

2018

A Phenomenological Exploration of Parent Experiences that Influence Positive Adoption Outcomes

Deena Shelton
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Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

A Phenomenological Exploration of Parent Experiences that Influence Positive Adoption

Outcomes

by

Deena Shelton

MA, Stephen F. Austin State University, 2009

BS, LeTourneau University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

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August 2018

Abstract

Children who age out of foster care face adjustments and mental health issues at higher rates than their peers, but those who are adopted have the opportunity to heal from previous trauma and experience better outcomes. To create healthy family systems for adopted children, adoptive parents need support and guidance as they personally adjust and help their children adjust to a new family system. Previous research has focused on child identifiers rather than on the broader family system in efforts to understand adoption success and failure. In this transcendental phenomenological study, adoptive parents provided their lived experiences of support during the adoption process. The results were analyzed using Giorgi, Giorgi, and Morley's descriptive phenomenological psychological method and the results were framed using an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. The results offered experiences of support at all 4 levels of the ecological model and provided a framework to use for future research to understand the influences of the sources of support and a guideline for agencies and counselors to use when serving adoptive families. The results can aid in the proactive development of training and support services for adoptive families and provide information for professionals by offering insight into the nontraditional structure of adoptive families. This information may also be used to inform counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs that offer the marriage, couples, and families specialization.

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Dedication

To Ben—your heart for our children before we knew them changed me. Your willingness to self-reflect and change yourself to be a better parent inspires me. And your support of my work to help other adoptive parents experience the joy we have means more than you will ever know.

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I am so grateful and humbled by the opportunity to complete a doctoral program and would not be successful without many key players in this process. First, to my family—my husband Ben and children, Banks and Everly--you have been in the trenches with me during this process and have supported me in more ways than I can count. Ben, your willingness to take on every chore, every errand, and every extra thing I couldn't take on because I had to write. My in-laws, Bob and Sharon, have believed in me since the day I walked into their home. I am so thankful for the countless meals and babysitting hours, but mostly for the emotional support and ownership they took for my journey.

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Finally, I am so grateful for the spiritual connection and foundation upon which I have built my life and mission. I am grateful to God for the gifts He has given me that allowed me to persist and finish this level of education. I pray that I steward this gift well, pursue excellence in my work, and direct it to serve those in need. “...And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the nonday.” – Isaiah 58:10 (NIV)

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Children who are in foster care as a result of abuse or neglect often experience negative outcomes in adulthood if they do not match with adoptive families and age out of care (Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). Zlotnick et al. (2012) found increases in the likelihood of drug use, obesity, alcoholism, smoking, mood disorders, and persistent mental or physical illnesses that render these adults unable to work. However, the behavioral, educational, and physical outcomes improve for children placed in stable, loving adoptive families (Goldman & Ryan, 2007; Helton, 2011). States generally require a 6-month waiting period between child placement and adoption finalization to allow for child and parent adjustment (McDonald, Press, Billings, & Moore, 2007). In cases when parents, children, or social workers determine that the family match is not appropriate, the children return to foster care resulting in an adoption disruption (McDonald et al., 2007).

Helton (2011) noted that as many as 25% of children placed in adoptive homes may experience an adoption disruption, and researchers have spent a significant amount of time exploring the reasons that may cause those disruptions. However, since 75% of children placed in family units succeed, there is a great opportunity to capture information regarding what works to integrate children into a family and secure a desired finalized adoption. The best way to gather that information is from the heads of the family systems, or the parents, tasked with creating a loving and supportive environment for children who have had their original family systems dissolve.

In this chapter, I will present background information related to the need for additional qualitative inquiry in adoptive parent experiences as they relate to adoption outcomes as the current body of literature available is lacking in that information. I will provide a problem statement, purpose statement, research question, theoretical framework information, and a case for the type of study I pursued. Additionally, I will define key terms, highlight assumptions related to the study, offer the scope of study, and consider limitations based on the methodology and design. Finally, I will supply a substantial case for the significance of this information as it relates to the field of counselor education and supervision.

Background

Coakley and Berrick (2008) conducted a literature review in which they explored the recent history of adoption placement and disruption rates in the United States, England, and Canada. The authors explained the mandated waiting period before adoption, provided a working definition of the term adoption disruption, and explained the 30-year history of adoption rates (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). Coakley and Berrick exhausted the literature regarding established child characteristics (i.e., gender, age, special needs, siblings, length of time in care); family characteristics (i.e., marital status, education levels of parents, parenting experience); and agency characteristics (i.e., specific services and policies) associated with disruption. Ultimately, the authors made practical suggestions to the fields of practice and research regarding adoptive placements and disruption but focused on suggestions of defining terminology for future research (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). The authors published this article 10 years ago, but it

provides a history of quantitative focus on adoption success and disruption and provided strong support for my argument for a qualitative approach. Additionally, the authors emphasized a need for policies and procedures to be grounded in research and suggested that increased connection between research and practice may improve adoption outcomes (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). Their study supported my topic by providing a literature-based need for future research to ground practice, and my study provided basic information to help practitioners train and support adoptive families.

Denby, Alford, and Ayala (2011) used qualitative, constant comparative analysis to explore the motivations, expectations, preparation, and experiences with 17 adoptive parents from nine families. They discovered the motivational themes of situational and personal experiences as well as genuine concerns for the well-being of children in foster care (Denby et al., 2011). Many themes emerged in Denby et al.'s study regarding the experience of the adoption process, but only a few are specifically related to my proposed study. They found three themes regarding the encouragement for prospective adoptive parents to complete their adoptions since not all persisted, and those themes were competency and involvement of the social worker, family and friend support, and support activities or personal counseling for the parents (Denby et al., 2011). Denby et al. encouraged future research to understand the adoption process from the perspective of the adoptive parents because their findings indicated that parental experience is influential in the outcomes as well. The authors discovered that all families shared similar frustrations, but they suggested that future research regarding parental experiences could help predict disruption before it happens (Denby et al., 2011).

Goldman and Ryan (2011) conducted a quantitative survey study that used secondary data analysis to analyze the relationship between preadoptive functioning (PAF) and postadoptive outcomes as well as the connection between child risk factors (alcohol, tobacco, or drug [ATOD] exposure; history of sexual abuse; number of placements before adoptive placement; and sex of the child) and both functioning scores. The authors substantiated previous literature regarding the connection between PAF and postadoptive adjustment (PAA), as they noted was shown in previous literature ($F[1,582] = 78,109, p = .000$). They completed a regression analysis, which indicated that prenatal ATOD exposure had a significant relationship with PAF ($F[1,615] = 11,327, p = .001$), but ATOD exposure did not have a significant relationship with PAA ($F[1,569] = 1,193, p = .28$). The authors also completed a direct effects analysis to determine if the risk factors influenced the relationship between PAF and PAA. They discovered that none of the four risk factors significantly moderated the interaction between PAF and PAA. However, upon the combination of all four risk factors, their combined experience provided a significant moderation between PAF and PAA ($\chi^2[19] = 1878, p < .001$). Goldman and Ryan concluded by suggesting that all parties should be aware of the influence of risk factors on PAF and PAA as they relate to adoption outcomes. While they made no indication of future research suggestions, the results of their study inherently suggest that future research explore the mitigating factor of adoptive family placement to further understand its influence on positive adoption outcomes (Goldman & Ryan, 2011).

Helton (2011) conducted a quantitative survey study to examine the differences in placement disruption prevalence for children based on the relatedness of caregivers and

disability status. In a nationwide sample of over 5,500 children placed outside of their homes, Helton found that 1 in 4 experienced a disrupted placement. The results from this study supported previous findings that, despite characteristics, kin-caregivers are less likely to return children to foster care (Helton, 2011). Older children were more likely than younger children to have a disrupted placement, $\chi^2(2, n = 315) = 6.30, p = .01$, and children placed with nonrelatives were more likely than children placed with relatives to experience a disruption, $\chi^2(1, n = 25.01) = 25.01, p = .001$. Of the four categories of disability (i.e., none, behavioral, nonbehavioral, multiple), there was no distinction between the categories regarding the likelihood of disruption, nor did a disability increase the likelihood of disruption (Helton, 2011). Helton suggested the results of this study would encourage more kinship placements and support for those placements, but it also provided support for additional consideration of parental factors and experiences that may help build secure placements for adopted children, as Helton clearly showed that child disability issues were not the strongest factor in placement disruption. Helton's study provided a rationale that factors beyond child characteristics influence the stability of adoptive placements. Additionally, Helton offered a current percentage of disrupted adoptive placements, which aids in the argument that the topic is relevant and significant to a marginalized population.

Kalus (2014) critically analyzed current literature in adoptive family studies and specifically challenged the credibility of the methodological practices of researchers. The author highlighted the current literature's indication of a need for adoptive family support and additional research that is grounded in systems approaches (Kalus, 2014). Studying

the adoptive family is a “methodologically complex task” due to the connection of adoptive factors, psychological factors, and external factors on its success, so Kalus suggested that researchers approach it from mixed methods results (p. 22). This suggestion specifically encourages more qualitative research because most of the research reviewed used quantitative methodologies (Kalus, 2014). This study was particularly important to my research because Kalus (2014) specifically encouraged future research that integrates systemic approaches and qualitative methods to capture a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics outside of individual variables that provide connection or indication within the system but that ignore the interworking of the complex system.

Leung, Erich, and Kanenberg (2005) used a quantitative survey method to explore adoptive family functioning with a focus on parental identifiers. The authors surveyed 86 parents and used multiple regression analysis to compare a family functioning score with other variables like “child behavior scores, special needs adoption, gay [and] lesbian headed families, age at adoption and at interview, diagnosis of disabilities, total social support score, number of previous placements, previous abuse and co-sibling adoption” (Leung et al., 2005, p. 1031). Regarding correlation scores with family functioning, Leung et al. found a positive correlation between it and child behavior scores ($r = .258, p = .000$); age of child at adoption ($r = .275, p = .000$); and child’s age at the time of the data collection ($r = .279, p = .001$). In this study, the number of previous placements was not significantly connected to family functioning (Leung et al., 2005). Leung et al. used *t* tests and found connections between family functioning and the child characteristics of

previous abuse ($t = 4.104$, $df = 199$, $p = .000$); adoption in a sibling group ($t = 4.028$, $df = 199$, $p = .000$); and had been diagnosed with a disability ($t = 3.06$, $df = 198$, $p = .003$).

There was no significant relationship between family functioning and ethnicity or gender (Leung et al., 2005). The authors found homosexual couples that adopted older children, anyone who adopted younger children, parents who adopted children with no special needs diagnosis, and those who adopted an individual child rather than a sibling group expressed better family functioning (Leung et al., 2005). The authors also found homosexual same sex couples who adopted older children, anyone who adopted younger children, parents who adopted children with no special needs diagnosis, and those who adopted an individual child rather than a sibling group expressed better family functioning (Leung et al., 2005). Though this study is nearly 15 years old, it was relevant to my research because of its specific focus on family functioning as a standard indicator of successful family situations, especially after adoptions. Leung et al.'s quantitative study offered clear indicators of issues that inhibit or support family functioning in adoptive families, but it left a gap in the qualitative understanding of adoptive family functioning during the process of adoption.

Mariscal, Akin, Lieberan, and Washington (2015) used a mixed methods approach to explore the concept of successful adoptions from the perspective of youth with foster care experience. The authors surveyed nine youth and interviewed 14 additional youth in focus groups to explore their perspectives of child, family, and system factors that influence positive adoption outcomes (Mariscal et al., 2015). Mariscal et al. used theoretical thematic analysis to filter results into a theoretical understanding, which

was a helpful starting point in using a theoretical framework to categorize results in my study. Mariscal et al. found themes related to child factors (desire to be adopted, feelings of no control, trust issues); parent factors (lack of training, commitment to the child, ability to be open and honest); and system factors (community stigma and labels, policies and structural changes in the system, challenges with mental health, and trauma information). Mariscal et al. made policy and structural suggestions for agencies and organizations that work with children in foster care and their potential adoptive families and provided an example of the ecological model as a framework for adoptive outcomes but from the perception of a different population. Their study supported my intentions to use the same framework to structure responses from the parent perspective.

Merritt and Festinger (2013) used a quantitative survey method to explore types of adoption (international, foster care, and kinship) and support services to consider their influence on positive adoption outcomes. They used comparative statistics to elaborate on types of adoptions and the services used, out of 12 previously established services (Merritt & Festinger, 2013). The services were (a) meeting with an adoption representative to discuss services, (b) child support group, (c) adult support group, (d) mental health counseling, (e) family counseling, (f) crisis counseling, (g) alcohol/drug treatment, (h) mentoring for children, (i); tutoring for children, (j) adoption classes, (k) paid child care, and (l) respite care (Merritt & Festinger, 2013). The authors provided a representation of the focus on family experiences with adoption outcomes by type of adoption and services received, but their findings were surprising regarding the high percentage of parents who did not desire most of the services offered to them after

adoption (Merritt & Festinger, 2013). The authors noted the phenomenon as a mystery, and their study serves as a foundation to encourage more qualitative research regarding the services parents do need after placement.

