voice that can help birth parents decide what is best for them when it comes to decisions regarding contact, reunification, and sharing information. There is still a lot of stigma surrounding adoption and it is sometimes still viewed as something to be kept a secret (Henderson, 2007). Therapists can help birth families by providing a safe place to discuss and explore the difficult situations and emotions involved in adoption and reunification since it can sometimes be isolating and stigmatized.

Adoption can be described as a lifelong process (Soares et al., 2019). Identity development can also be described as a lifelong process as it is not static and constantly changes and expands through time and contexts (Berg & De Jong, 1996; Combs & Freedman, 2016; Minuchin et al., 2014; White, 2007). Part of creating a coherent sense of self involves incorporating one's past, present, and future contexts (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Marcia, 1994; Schooler, 1998; Siegel, 2012b). This study allowed me to look back on my past contexts and integrate them into my present context and include them in my future contexts. This type of identity work can be used by therapists that work with any individual but most importantly with adoptees because they have the added task of incorporating both their adoptive family and birth family into their identity (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Koskinen & Book, 2019; Schooler, 1998; Siegel, 2012b). Therapists could guide adoptee clients through exercises that allow the adoptee to examine their past such as looking through old photos, videos, gifts, and letters from both their adoptive families and birth families. If an adoptee does not have any items or information from their birth family, the exercise could focus on the adoptive family and how these items impact their identity. The adoptee could journal about the memories

these past items bring and the meaning behind them. Therapists could then help the adoptee incorporate this information into their present context and self by asking meaningful questions that relate to identity such as how does this make me feel, what does this show me, how does this make me view myself, what does this say about what I value? Looking to the future, therapists can explore different scenarios that the adoptee may encounter and how their identity and sense of self can support them through these situations.

Family therapists have described identity development as a relational, systemic process that develops out of one's relationships and interactions with others (Berg & De Jong, 1996; Combs & Freedman, 2016; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Minuchin, 1969; Minuchin et al., 2014; White, 2007). Who we are involves who we are in relation to others (Minuchin, 1969). The family, parents' attitudes, and quality of family relationships are major factors that contribute to one's identity (Brodzinsky, 2011; Minuchin, 1969). I was lucky to have parents that had positive attitudes regarding adoption. We also had and have good quality relationships with one another where we can be open, honest, and respectful of each other. My extended family has provided me with acceptance, support, and love throughout my life. I consider myself to have a stable family system in which I have been able to blossom as an individual because of the connection and acceptance I received. Family therapists can help adoptees and adoptive families by addressing family dynamics, relationships, and attitudes in a systemic way that looks at the complexities of each family system. Family therapists can encourage and guide adoptive families through respectful conversations that provide space for empathy and understanding of each family member's perspective and needs. My experiences and this study have shown me the

importance of openness, honesty, and respect in adoptive families. Without these in place from my parents, I think it would have been harder for me to feel supported, loved, lucky, blessed, grateful, and appreciative. This created the foundation upon which I developed a secure identity.

While this is what worked for me, I believe it is important for therapists to remember that each adoptee, adoptive family, and birth family's experience will be different. Adoption can affect all members in different ways at different times (Soares et al., 2019). Each person's life experiences will be unique and influenced by individual factors such as temperament and self-esteem, social factors such as relationships with peers and others, and cultural factors such as family beliefs, backgrounds and community values (Brodzinsky, 2011; Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant et al., 2007; Marcia, 1994; Soares et al., 2019; Triseliotis, 2000). The above are general suggestions for family therapists and other practitioners that work with members of the adoption triad. However, these should be modified to fit each individual's needs and contexts (Grotevant et al., 2007; Porch, 2007).

I chose to do an evocative autoethnography as this helped create a sense of understanding and empathy for the culture of adoption and reunification as it relates to identity. While my autoethnography was evocative in nature, it was also therapeutic. I was able to get in touch with myself and understand how I relate to others. It was an emotional but rewarding process. By developing a better understanding of my identity, I was able to feel more secure and confident in myself. This study shows the power of a therapeutic autoethnography and how it can help researches connect with themselves and grow as a person. This implies that therapeutic autoethnography can be used outside of a

purely research assignment, such as a dissertation. Therapeutic autoethnography can be used in therapy training programs to help future therapists explore the self-of-the-therapist, diversity and culture issues, and personal and professional biases. By collecting different data to help them be curious about themselves and asking questions similar to the ones I used in this autoethnography, students and therapists can explore who they are in relation to their therapeutic, cultural, and personal contexts.

### **Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore my own development of identity through reunification with my birth mother. I used autoethnography to explore my own experiences related to adoption, reunification, and identity. My experience of reunification was an overall positive one. My story included having a secure identity pre-reunification, reunifying with my birth mother unexpectedly through a DNA website, developing a close relationship with my birth mother, and discovering a deeper sense of self post-reunification.