Timm, Mooradian, and Hock (2011) designed a mixed methods survey study to inform curriculum and support services by asking adoptive parents about their perceptions of difficulties during the adoption process. Their survey was structured to include core issues broadly accepted by the field of adoptive family studies as universal experience including loss and grief, entitlement, claiming, unmatched expectations, family integration, bonding and attachment, identity, and mastery and control (Timm et al., 2011). Timm et al. asked their participants to indicate the extent to which each area affected their adoption experience and their marriage during adoption, including whether it was a challenge or strengthened the marriage. Due to low return rates from fathers, Timm et al. focused only on mothers' experience ($N = 104$) and found that more than half of mothers indicated experiencing issues related to loss and grief (64%), unmatched expectations (59.6%), bonding and attachment (52%), and mastery and control (58.6%). The mothers indicated the same four as issues within their couple relationships, though all categories held the indication that the issues strengthened the couple in higher measures than challenged them (Timm et al., 2011). This information supported my study because the authors suggested future research consider parent perception and suggested that researchers can attain significant information from parents regarding their experiences that will help overall adoption processes and outcomes. The authors used a well-received standard of eight universally-experienced traits, though they admitted that

no research has supported that claim (Timm et al., 2011). The gap in literature suggested that more qualitative research would be beneficial to capture the true experiences and ground future quantitative and mixed methods studies.

Zlotnick et al. (2012) used a quantitative methodology to compare the mental and physical health problem prevalence rates between adults with and without foster care experience histories. They used a large sample ($N = 70,456$) from the California Health Interview Survey and discovered that 3.4% of that sample had histories of foster care interaction (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Zlotnick et al. found that adults with foster care histories had higher rates of reporting at least 1 day of mental health problems in the past 30 ($OR = 1.62$; 95% CI = 1.42, 1.85); higher rates of reporting at least 1 day of physical health problems in the past 30 ($OR = 1.62$; 95% CI = 1.44, 1.82); and higher rates of being unable to work due to mental or physical health problems ($OR = 2.47$; 95% CI = 2.13, 2.86). The authors suggested the clarity with which foster care engagement connected to mental and physical issues aligned with other research to show the heightened issues related to children who age out of care (Zlotnick et al., 2012). The information from their study provided a strong foundation to the basic need for research and attention to healthy adoptive placements and outcomes to prevent significant issues later in life for children with foster care experience.

After an exhaustive review of the literature, I located no articles that explored the parent experience with adoption and their perceptions of experiences that influenced positive results, aside from interventions due to child issues (see Leung et al., 2005). Though many researchers suggested future research focus on that topic, there were no

studies that prove it has been addressed (Kalus, 2014; Leung et al., 2005; Mariscal et al., 2015). Without this information, counselor educators and supervisors are ill-equipped to train counselors to address adoptive family needs from a perspective beyond individual characteristics or the statistical likelihood of disruption. My goal with this study was to provide a broader understanding of the lived experiences of adoptive parents so that agencies and families can redesign trainings and build better support systems for families. This information could also be used to inform the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2016) requirements for the Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling specialization. Specifically, through the results of my study, I offer information relevant to nontraditional family systems impacted by adoption, expand on the information available about the experiences of adoptive families, and provide information relevant to clinicians' abilities to foster wellness in families as they are in the process of adopting children. Additionally, the results of this study may be useful to inform counseling practice related to family intervention during the adoption process.

Problem Statement

Each year, between 415,000 and 510,000 children are in foster care in the United States, and though child protective services attempts to reunify children with their biological parents, it is not always possible (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Each year, nearly one quarter of children in foster care are adopted after parental termination, and approximately 5% (more than 20,000 individuals) exit foster care as young adults without an established, stable family placement (Child Welfare Information

Gateway, 2017). Individuals who age-out of care struggle with life adjustment and encounter physical and mental health issues at rates higher than their peers (Zlotnick et al., 2012).

Most current research related to adoption disruption and success focuses on behavioral and demographic child identifiers or parental demographics as they relate to the adoption process and outcomes (Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Helton, 2011; Leung et al., 2005). Berry, Barth, and Needell (1996) considered parent experience as it relates to positive adoption outcomes, but their research focused on satisfaction and experience with private, public, and state-based agencies. Though Berry et al. conducted their research more than 20 years ago, it was one of few studies that specifically considered the parental experience as it relates to adoption outcomes. Overall, previous literature focused attention on individual family member identifiers (i.e. age, race, child's number of placements) and perceptions of outside influencers (i.e. type of adoption agency used, interventions offered) rather than considering the family as a unit and identifying factors that impact the whole system during adoptions (Kalus, 2014). Kalus (2014) argued that previous studies have correlated adoption disruption with child characteristics but that those connections do not provide data that aids in intervention or prevention from the family system. For example, though previous research provides substantiation that older children are more likely to experience adoption disruptions, it does not offer how the family system can mitigate issues that arise during the placement timeframe (Helton, 2011). Kalus urged researchers to design studies that provide a comprehensive understanding of the family system as it relates to adoption experiences and outcomes.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand adoptive parent lived experiences that contributed to positive adoption outcomes and describe them from a socioecological perspective. I limited my sample to parents who finalized their adoptions but focused on their experiences during the placement gap between the time of child placement in the home and the finalization of the adoption. The findings from this study could be used to inform curriculum pursuant to the CACREP (2016) standards requirements for the marriage, couple, and family counseling specialization, particularly by offering information relevant to nontraditional family systems impacted by adoption, expanding on the information available about the experiences of adoptive families, and providing information relevant to clinicians' abilities to foster wellness in families as they are in the process of adopting children. Additionally, the information may be useful to inform counseling practice related to family intervention during the adoption process and relevant to practicing counselors regarding system support for families during the adoption process.

Research Question

My aim for this study was to describe the experiences of adoptive parents that they perceived as influential to their positive adoption outcome. Specifically, I hoped to uncover supportive structures from internal, familial, community or agency, and societal sources. The research question I developed to guide this study was: What are the lived experiences of adoptive parents during the time between child placement and adoption completion that they perceive affect the outcome of finalization?

Theoretical Framework

Traditional transcendental phenomenology is grounded in Husserlian philosophy, which proposes that true understanding of phenomena requires capturing the objective occurrences and the subjective meaning making of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). People experience any phenomenon or topic worth studying in reality but also construct the experience and its meaning in a subjective experience by those who are encountering it (Moustakas, 1994). What separates transcendental phenomenological approaches from other types of phenomenology is the belief that researchers can set aside personal, biased experiences to approach the topic from a fresh perspective, which allows for unadulterated data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers can use structured methods to bracket preconceptions and reduce the influence of previous experiences affecting the current observations (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Though phenomenological approaches do not require the use of additional theory within the methodological structure, theoretical lenses help guide or display the data for broader understanding or connection to respected theories (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Since Kalus (2014) suggested that future researchers explore ways to integrate systems-based methods to explore adoption experiences, I incorporated an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model to inform the interview questions and structure the results. Bronfenbrenner proposed a model that described human development beyond the individual and as the result of a complex system. Specifically, it was proposed that external systems significantly influence the individual's self-development, and all systems influence those they encompass and those that encompass

them (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Individuals experience a microsystem (family, peers, school, and work) and a mesosystem (the interaction of microsystem groups) that work in tandem to develop the individual's experience with close relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, the exosystem (community and agency influences) and macrosystem (societal and cultural experiences) affect the individual experience and are related to overall outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Governmental agencies, like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC; 2015), recognize the value of the ecological model in explaining many medical and social phenomena, so translating results into established models would be beneficial for result dissemination to governmental agencies. The CDC (2015) used a simplified concentric circle model to show the individual within a relational system, within a community system, and within a broader societal system. I used the simplified model to frame the family experience of adoption in this study since it is directly related to community and societal systems through legal and agency support.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I used a transcendental phenomenological approach, which explores information from multiple participants while requiring that researchers bracket their personal experiences and approach the topic from a fresh perspective (see Tufford & Newman, 2012). A transcendental phenomenological approach helped me achieve the goals of gathering information from the participants through open-ended questions and providing themes that explain the experiences to address my research question (see Patton, 2015). My goal was to provide a broader understanding of the general experience

of adoptive parents so that agencies and families can redesign trainings and build better support systems for families, which will provide foundational research for CACREP (2016) accredited programs. For optimum data use, an unbiased perspective was beneficial, which supported the use of an effectively executed phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994).

Definitions of Key Concepts

Adoption: The relationship established by law between a child whose biological parents' rights were terminated and a parent, parents, or family that legally bind themselves to that child as though the child was born into them (Texas Family Code, 2015).

Completion: Used interchangeably with *finalization* to describe the consummation of the adoption. Specifically, an adoption is complete or finalized when the presiding judge grants adoption to the adoptive parent(s). After the point of finalization or completion, the child has legal status equal to a natural born child within that family (Texas Family Code, 2015). However, before completion or finalization, the state retains custody of the child and adoptive parents must conform to the expectations of the state departments regarding reporting, paperwork, documentation, and case manager visits as requested.

Disruption: The return of a child to foster care after adoptive placement. This is an event that can alter the future both the child and the family involved (Mariscal et al., 2015).

Foster care: The national structure and state mandated systems of child protective services and their oversight of children who have been removed from their families of origin and placed with temporary (foster) families (CITE).

Foster to adopt: When parents foster children who may return to birth parents and consider adoption only if the parents' rights are terminated (CITE).

Placement: The time between a child's entrance into an adoptive home and the adoption finalization. According to the Texas Family Code (2015), the state regulates adoption by caregivers to include a waiting period during placement to monitor the child's success in the new family system. The minimum timeframe provided by the Texas Family Code is 6 months, but that timeframe may be longer depending on a myriad of variables related to family court proceedings.

Straight adopt: Where parents commit to adopt children whose parents' rights have already been terminated (CITE).

I used the term *adoption* to describe the relationship established by law between a child whose biological parents' rights were terminated and a parent, parents, or family that legally bind themselves to that child as though the child was born into them (Texas Family Code, 2015). The term *foster care* referred to the national structure and state mandated systems of child protective services and their oversight of children who have been removed from their families of origin and placed with temporary (foster) families. Terms used to describe adoption types include *foster to adopt*, where parents foster children who may return to birth parents and consider adoption only if the parents' rights are terminated or *straight adopt*, where parents commit to adopt children whose parents'

rights have already been terminated. The term *disruption* was defined as the return of a child to foster care after adoptive placement, and is an event that can alter the future both the child and the family involved (Mariscal et al., 2015).

I used the term *placement* to indicate the time between a child's entrance into an adoptive home and the adoption finalization. According to the Texas Family Code (2015), the state regulates adoption by caregivers to include a waiting period during placement to monitor the child's success in the new family system. The minimum timeframe provided by the Texas Family Code (2015) is six months, but that timeframe may be longer depending on a myriad of variables related to family court proceedings.

The terms *completion* and *finalization* are interchangeable and described the consummation of the adoption. Specifically, an adoption is complete or finalized when the presiding judge grants adoption to the adoptive parent(s). After the point of finalization or completion, the child has legal status equal to a natural born child within that family (Texas Family Code, 2015). However, before completion or finalization, the state retains custody of the child and adoptive parents must conform to the expectations of the state departments regarding reporting, paperwork, documentation, and case manager visits as requested.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, several assumptions guided my approach to data collection. First, I assumed that my background as a counselor and adoptive parent might increase the likelihood of participant interest and honest engagement in this project. I also assumed that adoptive parents who finalized their adoptions would be able to accurately

recount and express their lived experiences before adoption finalization after they completed the process. Another assumption was that adoption workers and adoptive parents who had engaged in the process would value the nature of this research and would support it through marketing it via their networks. Finally, I assumed that, though adoptive families are a hidden population due to the privacy of court records, I would be able to locate a reasonable sample to gather the data I sought.

Regarding the methodology I chose, I assumed that it was possible for researchers to separate themselves from a phenomenon or experience to collect the information through a fresh perspective from individuals who had experienced the phenomenon. I also assumed that it was possible to *bracket* experiences, or to suspend personal beliefs and describe experiential themes from a selected group. Finally, I assumed that, through established methodology, it was possible to review experiential information from participants and analyze it in a way that is descriptive, without inferring meaning or connection from personal experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

To ensure that adoptive parents who finalized their adoptions provided the experiential data needed, participants must have completed the adoption process before participating in this study. At any point during adoptive placement before finalization, adoptive parents can choose to terminate the adoption proceedings and return the children to state custody (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). Narrowing the participants to those parents who had completed the process and were not engaged in it currently ensured that the perspective would be through my desired lens of supporting positive

adoption outcomes. Though parents in the process may have provided a more current overview of the lived experiences of that timeframe, Van Manen (2014) explained that no person could fully express their experiences while living them, so phenomenological inquiry seeks a retrospective perspective.

I narrowed the scope of this study to adoptive parents of children who were previously in the state of Texas's custody due to removal from their families of origin. Potential parents may adopt infants from private birth parents, children from international countries, orphans from international orphanages, or family members outside of state custody (see Merritt & Festinger, 2013). However, the purpose of the study was to understand the participants' experiences during placement before finalization, which is experienced differently by adoptive parents who adopt children from the foster care system. Foster parents who adopt experience similar phenomena, but they are never guaranteed the ability to adopt a child because they are often placed before the child is legally free for adoption. This narrowed scope provided a focus on the shared phenomena of creating a stable home environment for children whose parents committed to adopting before placement and had to manage state requirements during their placement before adoption finalization. Additionally, previous reviewed literature provided a framework for this study and supported my use of this population as a narrowed group within the overall population of straight-adoptive parents. Though the purpose of phenomenological studies is to provide descriptive, rather than prescriptive information, it is possible that the experiential findings of this study may transfer to families in other adoptive situations

(i.e., family placements, foster placements) in other areas of the United States (see Patton, 2015).

Limitations

When using transcendental phenomenological inquiry, researchers describe the lived experiences as understood by those who experience the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). However, because individuals cannot express lived experience while living it, the process of phenomenological inquiry requires participants to consider their experiences retrospectively (Van Manen, 2014). As such, the phenomenological process is relegated to both the individual's descriptions of their experiences but also to their recollection of those experiences.

Though the sample size met accepted criteria for phenomenological study (see Patton, 2015), I recruited participants from a single area of the United States and their shared experiences may reflect cultural and geographical influences on their adoption experiences. The information provided by participants in this study may not be transferable to parents in Texas or other states regions of the United States if they have varied processes during the adoption process. Also, since the participants of this study all adopted children who were in care of the state of Texas, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of other adoption situations including, but not limited to, international adoptions and private adoptions.

Finally, as the researcher, I am an adoptive parent of children who were in state custody before we adopted them, and I spent several years working for an agency that provided advocacy for children in foster care. As part of the bracketing process described

by Van Manen (2014), I acknowledged my preconceived ideas and recognized that they create a lens through which I see the adoption process and parenting experiences. To minimize this limitation, I clearly outlined a plan to be aware, address, and regulate my personal experiences throughout the study (see Maxwell, 2013).

Significance

While foster children technically have a vocalized opinion in court related to their placement, they do not have the authority to make changes in their foster homes (MacDonald et al., 2007). Simply identifying child factors that correlate with higher disruption rates limits how practitioners and providers work with the family system for support or intervention (Kalus, 2014). Bariola, Gullone, and Hughes (2011) suggested that parental functioning influences the success of children because parents guide the family system. Since I identified elements that parents recognized as influential to positive outcomes, state and local agencies could use the information to inform preparatory training and intervention strategies and better support families during their adoption processes.

Children who transition from foster care into adulthood are significantly more likely to struggle in ways that prevent healthy adult functioning including drug use, obesity, alcoholism, smoking, mood disorders, and persistent mental or physical illnesses (Zlotnick et al., 2012). However, those placed in a secure family system have much better outcomes, though that is often misunderstood (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Children in foster care fall into several categories of marginalization, and they are unable to advocate for themselves or make changes in their situations (Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Educated

adults must make decisions for them, but they cannot do so effectively without quality research that provides guidance from a systems-focused approach (Kalus, 2014). To be relevant, social change measures must apply theoretical approaches and research-based findings to life situations that will produce sustainable influence in local communities (Walden University, 2016). Quality research with adoptive families can decrease adoption disruptions before finalization, encourage families to adopt, offer guidance to agencies and communities to support families during adoption, and change the outcomes for children as they enter adulthood and contribute to their communities. Additionally, the findings from this study can inform curriculum pursuant to the CACREP (2016) standards for the Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling specialization by providing additional information related to nontraditional family systems and educating future counselors about supportive factors that help provide positive adoption outcomes.

Summary

Stable families provide better outcomes for adopted children, and adoptive parents often need support to provide a healthy family system for the children they adopt (Helton, 2011). While child identifiers and information related to the predictability of adoption disruption may be useful to understand families with greater needs related to adjustment, it does not provide useful information to aid parents actively integrating children into their family system. It is important to gather information related to adoption success from the parent perspective to understand how adoptive parents experience support that results in positive adoption outcomes. This information is able to help guide appropriate support services for proactive engagement and interventions.

I have provided a foundational piece of literature by collecting and describing parent experiences that led to positive adoption outcomes by conducting a transcendental phenomenological exploration of a sample of parent perspectives. Though there were limitations associated with this study, I took measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the collected data and that the information will benefit current and potential adoptive families, children in foster care, and the professionals who serve them. In Chapter 2, I will provide a comprehensive review of the literature associated with this research project and build a case for its value to the profession.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Stable adoptions provide significant positive outcomes for children, and lack of successful placement results in a significant risk for poor outcomes like alcoholism, drug use, obesity, smoking, and mood disorders (Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Helton, 2011; Zlotnick et al., 2012). If a child is placed and the adoption disrupts, resulting in the child returning to the system, the added issue from placement failure can contribute to a decreased likelihood that the child will achieve permanent, stable placement in the future (Goldman & Ryan, 2011). Recent literature established that adoption disruption has a negative impact on children who have already experienced trauma and that some child characteristics (like age, race, abuse history, and number of placements) influence adoption outcomes (Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Helton, 2011). However, though child characteristics may correlate to disruption experiences, parents in the family system have the power to make decisions about finalizing the adoption or disrupting the process. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of parent engagement, education, and experience to promote positive adoptive child experiences (Denby et al., 2010; Mariscal et al., 2011; Timm et al., 2011). Current research has also highlighted the importance of parent influence on adoptive child adjustment because they are significant factors in the mental and emotional development of their children (Duemer, Hicks, & Brendle, 2016).

Parent experiences are related to adoption outcomes, and their experiences are important due to the influence their decisions have over child integration into the family (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010). Though an abundance of literature exists that discusses

adoption success and failure, including factors that prevent disruption, there is a significant lack in qualitative approaches that capture more of the family dynamics involved in adoption outcomes (Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Helton, 2011; Kalus, 2014). Though parent experiences and decisions are determining factors in adoption outcomes, researchers have not paid adequate attention to the topic of parent experiences to thoroughly understand what parent experiences increase preferable outcomes (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010; Denby et al., 2010; Kalus, 2014; Timm et al., 2011). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study was to understand adoptive parents' lived experiences of support during the placement of their children before finalization that they perceived influenced their successful outcome. Understanding the experiences of parent support that were effective will provide agencies and counselors working with adoptive families an understanding of relevant aspects that could help with their services to other adoptive families in the future.

In this chapter, I will explain my literature search strategy to show a substantive review of the current literature on this topic. Then, I will provide an explanation of the theoretical foundation of transcendental phenomenology that underlies the method. Additionally, I will expand on the added use of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model of human development and how it is relevant to interpreting the results of this study. Finally, I will provide a comprehensive review of the literature related to foster care and adoption statistics, adoption disruption, parent experiences and influence in the adoption process, training and support for adoptive families, trends in adoption research, and the need for a broader approach to adoptive family studies.

Literature Search Strategy

To provide a thorough and comprehensive explanation of the issues presented in this study, I conducted an extensive review of the literature to explore the topic. I used multiple online databases to access journal articles, including Academic Search Complete, ERIC, PsychARTICLES, PsychBOOKS, PsychINFO, PubMed, Ebscohost's Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, and searches through Google Scholar to identify articles from journals that did not appear in the database searches. I searched the databases using the search terms *adoption* or *adoptive* or *adopt* and *parent* or *parents*. Additionally, I used those key terms with related terms including *experience* or *experiences* and *support* or *connection*. Finally, I also included searches for *positive adoption outcomes*, *adoption disruption*, and *adoption finalization*. Initially, I started the process with collecting current, peer-reviewed literature published in the last 5 to 7 years. However, due to the sporadic focus of adoption in counseling literature, I found it important to extend article review of some topics back to the 1990s. The extensive term searching provided an assurance that I exhausted the literature on this topic and that my literature support for this study was sound.

Theoretical Foundation

The foundational theory of this study was a Husserlian approach to phenomenology, which abandoned the concept that empirical research and evidence supersedes subjective perceptions (see Moustakas, 1994). The foundation of phenomenological exploration is grounded in the supposition that nothing exists outside of the experience of the person experiencing it, so all knowledge is subjective to the

perspective of the person learning (Pivcevic, 2014). Husserl suggested that while the human conscious is never void of consciousness, intentionality was the key to harnessing knowledge through human experience (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Another critical aspect of transcendental phenomenology is intuition, or the judgments made about experiences through a mind that is free from the inferences of daily experiences and external interpretations (Moustakas, 1994).

As a theory, transcendental phenomenology postulates that the human mind can experience *epoché*, or the setting aside of general knowing to experience phenomena from a fresh, unclouded perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché is possible through *bracketing*, a process that suspends the researcher's beliefs and provides an openness for learning and experiencing the phenomenon in a way that can be described without preconceived notions (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Though some modern phenomenological researchers assert that bracketing may not be possible and the Husserlian approach to research is invalid, there are many who believe the suspension of preconceived ideas is possible and helpful in describing the lived experiences of others (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Counselors and counselor educators ascribe to the American Counseling Association's (ACA; 2014) *Code of Ethics*, which mandates that counselors explore and increase awareness of their personal beliefs so that they do not impose them on their clients. The purpose is to enter the world of the clients and explore their experiences from their perspectives, which corresponds to the concept of bracketing in transcendental phenomenological theory (Moustakas, 1994). Ultimately, this theory is a solid approach for counselor educators who research topics with the intention to describe

their participants' experiences without imposing personal beliefs and interpretations into the data.

Transcendental phenomenology is a theory and a method; therefore, researchers are not required to incorporate a separate theoretical or conceptual framework with it. However, it can be useful to incorporate other theories to help frame results in a way that is usable by the intended readers (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For this study, I used a modification of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model of human development, which describes individual development as part of a more complex system to structure the results. A specific tenet of Bronfenbrenner's conceptualized theory is the impact of the self and external systems on the individual's developmental outcomes. In drawn models, concentric circles represent the entire system, with the individual located in the center (see CDC, 2015). A small microsystem consisting of family, peers, school, and work comprise the next closest impactful individuals or environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The mesosystem describes interactions between microsystem components that create experiences beyond the microsystem for the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, if a child has a parent who works at his or her school, the interaction between those systems would create experiences outside of the close microsystem. Beyond that, the exosystem consists of influence from the community via neighbors, social services, media, etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The largest influencing area, called the macrosystem, encompasses broader cultural attitudes and beliefs, like poverty, racism, and social stigma (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In this study, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model was effective aiding me in describing adoptive parents' experiences of support. During the

adoption process, parents have experiences at every level of Bronfenbrenner's system that influence their adoption outcomes including the following: microsystem (family, peer, work, and school influences); mesosystem (balancing work and new family members); exosystem (adoption agency interactions and support or healthcare institutions); and macrosystem (societal responses to adoption and cultural stigma regarding adopted children).

Existing research shows that preplacement factors experienced by parents can impact overall outcomes of children placed in adoptive homes (Bariola et al., 2011). As such, the ecological model supported the concept that the existing system and any changes experienced by caretakers has the potential to affect adoption outcomes (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Goldman & Ryan, 2011). The system influences on parents during the placement process may contribute to overall positive adoption outcomes as well.

Previously, researchers have used the ecological model with studies related to parenting, adoption, and foster care. Algood, Harris, and Hong (2013) used an ecological system analysis to consider parenting success in families with children who have disabilities. Adopted children have higher rates of disabilities and their challenges increase family stress (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). Algood et al.'s findings emphasized the importance of approaching parenting successes rather than failures, and they used an ecological approach to support the claim by providing successes on multiple levels. Hong, Algood, Chiu, and Lee (2011) used Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory to conceptualize kinship foster care success. There are a wide range influences on children and families, and adoption and foster care outcomes must be understood from

that perspective (Hong et al., 2011). Most importantly, Hong et al. urged future policy and practice makers for foster care and adoption to consider the value of an ecological systems application on future decisions.

Goldberg and Smith (2011) considered the experiences of lesbian and gay men during the adoption process through an ecological lens. Through this research, the authors completed a longitudinal study and reviewed the impact of each level on the adoption process for their population. They found that indicators on every level impacted the parents' mental health and overall experience (Goldberg & Smith, 2011), which provides significant support for the use of an ecological structure in my study. Similar to the purpose of this study, Mariscal et al. (2015) explored the concept of successful adoptions through the observations of foster care alumni. The authors used an ecological model to structure their interview questions and the initial data analysis to help guide the young adults through their personal histories (Mariscal et al., 2015). They provided an excellent example of the importance of an ecological approach to family issues that include individual, familial, and significant system or cultural influence.