This study is missing the voices of others. Although this study was corroborated by those close to me, it is limited to my own experience. There is a need for other perspectives to provide a broader, more diverse experience. Other perspectives that could be addressed include adoptees who were actively searching and reunified with a birth parent, adoptees who had an unsuccessful reunion, adoptees who were reunified with both birth parents, adoptees who had an insecure identity prior to reunification, and adoptees who found out about their adoption later in life and/or unexpectedly. The following expands upon these ideas.



I was not actively searching for my birth mother or birth parents at the time I was notified of the connection through the DNA website. It could be beneficial to study adoptees who are actively searching and how they are affected by a reunification. They could possibly have higher expectations for the reunification since they are purposefully searching. The adoptee's identity could become more secure or insecure depending on how the reunification matched up to the adoptee's expectations.

As previously mentioned, I consider myself to have had a successful reunion with my birth mother since we have continued to stay in touch and meet up with each other and our families. In order to provide a wider range of experiences, future studies could focus on adoptees who did not have a successful reunion with a birth parent.

Unsuccessful reunions could include those that were rejected or denied any information or contact, those who met their birth parent in person but then had no future contact, and those whose expectations were not met through reunification. It would be interesting to study how these types of reunions affected the adoptee's identity and sense of self and how it compares to those that have a successful reunion.

My experience of reunification only included my birth mother as my birth father was not open to meeting me at this time. While I was provided a decent amount of information on my birth father, future research could explore the effects on an adoptee's identity when reunified with both birth parents. It would also be interesting to explore when an adoptee's birth parents are still in a relationship together upon reunification. The different dynamics in relationships with both birth parents could affect one's sense of self as more information could be provided that could add to one's identity.

I consider myself to have had a secure identity prior to reunification. Therefore, future research could explore adoptees who have an insecure identity prior to reunification. It would be interesting to see how a successful reunion influences an adoptee's insecure identity. If the reunion affected the adoptee's identity in a positive way, it would be helpful to understand what factors contributed to the adoptees more secure identity.

This study has shown me that I highly value openness and honesty. These are two qualities that my parents provided me with from the very beginning. They were always open and honest with me and my adoption was never a secret. I believe this had a direct impact on my identity and sense of security growing up. Future research could be directed towards adoptees that were lied to about being adopted and found out about being adopted later on in life or were told about their adoption in an unexpected way such as being told out of anger. Researchers could study the effects these types of disclosures have on an adoptee's identity, how a reunification changes that identity, and what factors contributed to that change.

### **Limitations**

Using autoethnography as a research method is limited because I have only explored my own personal experiences. Data has been analyzed through my own personal perception and the results have been interpreted through my own values. This study is missing the opinions of others that have gone through similar experiences. It also focuses on my successful reunion with my birth mother and does not focus on other types of reunions such as unsuccessful reunions. This study is also limited to adoptees as it does not include an in-depth study of the adoptive parents' or birth parents' experiences.

## Conclusion

This study allowed me to explore my own experiences with reunification with my birth mother and how these contributed to my identity. Through the use of autoethnography I was able to come to a deeper understanding of myself and who I really am. This process showed me that reunification with my birth mother helped solidify my identity rather than change my identity. What stood out most to me was the sense of recursion and the connection between myself pre and post reunification. I was able to understand what factors, both internal and external, contributed to my sense of identity. This study provides family therapists with a better understanding of what factors may contribute to a successful reunification and a secure sense of identity with adoptees. It also shows how certain personality traits helped me navigate different roles and relationships. Overall, this process has been an introspective one for myself. I have been able to dive deep into my personal identity and explore who I really am. It has been an emotional process filled with happy tears. To end, I have included the poem my birth mother's mother wrote for me while taking care of me in the hospital nursery during my first three days of life as it seems to perfectly capture my adoption experience and always brings happy tears to my eyes.

Go sweet baby to the arms that await you. I can tell you from experience that they already love you. Help them to make a family. They will adore you, cherish you, and be grateful that you made them parents. They will protect you with their very lives. They will nurture you, provide for you, educate and guide you so that you grow up to be the strong woman you are meant to be. But as you go, take a little of us with you. Not enough to keep you from bonding to your parents but enough to let you know you were loved from the beginning. Not enough for you to search obsessively for your birth mother but enough to reassure you that you were not given away but carefully and prayerfully placed in your real home. – Lynn Gray



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### **Biographical Sketch**

Jessica Popham was born and raised in Florida. She has been living in South Florida for the last decade. She attended Florida International University where she received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. She then pursued her graduate career at Nova Southeastern University and received her Master of Science Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy. Jessica continued in graduate school to pursue her Ph.D. in Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University. Jessica is a licensed marriage and family therapist in the state of Florida. She has experience working in community mental health serving individuals, couples, and families. She also conducts groups for adult sexual offenders and is very passionate about working with this population. Jessica has presented on her work with this population at a state conference and in Master classes at Nova Southeastern University. Jessica has published on different topics in the marriage and family therapy field such as qualitative research, recursive frame analysis, and the Mental Research Institute.