Finally, the CDC (2015) use ecological models to frame many of their intervention and prevention strategies, and they recognize it as an effective framework to understand public concerns. While based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, the CDC adopted a modified version that simplifies the system levels and labels them individual, relational, community, and society (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). Since I designed this study to inform counselors and counselor educators who serve adoptive families with

counseling, training, or advocacy in public policy, a well-recognized framework was helpful to structure the results (see Figure 1).

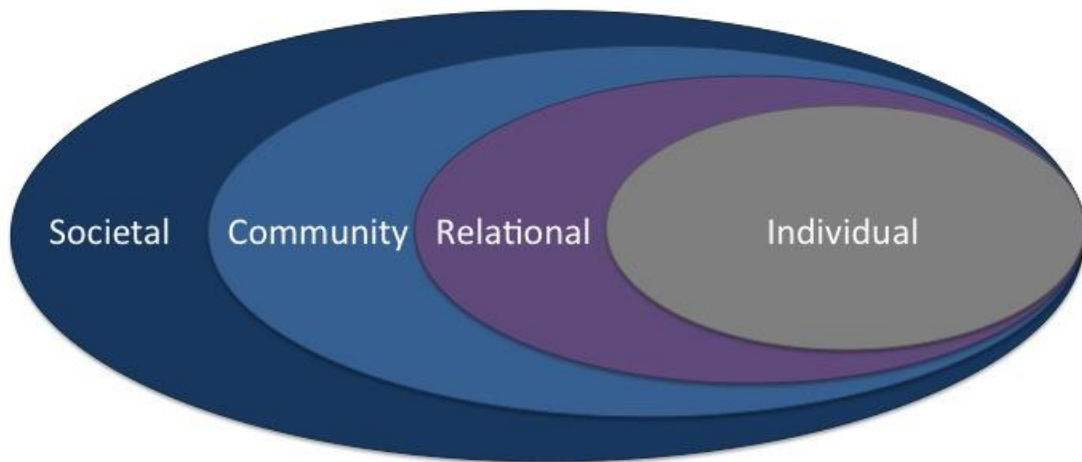


Figure 1. Simplified version of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model as used by the World Health Organization and adopted by the CDC (2015).

While a standalone theory to human development, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory provides a structure to help gather and report information associated with experiential phenomena. Since semistructured interview approaches to phenomenological studies offered flexibility for the me to engage deeper in the participant experiences, an ecological model provided the structure to guide interview questions to fully explore parent experiences of support (see Patton, 2015). Additionally,

the model offered a structure for organizing the descriptive data obtained by the transcendental phenomenology process without compromising the descriptive nature and adding interpretive inferences about the experiences (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017).

Literature Review

In this section, I will provide a comprehensive literature review that establishes the need for broader exploration of parents' experiences during their adoption process. To begin, I will explain the nature of statistics of foster care and adoption in the United States, explore adoption disruption including predictions and prevention, and explore child and parent experiences as outlined in the literature. I will follow with an explanation of parents as influencers of the family system, support services for adoptive parents, and trends in adoption research approaches. Finally, I will conclude with a clear gap in literature regarding adoptive parent experiences and how influential the findings from such research could be to counselors and other professionals serving adoptive families.

Foster Care and Adoption

Each year in the United States, child protective service agencies investigate allegations of abuse and neglect of over three million children (Children's Bureau, 2015). Of those investigations, more than 650,000 were confirmed victims each year since 2011 (Children's Bureau, 2015). Though child protective agencies support reunification and strengthening of biological families, many children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care to prevent further abuse or neglect while the state agencies work with families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). According to the Child

Welfare Information Gateway (2017), between 415,000 and 510,000 children were in foster care in the United States each year from 2006 to 2015. Of the summary provided for the 427,910 children in foster care in 2015, caseworkers provided the goal of family reunification for 55%, adoption for 25%, no determined goal for 6%, emancipation for 4%, long-term foster care for 3%, guardianship for 3%, and living with relatives for 3% (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Of the 243,060 children who exited foster care in 2015, 51% were reunified with family, and 22% were adopted (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Over 20,000 children were emancipated, or “aged-out” of foster care in 2015 without the security of a stable family system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Throughout the last 20 years, researchers have documented that children who age-out of foster care struggle more as adults and have poorer outcomes than their peers (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galan-Cisneros, 2015; Leve et al., 2012; Zlotnick et al., 2012). For those aging out of foster care, one study showed that 31%–46% experienced homelessness by age 26, and many demonstrate learned helplessness related to adult life (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Gomez et al., 2015). While foster care systems provide a significant amount of resources and support in the form of programs, life skills training, and financial resources, those who age out report a lack of experience with real-world scenarios and a disconnect from the processes that create a successful adult experience (Gomez et al., 2015). For those with foster care backgrounds in general (without the designation of aging-out), they are more likely to receive social security disability insurance due to the inability to work for mental or physical health problems

(Zlotnick et al., 2012). Ultimately, children who age-out of foster care describe the experience as a drastic shift, lacking the step-by-step process that most adolescents and young adults experience (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

However, when children are placed in stable home environments (especially with relatives), their outcomes are much better than those who are not (Helton, 2011). In fact, Goldman and Ryan (2011) posited that adoptive intervention might provide the type of environment that allows for children to heal and recover from negative risks, including those experienced prenatally. Children placed in adoptive homes have the opportunity for better outcomes related to relational stability, education, and physical health (Helton, 2011). But if the adoption fails (or disrupts), the child may regress, and experience compounded issues due to additional placements (Helton, 2011).

Adoption Disruption

Adoption disruption, or the return of a child after adoptive placement, is a traumatic event that can alter the future of all members of the family (Mariscal et al., 2015). Issues within the adoptive family system that prevent adequate support of child adjustment could cause disruption before finalization returning the child to foster care and compounding trauma in the life of the child (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) passed in 1997 addressed timeframes for biological parents to complete court assigned services and for children to be placed permanently after parental termination of rights (Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan, 2006). According to Smith et al. (2006), after the changes provided by the ASFA, adoptions in the United States drastically increased from 24,000 in 1996 to 51,000 in 2000. The

increase in adoptions did not change the rate of disruption (Coakley & Berrick, 2008); it increased the number of children who experienced a failed adoption, and increased researchers' interest in the factors that influence the outcomes of adoption.

According to the National Adoption Center (2015), the United States requires families who adopt a child from foster care to wait for a minimum of 6 months before finalizing the adoption. The waiting period provides time for the family to bond and decreases failure after finalization (National Adoption Center, 2015). It is during this waiting period that adoptions can disrupt, and children return to the foster care system. Coakley and Berrick (2008) highlighted the historical adoption disruption rates in the United States. In the early 1970s, the estimated disruption rates were 2.8% (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). In the 1990s, new study methods offered a range of disruption rates from 7%–47%; higher percentages represented special populations that have a historically greater rate of disruption like children with severe medical needs (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). Since the early 1990s, the estimated disruption rates are 6%–11% overall (Coakley & Berrick, 2008).

Predicting Disruption

One concept regarding adoption disruptions that is prevalent in the literature is the possibility to predict adoption success or failure. Throughout the 1990s, researchers articulated that preadoptive risk factors including history of sexual abuse, male sex of the child, multiple out-of-home placements, and prenatal ATOD exposure were connected to children's externalizing behaviors (i.e., hyperactivity, aggressive behaviors, delinquent behaviors) and associated with adoption disruption instances (Barth, 1991; Rosenthal &

Groze, 1991; Smith & Howard, 1999). More than a decade later, Goldman and Ryan (2011) explored the relationship between those risk factors and both PAF and PAA by conducting a quantitative secondary analysis of longitudinal data collected from the Florida Adoptive Family Study. They collected data in two waves, and had 2382 responses and 1,032 responses in Waves 1 and 2 (Goldman & Ryan, 2011). Goldman and Ryan did not provide racial or age data on the sample but reported that 70% of the adoptive parents were married, 95% of adoptive mothers finished high school or had higher education, and family annual income rates ranged from below \$10,000 to above \$200,000. Using structural equation modeling, Goldman and Ryan confirmed previous literature suggestions that PAF and PAA were connected ($F[1,582] = 78,109, p = .000$). Using regression analysis, the authors found that ATOD exposure had a significant relationship with PAF ($F[1,615] = 11,327, p = .001$), but ATOD exposure did not have a significant relationship with PAA ($F[1,569] = 1,193, p = .28$). Additionally, by using direct effects analysis, Goldman and Ryan found that each of the four risk factors mentioned above were not individually significantly predictive of PAF or the relationship between PAF and PAA. According to Goldman and Ryan it was only when all four risk factors were combined that there was a significant influence, indicating that multiple traumatic experiences and male sex together was predictive of the relationship between PAF and PAA ($\chi^2[19] = 1878, p < .001$). This study offers a new perspective on the default predictors of adoption disruption by showing the predictors' weaknesses as individual predictors of the child's experiences (Goldman & Ryan, 2011). However, as a

quantitative study, the authors were not able to elaborate or explore factors that might mitigate the effects of the risk factors after placement in a stable home.

Testa, Snyder, Wu, Rolock, and Liao (2014) examined the thought processes of 346 guardians and adoptive parents on disrupting their placements by using mediation analysis and found several factors that increased or decreased the likelihood that a parent would consider terminating the arrangement. The 346 guardians and adoptive parents comprised 69% of the sample from the 22,563 children's cases documented in the Illinois post permanency survey from 1998 to 2002. The authors did not provide demographic information for the sample of this study (Testa et al., 2014). Testa et al. found that the child's placement continuity was lower when there were more negative behaviors ($c = -0.061$; 95% CI [-0.104, -0.170]). However, when they added parent experience of thoughts of ending permanency relations as a factor, the child behavior was no longer statistically significant ($c^1 = -0.040$; 95% CI [-0.087, 0.007]). When Testa et al. tested the data to determine the relationship of the parent's thoughts of terminating the relationship with the children's behaviors and permanency, they found a "significant indirect negative effect of child behavior problems on permanency continuity that was mediated through the caregivers' thoughts of ending the relationship ($ab = -0.015$; 95% CI [-0.029, -0.003])" (p. 7). While the authors exposed the primary limitations of the study including the lack of related information that could affect these relationships like agency intervention, the powerful influence of parent decisions and thoughts on the permanency outcomes supports additional focus on the parent experience of the adoption process.

Many studies have reviewed correlations between child factors and adoption disruption but failed to explain how they affect outcomes (Kalus, 2014). For example, children placed in adoptive homes at older ages at placement were found more likely to experience a disrupted adoption, but it is unclear if individual parental experiences or overall family system functioning influence the success of similar age children in families that do not disrupt (Kalus, 2014). Ultimately, child characteristics were not found to be strong indicators of disruption prevention, but parental experiences may have a significant impact on success or failure.

Preventing Disruption

It is difficult for counselors and other professionals working with adoptive families to pinpoint the reasons adoptions succeed or fail since the entire family system is involved in either outcome (Kalus, 2014). Researchers have explored perceptions of children and adults regarding their perceptions of factors and difficulties experienced within the adoption process (Mariscal et al., 2015; Timm et al., 2011). Though individual perspectives are valuable, Kalus (2014) emphasized a need for more systems-focused research to capture the impact of the interconnections rather than individual experiences that influence adoptions.

The focus of research regarding the success or disruption of adoptions was related to child characteristics rather than the entire family system or parental experience (Kalus, 2014). Children in foster care have little authority in their placements or choices of homes, so it is inconsistent to focus research on child characteristics when considering the responsibility or reasons for the success or failure of adoptions. Identifying child

factors that may predict disruption does not provide information that would guide or aid a family system that is experiencing difficulties during early placement as they move toward their finalization (Kalus, 2014).

There appears to be a gap in research regarding the correlation of parental experiences contributing to adoption outcomes, especially those resulting in a successful completion. Coakley and Berrick (2008) summarized years of research regarding adoption disruption prevention and noted mixed messages in the literature. For example, some studies assigned higher education levels of the mother, presence of both parents, and presence of other children in the home as factors associated with adoption outcomes (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). However, the authors shared criticism of those factors as associated due to variables that were missing. For instance, mothers with higher education may also work outside the home more often or may be first-time parents due to expanding their education, which would play a role in the adoption outcome (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). Research on healthy adoptive outcomes focused on the parental satisfaction of agency preparation during the adoption process (Berry et al., 1996).

Other researchers reviewed contributing factors to healthy family functioning targeted at individual child demographics and behavioral issues and parental demographic identifiers (Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Helton, 2011; Leung et al., 2005). Kalus (2014) proposed a new approach to the literature that focused effectively on the family as a system in adoptive situations and raised concerns that previous literature relied too heavily on individual aspects that contributed to adoption disruption (like child characteristics, individual parental characteristics, etc.). Though many of these factors

correspond to disruption, they do not allow for the appropriate focus in addressing or preventing disruption (Kalus, 2014).

In successful adoptive families, research shows that well-planned support services are directly related to the success (Merritt & Festinger, 2013), and support groups for marriages strengthen the system and provide a more stable family after placement (Schwartz, Cody, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Fong, 2014). Additionally, adoption outcomes are better for families that report overall healthy family functioning (Leung et al., 2005). While these studies provide excellent information regarding agency preparation and individual factors that contribute to success, they do not consider the parent experiences of support from a broad perspective, inclusive of interpersonal relationships and other support systems.

Though specific characteristics of children may predict disruption, it is not possible to change the experience of a child that occurred before adoptive placement. Ultimately, Goldman and Ryan (2011) reminded readers that more adoptions end in success than failure, so regardless of previous experiences, stable environments produce positive outcomes for children from abusive and neglectful situations. It seems to be more realistic to determine how to predict success rather than failure.

Child Perceptions of Adoption Outcome Factors

An interesting perspective that surfaced in the literature was the perception of foster children and adult adoptees related to adoption success and failure. Mariscal et al. (2015) used a mixed-methods approach by surveying ($n = 9$) and interviewing ($n = 16$) youth with foster care histories (whether adopted or not), to explore factors at basic

ecological levels (child, family, system) that contributed to adoption outcomes. Of the participants, 84% were female and the average age was 21 years (Mariscal et al., 2015). The participants' racial makeup was 80% White, 12% Latino, and 8% African American (Mariscal et al., 2015). The researchers used thematic analysis on the focus group semistructured interviews and open-ended survey questions to explain the factors from an ecological perspective (Mariscal et al., 2015). While Mariscal et al. noted that they used the survey questions in the study and that they included close-ended questions, they did not report the information collected from that portion. The child factors identified by the participants included issues with trust due to trauma and history, identity development issues in foster care, lack of say in their experiences, and the label of being unadoptable (Mariscal et al., 2015). Regarding family factors, the youth noted that adoptive parents do not receive adequate training, they may rely on records rather than relationship to know the child, may treat adopted children differently from biological children, and may struggle to communicate effectively (Mariscal et al., 2015). In both sets of factors identified by children with foster care and adoptive experiences, the information lends to an understanding of the family system as a whole for positive adoption outcomes (Mariscal et al., 2015). For example, parents may need extra training and support to foster the type of environment and build connections that are necessary for children to assimilate into an adoptive family. And of the four child factors identified, three of them (identity development, building trust, and influence of their situation) would be related to the parent relationships and connection after placement. A significant strength from this study is the focus on parent influence of adoption outcomes by children who have foster-

care histories. However, the researchers did not limit their participants to those who had experienced adoptions, so the information is compromised by theoretical information not related to specific experiences. The most effective qualitative information about adoption outcomes and experiences come from those who have experienced it, which is the purpose of a qualitative phenomenological approach (Patton, 2015). Mariscal et al. (2015) were not structured enough in their method to limit the data to a qualitative or quantitative approach and did not use mixed-methods in a way that connected the qualitative and quantitative information, which compromised the findings from any research method (Patton, 2015).

Duemer et al. (2016) used a phenomenological method to explore the experiences of adult adoptees during adolescence and early adulthood regarding exploring information related to their biological families. Since criteria for this group was the experience of seeking original birth certificates and biological family as an adult adoptee, the unanimous shared experiences of identity issues from adolescence into adulthood, negative emotions, self-doubt, and behavioral issues may not translate to adult adoptees who felt no need to seek birth certificates or biological family (Duemer et al., 2016). However, the portion of Duemer et al.'s study that relates to the presented topic was the request for adult adoptees to suggest helpful interventions to help with the problems that arose. The four themes related to preventative measures included adoptive parents' openness about adoption topics (including biological family), caring environments during struggle, a spiritual connection, and learning to forgive their biological parents to move past resentment (Duemer et al., 2016). While the latter two of those helpful suggestions

are ultimately carried out by the adoptees, all four are related to the parent's guidance and structure of the home environment.

Adoptive Parent Experience

After exploring the literature to support their study of adoptive parent experiences while adopting a child with special needs, Denby et al. (2011) recognized the severe lack of literature that explored or measured adoptive parent expectations of the adoption process, so they used a qualitative constant comparative analysis to explain the influence of parent experiences and sense of preparedness as it relates to adoption outcomes (Denby et al., 2011). They interviewed 17 parents from nine families, with married couples interviewed together. Of those participants, 56% were male; 67% were White, 22% were African American, 11% were Latino; 89% had an annual income of more than \$50,000 per year; 78% were married, 11% were living with a partner, 11% were single, never married; and the average age was 39 years (Denby et al., 2011). Though not all of their findings related to the proposed study (i.e., motivation to adopt and factors related to adoption discontinuation before placement), portions of their findings showed that three themes influenced prospective adoptive parents to complete their adoptions including the following: competency and involvement of the social worker, family and friend support, and support activities or personal counseling for the parents (Denby et al., 2011). All themes suggested that parent experiences of support or engagement with professionals are related to their likelihood to complete adoptions (Denby et al., 2011). Additionally, Denby et al. encouraged future researchers to approach the topic of adoption from the

parent perspectives, particularly related to experiences that could prevent disruption before it occurs.

Though captured more than 20 years ago, Berry et al. (1996) completed one of the largest studies related to adoptive family preparation, support, and overall satisfaction. Within the results, they noted that parent characteristics, preadoption services, and postadoption support were all factors that contributed to adoption success (Berry et al., 1996). Denby et al.'s (2011) findings confirmed previous suggestions that adequate training and realistic expectations were important to successful outcomes, but that support from both familial and non-familial relationships correlated with parent's sense of preparedness.

Narrowed focus of adoption studies. Adoptive parental experiences in current literature commonly focus on specific identifiers of the parents or children to frame the study (Kalus, 2014). For example, Goldberg and Smith (2011) measured changes in depression and anxiety in adoptive parents and found that perceived support from family, workplace, and quality of relationship were connected to lower rates of anxiety and depression following adoption. However, the researcher limited the sample to lesbian and gay men who were also experiencing cultural stigma related to their sexual orientation and parenthood (Goldberg & Smith, 2011). In another study, researchers found four strong themes among adoptive parents' experiences including feeling extremely unprepared, personal insecurity, experiencing overwhelming emotions, and a strong commitment to their role as parents (Follan & McNamara, 2013). However, in this study, all participants were parenting adopted children diagnosed with reactive attachment

disorder, which changes the parent-child relationship significantly (Follan & McNamara, 2013).

Tasker and Wood (2016) considered the experience of adoptive parents as they transition into parenthood, focusing on specific experiences of uncertainty. They identified participants through social workers' advertisement and interviewed six couples (12 individuals) to explore the translation of preadoptive expectations to post adoptive experiences (Tasker & Wood, 2016). The researchers limited the sample to a homogeneous group that eliminated single parents, trans-racial adoptions, LGBTQ couples, and special needs adoptions from the participant pool (Tasker & Wood, 2016). Though each of the studies that investigated specific adoptive experiences is useful for practitioners and counselors serving adoptive families with those specific concerns, the information is primarily relevant to a small percentage of adoptive families.

In a European population study, Wasinski (2015) explored adoptive parents who experienced infertility and decided to adopt to understand these parents' personal biographical narratives of the process. As a result, the authors emphasized the individual nature of each adoptive process (Wasinski, 2015). Based on the findings, Wasinski recommended that researchers use an open approach to study the adoptive experience to expand knowledge from facts to an understanding of the full, rich understanding of the adoptive experience.

Generalized studies. Prospective adoptive parents must complete a preadoption training to aid in their experience and educate them of the realistic expectations for the adoption process (Nash & Foster, 2016). Though extensive pre- and post-testing

procedures show high satisfaction and ratings of high quality from parents who took it, the data was collected from potential adoptive parents in training before placement (Nash & Foster, 2016). As seen in other studies, parents who are placed and experience difficult situations may feel as though they were unprepared after their individual experience does not mirror that provided during training (Follan & McNamara, 2013).

Though published nearly two decades ago, one study explored child, parent, and family predictors of adjustment in the adoptive experience with a larger sample unencumbered by specific characteristics of parents or children (McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001). A significant finding to note is the overall message of positive outcomes, and that most parents reported consistency in their expected and real difficulty, that they transitioned well, and that their children were a positive addition to their family (McDonald et al., 2001). The main theme that surfaced regarding dissatisfaction or needing improvement was support from personal and social support systems and intervention services (McDonald et al., 2001). This study provided relevant context for current research that specifically explores parent experiences of support.

Parents as Primary System Influencer

While everyone in an adoptive family system contributes to the experience of integration and outcome, parents have a particularly important role (Kalus, 2015). Their experiences before adoption and during the adoption process influence adoption outcomes (Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Denby et al., 2011; Duemer et al., 2016). Crosnoe and Cavanagh (2010) defined a family system in the context of a parental relationship that sets the tone for any children entering the family. There exists a power differential in

the adoptive family system as parents have a responsibility to make decisions on behalf of the entire family, and those decisions are influenced by parent experiences, regardless of whether those experiences are directly related or unrelated to the adoption. For example, Coakley and Berrick (2008) noted that adoptive mother's level of education and the parents' previous parenting experience were shown to be relevant to adoption outcomes, though neither specifically relate to an adoptive placement.

Bariola et al. (2011) compiled results from various studies to provide a comprehensive review of the influence of parent emotional regulation on child emotional regulation. In all of their findings related to emotional regulation in family systems, it was clear that the emotional coping strategies and dysfunction shown by parents were related to how their children experienced and managed emotions (Bariola et al., 2011). Fomby and Sennott (2013) confirmed earlier studies that show connections between family structure changes (specifically relational changes by the mother) were associated with higher mobility (moving and changing schools) and increased problem behavior in children. Additionally, in some adolescents, the mobility factor produced increased issues related to their adjustment and behavior (Fomby & Sennott, 2013). Hartman, Magalhães, and Mandich (2011) thoroughly examined the literature regarding parental marital separation and divorce as it related to comprehensive adolescent outcomes. Some themes uncovered in the literature included academic performance, deviant behavior, romantic or sexual relationships, psychosocial well being, and relationship with parents (Hartman et al., 2011). In all of those themes, the reviewed studies showed that marital separation or divorce produced negative effects on the adolescents in the family; however, in all cases,

studies also provided ways that parent engagement or actions combated the negative experiences (Hartman et al., 2011). Though the findings in these articles were not specific to adoptive families, they clearly show the influence of the parent(s)' experience on their children's actions and outcomes (Bariola et al., 2011; Fomby & Sennott, 2013; Hartman et al., 2011).

Goldman and Ryan (2011) studied the validity of well-recognized risk factors' association with functioning before adoption and adjustment after adoption and concluded by showing the weak connections with postadoptive adjustment. The authors validated the influence of risk factors, especially with preadoptive functioning, but explained that stable environments created for children exposed were more powerful predictors of their ability to overcome any issues associated with those risk factors (Goldman & Ryan, 2011). In all cases of adoption, the child has been affected by the loss of primary relationships, which can make future attachment and adjustment difficult (Carnes-Holt, 2012). Adoptive parents need to create a loving, nurturing family system for children who may resist close relationships and sabotage the placement due to past trauma (Carnes-Holt, 2012). In these situations, the parent experience of frustration and failure can lead to blame of self or children and deteriorate the quality of the family system (Carnes-Holt, 2012).

Though her article's purpose was designed to teach counselors how to help foster children and adopted children grieve the loss of their birthparents, Fineran (2012) addressed the need for counselors to engage foster and adoptive parents in their children's grief process. Fineran noted that foster and adoptive parents desire to help their

children progress, but that it can be emotionally taxing and difficult to determine when the child is exhibiting struggle related to grief instead of normal development.

Additionally, the child's reactions can feel like rejection of the foster or adoptive parents' love and connection. However, when foster and adoptive parents can engage with their children's grief process productively and maintain self-care in the process, they contribute to stronger family bonds (Fineran, 2012).

Finally, in Duemer et al.'s (2011) findings of adoptee-identified significant protective factors for healthy adjustment, they identified parent openness to discussing biological family and the adoption experience, an actively caring and loving home, a spiritual connection, and the ability to forgive biological parents. The first two factors regarding options for open discussion and an actively loving and caring environment lie within the full responsibility of the parents in the home. Without purposeful actions from the parents, the adopted children cannot achieve these circumstances. The final two factors regarding spirituality and the ability to forgive are ultimately decisions and actions taken by the adoptee (Duemer et al., 2013). However, parents are the decision makers regarding a child's exposure to spirituality options and also are instrumental in helping children learn understanding of forgiveness from an early age. Without parent interaction, those two factors could be delayed or missed altogether.

Support Services for Adoptive Families

Support services for adoptive families vary by state and each state contracts with independent agencies to oversee the services (see DFPS, 2017a). In Texas, postadoption support services include the following: casework and service planning, parent training

and support groups, counseling, therapeutic camping, respite care, residential placement services, information and referral, and 24-hour crisis intervention (DFPS, 2017a). Merritt and Festinger (2011) explained assessing adoption support services to determine effectiveness and need of each offering is vital, as the services provided can help adoptions succeed. Unfortunately, there is enough issue with adoptive parent's lack of awareness or lack of utilizing postadoption services that researchers attempt to uncover the reasons (Merritt & Festinger, 2011).

For married adoptive parents, a strong relationship is related to positive outcomes, but formal marriage support services are not common offerings for adoptive families within their post-adopt services (Schwartz et al., 2014). However, those couples that actively pursue marriage enrichment report it as helpful and worthwhile (Schwartz et al., 2014). Within marriage enhancement, Schwartz et al. (2014) offered the increased helpfulness of group work, as adoptive families need the support of others, and organized support groups are successful. With a similar finding of support groups, Watson, Stern, and Foster (2012) provided counselors and agencies with a suggested model for helpful group services to adoptive parents before and after adoption. They suggested that a group designed to help parents navigate the adoption process beforehand and a process group for adolescents after placement could help ease the adoption process for everyone involved (Watson et al., 2012).

Adoptive parents must undergo a significant amount of training and engagement with professionals before adopting, but only receive postadoption services on an as-requested basis (Nash & Flynn, 2016). Depending on the caseworkers and professionals

assigned to the cases, adoptive parents may not be aware of the services they can request (Merritt & Festinger, 2011). Though preadoptive training is required for preparation and has documented support for positive parent reviews, the parents provided those reviews before they accepted placement of children (Nash & Flynn, 2016). After placement, when issues arise that were unexpected, families can feel as though they were completely unprepared and that the training they received was inadequate (Follan & McNamara, 2014). Merritt and Festinger (2011) suggested that agencies evaluate the needs of individual families, as all families need some form of support, and agency support services make a difference in family outcomes.

Trends in Adoption Research

In current adoption studies, researchers focused on quantitative methods to determine specific connections between factors and disruption or success (Kalus, 2015). Studies retest the connection between risk factors (especially those that are child related) to determine their influence on adoption outcomes (Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Helton, 2011; Leung et al. 2005). While the more common methodology is quantitative, there seems to be many researchers who recognize the complicated process of adoptive family functioning and are documenting suggestions for an increase in qualitative and mixed-methods approaches (Kalus, 2015; Watson et al., 2012).

Kalus (2015) made a significant statement by suggesting that the focus on the study of specific individuals (i.e., mother, child) in adoption studies automatically compromises the scientific value. Specifically, Kalus suggested that cause and effect studies oversimplify the experience of families, limiting the value of the results. Watson

et al. (2012) suggested that qualitative research regarding the lived experiences of parents and children during the adoption process would benefit anyone serving adoptive families. In corroboration, Kalus confirmed that mixed-methods research is the most productive way to study adoptive families. Though mixed-methods may be most effective, quantitative and qualitative data are valuable as connective methods to understand the systems of adoptive families.

Need for Broader Scope

Within the framework of exploring adoptive family successes and experiences, it is clear that more qualitative exploration of the family experience is valuable to the future of counselors and practitioners working with these families (Kalus, 2015; Watson et al., 2012). Within the context of studying families with children who have disabilities, Algood et al. (2013) specifically noted the relevance of future studies that recognize the ecological experience of support related to parenting success. Though not all adopted children have documented disabilities, their past histories of trauma corroborate inclusion in that statement (Leve et al., 2012).

Timm et al. (2011) designed a mixed methods survey study to explore the experiences of adoptive parents regarding their perceptions of adoption difficulties. The authors used a widely accepted claim of eight core factors experienced by all adoptive families including loss and grief, entitlement, claiming, unmatched expectations, family integration, bonding and attachment, identity, and mastery and control (Timm et al., 2011). Upon examining the data, few fathers responded, so Timm et al.'s sample included 104 mothers who ranged between the ages of 25 and 75 (average = 40.8),

predominantly White (94.2%) with reporting races and ethnicities of less than 2% each for African American, American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino (Timm et al., 2011). The participants had been married an average of 15.4 years and 76% reported household incomes of above \$75,000 (Timm et al., 2011). Of the sample, 49% adopted from the child welfare system, 25% from domestic, private adoptions, 11.7% international adoptions, and 13.7% were other types of adoptions (Timm et al., 2011). The participants offered affirmative experience rates in the following percentages individually and as a couple: families including loss and grief (64%, 58.6%), entitlement (30%, 30.6%), claiming (41.2%, 37.2%), unmatched expectations (59.6%, 61.9%), family integration (36.4%, 42.3%), bonding and attachment (52%, 52%), identity (40%, 28.9%), and mastery and control (58.6%, 53.1%). The most interesting thing to note is that, at most, 64% (less than two thirds) of responders experienced one of the eight widely claimed “universal” experiences for adoptive mothers, and Timm et al. noted that no literature had substantiated the claims that those factors were comprehensive or accurate. As such, adoption research may have additional unsubstantiated claims that have founded current studies, making the results compromised. New broad research that categorizes the experiences of adoptive parents should replace the older accepted, though clearly flawed, factors that have guided past studies (Timm et al., 2011).

Adoptive family functioning, successes, and failures have implications beyond the individual families that they affect. Since state and federal government systems implement policy and oversee the offerings of services before and after adoptions, research findings have the potential to influence policy decisions (Department of State

Health Services, 2017b). Crosnoe and Cavanagh (2010) reviewed family literature and noted the importance of producing research that has implications beyond individual scenarios, but can relate to larger-scale decisions.

Hong et al. (2011) established a connection between the significant contribution an ecological model applied to kinship foster care children and families and noted the value of support from external systems like policy-makers and agencies involved. The authors further suggested that those with influence in these families' lives should work towards offering everything they need to offer successful outcomes (Hong et al., 2011). Even when researchers recognize the value of additional literature related to adoptive and foster families, the focus is often on aspects like "adjustment to foster/adoptive care, including concerns with attachment, loss and grief, and abuse; counseling interventions for children and adults, families, and groups; and multicultural considerations in transracial and foreign-born adoptees," as outlined in *The Family Journal's* most recent special issue on adoption and foster care (Southern, 2012, p. 351). Even with specific focus on adoption topics, there is exclusion of the systems framework and the lens of successful outcomes.

Kalus (2015) explained the lack of studies that explore adoption from a family systems perspective, taking into consideration everyone who influences the outcomes. Within the family system, though all members' experiences and actions influence each other, the parents have a primary role in decision-making. Within that framework, adoptive parent experiences influence adoption outcomes, even when the experiences are not specifically related to their interaction or experience with their child (Kalus, 2015).

As noted by Kalus, studying the system as a whole is a very complicated process with little to no precedence, so it would be beneficial to explore parts of the process from a qualitative perspective to gather more understanding about the whole family experience. Specifically, understanding parent experiences and perspectives regarding successful adoptions is valuable to build a framework for future adoptive family support.

Summary

Children from foster care who do not achieve a stable adoptive placement before aging out of the system have significantly increased likelihoods of alcoholism, drug use, obesity, smoking, and mood disorders (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Studies indicate that a child's behavioral, educational, and physical outcomes improve when they live with a stable, loving family (Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Helton, 2011). However, after placement with a family, issues within the adoptive family system that prevent adequate support of child adjustment could cause disruption before finalization returning the child to foster care and compounding trauma in the life of the child (Coakley & Berrick, 2008).

A significant amount of recent literature focused on individual child demographics and behavioral issues and parental demographic identifiers to predict adoption outcomes (Goldman & Ryan, 2011; Helton, 2011; Leung et al., 2005) and family support influences on system strength (Merritt & Festinger, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2014). However, there is a lack literature that focuses on parent or family system influences that contribute to adoption outcomes (Kalus, 2015). Adoptive parents need support during and after the adoption process to help foster better outcomes for everyone (Merritt & Festinger, 2013). There is a gap in the literature regarding an understanding of

the lived experiences of adoptive parents and children that could provide a greater understanding of what helps adoptions succeed (Watson et al., 2012). This study addressed that gap by offering adoptive parents the platform to express their experiences with support during the adoption process that aided in positive adoption outcomes.

In this chapter, I provided a significant amount of support that explains the need for this research. I offered a compelling argument for a shift in the methodology, which supports my plan for this dissertation. In Chapter 3, I will describe my plan to explore the lived experiences of adoptive parents from a transcendental phenomenological approach to offer a broader understanding of helpful support that results in successful adoption outcomes.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of adoptive parents that they perceived as supportive to their goal of adoption finalization. Specifically, I wanted to understand the parents' experiences during the timeframe between the placement of the child(ren) in their home and the finalization date and describe them from a socioecological perspective. The results of this study could serve as an important foundation for counselors who serve families during the adoption process and provide relevant information to inform CACREP (2016) curriculum for the Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling specialization related to special populations.

In this chapter, I will explain the research design and provide a rationale for its use in this study. Additionally, I will address the role of the researcher in qualitative research and address researcher bias as it applied to my study. I will also provide a full explanation of the methodology chosen, including information on participant criteria, sampling procedures, and sample size. I will follow that with a plan for data collection and analysis and address the trustworthiness and ethical procedures of my study.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was: What are the lived experiences of adoptive parents during the time between child placement and adoption completion that they perceive affect the outcome of finalization?

Central Concept of the Study

Though the state of Texas makes provisions for children in foster care to participate in their adoption process (including requiring consent from children ages 12 and older), the children are not the only factors in the success of adoptions (Texas Family Code, 2015). A central concept to this study was the pivotal role parents have as the head of the family system as well as the influence parents have in general on children's functioning (Bariola et al., 2011). Adoptive families are significantly less likely to disrupt if the adoptive parents are related to the child(ren) placed in their home, which supports an emphasis on the influence of parent experience in adoption outcomes (Coakley & Berrick, 2008).

Another central concept was the parental need for support during the adoption process. For children from foster care who are placed in permanent homes, the adjustment and bonding differ from the general outcomes (Follan & McNamara, 2014). Though families often move through the adjustment successfully, Follan and McNamara (2014) emphasized the significant need for support from family, friends, other adoptive parents, and agencies. In one of the largest adoptive studies completed in the United States, Berry et al. (1996) found that private adoption agencies were more likely to provide postadoptive support services, and adoptive parents were the most satisfied with their experiences from private agencies.

Identifying the Research Tradition

The two primary approaches to research are quantitative and qualitative traditions, and I selected a method of qualitative inquiry to explore this research topic. While

quantitative research is widely accepted as the research of phenomena in terms of relational aspects quantified by mathematical processes, researchers have defined qualitative inquiry in a variety of ways (Yilmaz, 2013). Yilmaz (2013) addressed the inconsistencies and comprehensively defined qualitative inquiry as the “emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences in the world” (p. 312). Because my goal with this study was to describe the lived experiences of adoptive parents as they understand them instead of quantifying a connection within those experiences, qualitative inquiry offered a structured method to explore the phenomena in a way that addressed my research question.

Within the qualitative tradition, a phenomenological approach was best suited for this study due to the foundational principle that reality is not fixed but is subject to the human experience (see Reiners, 2012). Phenomenology is grounded in the understanding that the interplay between the participants and the researcher creates knowledge, and I engaged the participants in a way that provided an understanding of support during their adoption process (see Reiners, 2012). Specifically, I used a transcendental phenomenological approach, which explores information from multiple participants while requiring that researchers bracket, or suspend, their personal experiences and approach the topic without preconceived ideas and interpretations (see Patton, 2015).

The phenomenological research process, and specifically transcendental phenomenology, was founded by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century to present

human experiences and their awareness of those experiences in a way that suspends personal beliefs or interpretations of the researcher (Reiners, 2012). Husserl adopted the early beliefs of philosophers Descartes and Kant that human perception is the foundation of what is real (Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi et al. (2017) described the application of a descriptive phenomenology to psychological processes and explained that, as the philosophical process, the steps are “description, reduction, and essence” (p. 180). Though the process remains true to the philosophical foundation, the implementation may change based on the phenomena studied (Giorgi et al., 2017). Giorgi (1970) has spent more than 40 years developing effective processes for descriptive phenomenological studies as a response to the measurable and behavioral focus of the 1970s, so I used that process and method to structure this study.

Rationale for Chosen Tradition

A transcendental phenomenological approach was the most effective method for this study due to the importance of alignment between the research question, purpose of the study, and the methodology (see Patton, 2015). I aimed to provide a broader understanding of the general experience of adoptive parents related to their experience of support so that agencies and counselors working with families can aid future families with preventative and intervention support services. That type of generalization required an unbiased perspective, which eliminated the option of a hermeneutical phenomenological approach (see Giorgi et al., 2017). A hermeneutical phenomenological approach would have fit this study if I intended to engage personally with interpretations of the experiences and provide an interpretive analysis of the collected information.

However, my goal was to offer a scope of perspective within a framework that governmental agencies use already, and descriptive phenomenology offered the best structure for that goal (see Reiners, 2013). I could have chosen to structure this as a narrative study because I engaged the participants in the collaborative role of providing narratives that illustrated their experiences (Wiles, Crow, & Payne, 2011). However, I wanted to gather more than story examples and engage the participants in their retrospective understanding of supportive experiences, which expanded beyond individual stories, so approaching this research from a descriptive perspective provided the best structure (see Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Role of the Researcher

One of the most important roles of the researcher in qualitative inquiry is to determine an appropriate structure of the data collection and analytical process in a manner that is consistent and true to the nature of the research question (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research studies, researchers may mistakenly combine methodological processes from a variety of qualitative disciplines or change approaches within the same study (Englander, 2012). Those mistakes compromise the integrity of the study because qualitative approaches originated from different philosophical foundations (Englander, 2012). The researcher must focus on alignment oversight and ensure that the process of approaching the topic, collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting findings are consistent within a selected methodology that supports the original research question (Englander, 2012).

In all qualitative methodology, the researcher is a tool in the data collection process, and interviewing is a primary method of gaining information in transcendental phenomenology (Englander, 2012). The researcher should carefully construct interview questions to elicit information about the phenomena in a way that encourages the participants to explain the experiences in their most basic state (Giorgi et al., 2017). Additionally, it is important for the researcher to be an active participant during the interview, often adopting a semistructured process to provide the opportunity for knowledge to be uncovered as an emergent process (Englander, 2012; Giorgi et al., 2017).

Positionality

My personal and professional experiences with adoption and the foster care system in Texas were the inspiration for my study. For 2 years, I served as the executive director for a nonprofit organization in East Texas that trained community volunteers to advocate for children in foster care, including the adoption process. During that timeframe, I became familiar with the regulations and rules related to foster care and adoption. Additionally, I gained experience with specific cases and heard feedback from adoptive parents regarding the struggle to maintain a sense of normalcy in their family as they integrated new children into their family system due to lack of support and the personal adjustment they experienced.

I left that position as my husband and I embarked on our own family expansion process by adopting our two children who were in foster care for over 2 years before placement with us. As an adoptive parent who shared the same situation as the parents in

this study, I knew my personal experience may influence my perception of the information. I was thankful for the training we completed before placement but experienced the struggle of adjusting to a new family system and creating a balance of normal life for our family as we had increased expectations from the caseworkers and the state. Support at multiple levels was vital to our success as a family.

Finally, I consider adoptive families and agencies as one of my primary advocacy and service roles as a licensed professional counselor. I network and communicate with adoption workers and agencies that provide services to adoptive families during and after adoptions. I also volunteer frequently to provide training to adoptive parents when requested by local agencies or professionals.

Addressing Researcher Bias

I wanted to collect and provide a description of parent experiences of support during adoption without inserting my experiences into the outcomes, so I chose a transcendental phenomenological approach. A foundational principle of transcendental phenomenology is the concept of bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). Before collecting data, the researcher must process their preconceived ideas about the phenomena so that they become conscious thoughts and can be suspended to process the data from a fresh perspective (Giorgi et al., 2017). Chan, Fung, and Chien (2013) described bracketing as the purposeful practice of awareness and restraint of personal thoughts and experiences related to the topic throughout the research process in a phenomenological study.

Throughout the process of this research, I explored my ideas thoroughly and mindfully as I engaged with participants and the data. I answered the interview questions

from my own experiences before starting interviews to illuminate my preconceived ideas of the experiences. During the interviews, I found that I had interpretive thoughts at times, as parents would explain experiences. I had to consciously monitor my interpretation and ask clarifying questions, even if I believed I knew what they meant because I share similar experiences. I used an audio journal to process my thoughts after one interview that was particularly difficult due to the child's extensive foster care history, and I was able to suspend my personal feelings to incorporate that interview effectively into my thematic descriptions (see Chan et al., 2013). Because the participants were recruited through postadoption services, they knew I was an adoptive parent, but I asked each participant that they answer the interview questions thoroughly, in a way that nonadoptive parents would be able to understand. That practice helped prevent the potential tendency to fill in information gaps with assumptions during data analysis. Finally, I did not interview people I knew personally for this study because that would have risked compromising my ability to process their stories from an observational, unattached perspective.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality was a concern in this study because adoptive families are provided confidentiality with sealed records after the adoption finalization. To preserve confidentiality, I assigned participants an identifier that did not expose their identity, and I only collected identifying information about their children that were basic demographic identifiers to ensure that they fit the participant requirements (see ACA, 2014). Because my participants were the adult adoptive parents, I provided them with the opportunity to

ask questions regarding confidentiality and offered written information regarding the storage and plan for the data after I complete the study (see ACA, 2014). As expected, several parents questioned my protection of their children and I ensured that the demographic information they provided did not include their children's names or unnecessary identifiers. I redacted the interviews to remove any proper names of people, places, agencies, and geographical regions or cities to further protect the confidentiality of everyone involved.

The final ethical concern was the emotional risk for the parents as they explored their experiences of support with the adoption process. If a parent had experienced a particularly difficult situation or a significant lack of support, revisiting that information could have caused distress or negative emotions. I ensured that all participants knew that they could take a break, stop the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time during the process. Since I recruited adoptive parents through post-adoption service agencies, the families were provided resources for counseling and support as needed, and that served as an offered resource if the participants felt the need to seek counseling or support after participation. I offered a reminder of those services in the informed consent paperwork, and I also provided a secondary referral source to LeTourneau University's Center for Counseling that provides a sliding scale fee if they did not want to seek services through their agency. I had one participant who began the interview by telling me that she had a particularly difficult day with her adopted son. I offered to reschedule the interview if that was more conducive to her desires, but she declined. During the interview, she paused it to take a phone call from her son, but was ready to reconvene

after the call ended. She did not express the need for counseling services as a result of the interview, but she disclosed that they had a family counselor who regularly provides services in their home and those services were available to her as needed.

Methodology

Identification of Population

The participants included in this study were parents who adopted children placed in care of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). When adopting children in custody of DFPS, the type of adoption can determine the length of time parents have children before finalization. For families who adopt as kinship placements or foster-to-adopt, the placement period is often longer and may result in the child or children's return to their biological parents. However, in straight-adopt placements, the children have been legally free for adoption, and the only deterrent from a finalized adoption is a failure after placement. For this study, the population of interest was families who straight-adopted children from the Texas DFPS system without fostering or serving as a kinship placement.

Sampling Strategy

Qualitative researchers seek information related to specific phenomena, so sampling is purposive to ensure the participants have enough experience with the phenomena to justify inclusion in the study (Hunt, 2011). Since adoption records are sealed and were unavailable for public consumption and Texas DFPS could not release any records of adoption, I relied on the local agency that provides post-adoption services in Texas, to distribute flyers (See Appendix A) to promote the study (DFPS, 2017a). A

case manager with that agency agreed to distribute the information to families in her region and through social media (See Appendix B). I also used snowball sampling, though I never had to request participants recruit others (Patton, 2015). Several participants (and some interested adoptive parents who did not meet the qualifications to participate) voluntarily relayed the information to others who did.

Participant criteria. I solicited participants who were adoptive parents in the state of Texas and who chose to straight-adopt children who were in custody of the DFPS. Though some adoptive parents through the state of Texas foster before they adopt, they often have children in their homes for longer periods of time as they wait for reunification or the termination of the biological parents' rights (DFPS, 2017b). Parents who straight-adopt are only able to match with children who are legally free for adoption, creating a goal of adoption from the time of placement in their homes (DFPS 2017b). I attained the information I sought by interviewing parents who knew that the end goal would be adoption and worked to integrate the children as permanent family members from the time they were placed in the adoptive home.

I asked the parents to retrospectively consider their experiences of support during the adoption process, so I focused my recruitment on families who completed an adoption within the last 5 years. I did not restrict the demographic information of the parents or their children for this study. Single and married parents were invited to participate.

Sample size. Unlike quantitative research where researchers seek to establish information that is generalizable to larger populations of the sampled individuals, qualitative researchers seek to describe or explain information about specific processes or

phenomena (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). As such, larger samples sizes are not required to gather effective data and could, in some cases, may hinder the researcher from capturing the depth of information desired (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). In cases like this study, where the population was difficult to access, larger sample size requirements could have impeded information gathering and perpetuate a lack of information about important topics (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Englander (2012) suggested a move away from extreme beliefs including the idea that sample size is irrelevant in qualitative studies, and the idea that larger sample sizes in qualitative studies increase generalizability to the broader population.

Since all participants in qualitative research are selected based on their experience with the central phenomena, the sample size should provide the depth and breadth of information sought by the researcher (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). In phenomenological studies, Giorgi (2009) suggested the minimum sample size should be three to provide a broad enough spectrum of information, but Morse (1994) previously recommended a minimum of six participants. Englander (2012) provided a suggested broad range of five to 20 participants, while Creswell (2013) suggested using up to 10 participants. For this study, I planned to recruit six to 10 participants to ensure that I met data saturation.

Saturation. Though set as the standard for determining appropriate sample sizes in qualitative studies, it is more of a conceptual aid to help the researcher understand when enough data has been collected (Guest et al., 2014). Researchers reach data saturation when the interviews with participants produce repetitive information with little

to no new added benefits (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). By offering a planned range of sample size, I recruited and interviewed a minimum number of participants to meet the suggested standards by the experts and left room to add additional interviews if I do not reach saturation with six. After interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing the data, I confirmed data saturation after six interviews.

Participant Recruitment

As the purpose of this study was to explore adoptive parent experiences within a specific timeframe between placement and adoption related to their experience of support, it was important to identify participants who had experience that resulted in a completed adoption (Englander, 2012). Since states seal adoption records, and public records are unavailable, families considered for the study were those who were reachable by a postadoption service organization. Single and two-parent families were required to have legally completed their adoptions to meet eligibility requirements for this study.

I used purposive sampling to recruit adoptive parents who were willing to participate in the study. A criterion sampling strategy was the most effective for this study, as each participant needed to meet the specific criteria of completing adoptions. I worked with a local postadoption service agency to distribute a flyer (See Appendix B) advertising this study. The agency offered to use their standard information sharing procedures with the families who engage in their services, which could have included physical mail, e-mail, social media, and verbal information sharing. Ultimately, the methods of advertisement were social media, physical flyers at a training event, and word-of-mouth referrals. I communicated directly with potential participants in the

manner they reached out to me including e-mail, social media, and phone calls.

According to Emmel (2013), it is helpful to consider multiple methods of purposeful sampling if the primary method does not render the full sample size, so I will incorporate snowball sampling and participants referred other adoptive families to my study (Patton, 2015).

Instrumentation

Interviews

As it is the most common data collection process associated with qualitative research, I used interviews with participants to gather data (Englander, 2012). Though experts have broadly discussed qualitative interviewing, they often do not distinguish interviewing characteristics that are specific to the chosen method (Englander, 2012). Gathering information from participants by interviews frequently provides more data for analysis, more comprehensive descriptions, and offer the opportunity for the interviewer to ask for additional detail or include follow-up questions (Giorgi et al., 2017). For this reason, I used a semi-structured interview process, in which I determined a set of interview questions (see Appendix C) that guided the process rather than dictated it (Chan et al., 2013). To ensure that the interview questions align with the chosen method of transcendental phenomenology, I carefully structured the questions to be broad and open-ended, and asked for follow-up information when necessary (Chan et al., 2013; Englander, 2012). I planned individual interviews with participants and allowed the emergent process of interviewing to guide subsequent interview questions. To ensure that I secured a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena from each participant, I

requested permission to contact them for follow-up questions either verbally or in writing if necessary.

Data Collection and Procedures

When I identified potential participants for this study, I provided the informed consent in writing that included the nature and purpose of the study, information on voluntary participation and the ability to discontinue at any time, confidentiality, potential risks, sources for support if the research has negative emotional effects, and contact information. My goal was for that information to open participants' comfort with the topic and allow them the opportunity to ask questions before the interviews (Englander, 2012). Additionally, that process allowed me to start building rapport before I asked questions related to the data I planned to collect (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

I scheduled 90-minute sessions with the participants and reviewed important items from the informed consent paperwork like confidentiality, that they could voluntarily withdraw from the interview at any point or communicate discomfort and asked for permission to record the interview for transcription (see Patton, 2015). Of the 90 minutes, I allowed up to 30 minutes for informed consent and questions, and 60 minutes for the interview. I conducted the interviews face-to-face at a mutually agreed upon location convenient to the participant or by using video chat if the participant was located outside of a drivable distance and was comfortable with the technology. I chose not to take notes during the interview so that I could engage fully with the participants while we explore their experiences (see Qu & Dumay, 2011). Based on Patton's (2015) assertion that phenomenological interviewing highlights specific descriptions of lived

experiences, it was important to gather data through the perspective filter that provided a concrete understanding of the experience. At the termination of the interview, I provided a debriefing time for questions, offered to provide the participants with the study results and was willing to offer any appropriate referrals, though the last item was not necessary in any of the cases (see Nelson, Onwuegbuzie, Wines, & Frels, 2013). I requested permission for follow-up conversations since the developing data had the potential to require that I revisit earlier interviews to process the themes that emerged (see Englander, 2012).

Bracketing in qualitative research is a commonly accepted and suggested method of managing the researcher's experience with the collected data (see Chan et al., 2013). There are varied opinions about the timing of bracketing, as some argue for it to occur only in data analysis while others suggest it should be a process that occurs from beginning to end of a research project (see Tufford & Newman, 2012). Since I am an adoptive parent, and I had a rich conceptualization of my perceptions of support and had heard the stories of others outside of data collecting, it was best to begin the process before interviewing so that I was aware of my biases and preconceptions before I interpret their answers and formulate follow-up questions (see Tufford & Newman, 2012). I started the process with an audio journal and answered the interview questions myself to see how I processed the experience and allowed myself the ability to see written documentation of my filter for others' stories (see Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Data Management

As a result of the interviews, I had consent and demographic paperwork, audio files, and word-for-word transcripts that I needed to manage. For all electronic documents, I named the files related to that interview with a code to protect the individual identities (Patton, 2015). The only document that associated the actual participant names to the data was the original consent that was kept in the event that I needed to request follow-up information. I saved the files (consent, audio recordings, and transcripts) in a double password-protected Dropbox file. After completion of the study, I destroyed all physical copies of documents and will maintain the electronic versions for 5 years or after publication (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

Though I started the bracketing process early in my study as I developed the interview questions, I actively participated in bracketing as I transcribed and analyzed the data I collected (Chan et al., 2013). I had already explored my personal experiences as an adoptive parent and professional who works with adoptive families, so I used an audio journal to verbalize my personal processes as I transcribed, coded, and analyzed the interviews. I used Giorgi et al.'s (2017) data analysis process for transcendental phenomenological studies, which helped me focus on describing what I gathered, rather than inserting interpretations based on my personal experience.

To analyze the transcripts, I adapted Giorgi et al.'s (2017) descriptive phenomenological psychological method of data analysis, as Giorgi and colleagues have spent more than 40 years developing and using sound phenomenological research

methods. Recently, Giorgi et al. published a five-step method for effective descriptive phenomenological data analysis and noted that they added a fifth step to Giorgi's (2009) previously published method to clarify the process. The five steps as described by Giorgi et al. (2017) are as follows:

1. Read the entire transcript to understand the whole experience, including how it ends.
2. Assume the attitude of phenomenological psychological reduction to remove the natural experience of the phenomena from the analysis process.
3. Break down the transcripts into smaller parts for analysis by separating for meaning. These sections are called meaning units.
4. Transform the meaning units into phenomenologically, psychologically informed descriptions. This step could require several transformations for some meaning units, while other meaning units may only need one.
5. Organize the general structure of the experience.

While completing Giorgi et al.'s (2017) fifth step, I incorporated the adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model to organize the experiences within the framework of relationship levels. Since I am studying the parents' experiences of support, the responses included information related to people of varying relationships, agencies and organizations, and even societal or cultural support, so it was beneficial to organize the findings within those constructs for practical application.

I hand coded the data, as Giorgi's (2009) method originally described. After each interview, I completed verbatim transcriptions and began initial coding into meaning

units as described in Giorgi et al.'s (2017) steps. That process allowed for incorporation of initial themes into future interviews to seek saturation (Patton, 2015). Additionally, since phenomenological studies seek experiences, cases that seem discrepant inform future interview questions or prompt return questions to previous participants to determine if the experiences are shared among other participants (Patton, 2015). I did not have a significantly discrepant case that arose with little to no overlap with other participants, but if it had, I was prepared to accept it as evidence that I did not reach saturation and that I needed to recruit additional participants (Patton, 2015).

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research begins by the researcher effectively describing the methodology used in the study (Gunawan, 2015). I provided a specific outline of my strategy so that other researchers can review and replicate the process if desired. To provide maximum credibility, I used a well-established data analysis framework as a guide, which offered a developed method used by qualitative experts. In doing so, I structured this study to mimic a process that has shown credibility with a variety of settings and topics (see Giorgi et al., 2017). Though some researchers suggest using member checking, or returning transcripts to participants to review and confirm the information, others suggest that process compromises the nature of emergent qualitative work and capturing the experiences as they are expressed (Cope, 2014; Gunawan, 2015). Since Giorgi et al. (2017) did not include member checking as part of the methodology I selected, I will not incorporate it in this study.

Transferability refers to the ability for the findings to be used by readers of the study (Cope, 2014). While qualitative research is not designed to generalize to the broader population, I expected that the findings will be supportive information for practitioners and agencies to use with adoptive families (see Patton, 2015). Though I limited the participants to parents who adopted children legally free without fostering first, I hoped to recruit parents who represent demographic diversity regarding race, gender, age, and adopted children's race, gender, and age to provide a broad scope of the experiences. The only representation that was not met was the racial diversity of the parents.

Dependability, or the consistency of the data analysis by other researchers or with the same type of group, is a controversial measure of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Cope, 2014; Gunawan, 2015). Gunawan (2015) suggested that forced measures (like member checking or expert review) to ensure the same results compromises the qualitative process, but that triangulation was important to reduce bias. I used current literature to substantiate the dependability of the findings by ensuring that current research supported the findings.

Confirmability refers to the surety that the findings derive directly from the collected information of the participants, rather than the ideas of the researcher (Cope, 2014). I used data analysis steps that begin with basic meaning units directly from the participant's responses. I provided quoted responses to support the themes that I discovered to provide readers with clear connections between the findings and the original data.

Ethical Procedures

As a licensed professional counselor, I adhere to the ACA's (2014) *Code of Ethics* in counseling, supervision, teaching, and research practice, so I followed the guidelines outlined in the code. I completed a rigorous application with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University to ensure that I met all ethical criteria for the institution's research (#02-10-18-0550081). I also participated in the National Institute of Health's web-based training course, *Protecting Human Research Participants* (Certification Number: 1779023). The informed consent process with participants played a vital role in disclosure and care for participants' experience, and I provided all of the appropriate information as detailed in the section on data collection.

Protecting participant confidentiality was an ongoing process of information management, so I assigned each participant a coded identity that was attached to any consent files, audio files, and transcripts associated with their interview and information (ACA, 2014). I stored all electronic files in double-password-protected Dropbox file. I destroyed all transcripts after the study was complete and will retain the electronic files for 5 years.

One important factor in this study was understanding that adoption is an emotional process, and answering questions related to support could have elicited negative emotions. I provided that warning before the interview started and watched for any signs of distress or discomfort during the interview process. I planned to offer referrals to their postadopt agency or LeTourneau University Center for Counseling for any participants who disclosed the need for counseling services after the interview. No

participants requested those services; however, since that need may arise later after the interview is complete, I provided them with contact information to contact me and included the referral information in the informed consent paperwork so that it was available after the interview was completed.

Finally, one additional ethical guideline for this study was the protection of the adopted children who were previously in foster care. Since the state protects their information and seals the adoption cases after completion, it was important for me to honor that confidentiality and provide the same level of protection in my study (see ACA, 2014). I asked the parents to use their child(ren)'s first initial instead of a full name during the interview process. After the interviews, I completed a data cleaning process during transcription to remove all proper names of people, agencies, cities, geographical areas, or any other indicators that could risk indirect disclosure.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the planned research method and design, and provided sound literature support to justify my choice. I explained my plan to select participants, organize my interviews, recruit participants, collect data, and analyze the data. I outlined the plan to protect the trustworthiness of this study and elaborated on specific ethical considerations that relate to the specific nature of my research. In the next chapter, I will provide the results and findings of this study as produced by the process described.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe adoptive parent's perceived experiences of support during placement through an ecological framework. As such, the research question was as follows: What are the lived experiences of adoptive parents during the time between child placement and adoption completion that they perceive affect the outcome of finalization? In this chapter, I will describe the setting, demographics of the participants, data collection and analysis processes, evidence of trustworthiness, and results of this study.

Setting

For this study, I offered participants the option to have a face-to-face interview or to complete the interview over videoconference through Zoom.us so I had the potential to recruit participants from a large geographical area and it would allow me to include them (see Woodyatt, Finneran, & Stephenson, 2016). The first two participants chose videoconference because it was more convenient due to distance, and they were comfortable with the technology. The final four participants preferred to meet face-to-face at mutually beneficial public locations including a local bank conference room, a local library meeting room, and a local university meeting room.

There were a few setting nuances that may have affected the quality of the interviews. Over the videoconferences, one participant received some auditory feedback off and on throughout the interview but reported that she was having no trouble understanding questions and providing answers. The other participant who used the

videoconference worked from home, so his phone rang twice during the interview before he silenced it. Finally, the fourth participant took a phone call from her adopted child during the interview, so we paused the recording and continued the interview after she ended the call. None of these interruptions or setting issues seemed to create a problem, discomfort, or lack of continuity in the interview process.

Demographics

I interviewed six participants and assigned a code to each as a pseudonym by using “M” for Mom and “D” for Dad with the sequential number of their interview after (e.g., M3, D5). I asked that the participants provide me with basic identifying information about themselves and their children, including age, race/ethnicity, marital status, and the age of adoption for the children to whom it applied. In the following subsections, I will provide an outline of each participant and their demographic information.

M1

M1 was a 32-year-old, White (non-Hispanic) woman who was married with two children. Her biological daughter was 4 years old and White (non-Hispanic). Her adopted daughter was 23 months old, African American, and was placed with her since the age of 9 months.

D2

D2 was a 40-year-old, White (non-Hispanic) man who was married with three children. His oldest child was a biological, White (non-Hispanic) son who was 14 years old. His second child was a 14-year-old adopted, White (non-Hispanic) daughter who

was placed with him when she was 4 days old. His third child was an adopted, White (Hispanic) son who was 7-years-old and was placed with him at age 6.

M3

M3 was a 40-year-old, White (non-Hispanic) woman who was married with three children. Participants D2 and M3 were married to each other. Her children were the same: a biological, White (non-Hispanic) son who was 14 years old; an adopted, White (non-Hispanic) daughter who was 14 years old and was placed with M3 when she was 4 days old; and an adopted, White (Hispanic) son who was 7 and was placed with her at the age of 6.

M4

M4 was a 29-year-old, White (non-Hispanic) woman who was married with two children. She had a 15-year-old, African American son who was adopted and had been placed with her within the past year. She also had a 12-year-old, White (non-Hispanic) stepson who lived with them part-time as part of a shared custody agreement.

D5

D5 was a 45-year-old, White (non-Hispanic) man who was married with three daughters. He had a 20-year-old, White (non-Hispanic) daughter who no longer lived at home. His adopted daughters were biological half-sisters, both White (non-Hispanic). His older adopted daughter was 9-years-old and was placed with him at the age of 19 months. His youngest adopted daughter was 6-years-old and was placed with him at the age of 1 year.

M6

M6 was a 33-year-old, White (non-Hispanic) woman who was married with three sons. All three of her sons were adopted and were biracial (White and American Indian). Her first adopted child was her youngest and was 5 years old and had been placed as an infant at 2 days old. Her older sons were ages 13 and 10 and were placed with her at ages 11 and 9 respectively.

Data Collection

I interviewed six participants who were solicited from a flyer delivered in person and online through a postadoption agency (see Appendix A). Additionally, though I did not have to use snowball sampling, I discovered when interviewing two of my participants that previous participants recruited them because they felt the study was important. I scheduled 90-minute interview times with each participant, which included a timed interview of up to 60 minutes and an additional 30 minutes for questions before and debriefing after as needed.

The first two participants opted to use the video conferencing options because it was convenient to their location and they were comfortable using the technology it required (see Woodyatt et al., 2016). The program I offered, Zoom.us, provides the ability to record the interview, which was successful with both interviews. The last four participants preferred face-to-face meetings, and I used a handheld audio recording device to capture the interviews. I met with M3 at a local bank conference room, M4 at a local public library meeting room, and participants D5 and M6 separately at a local university meeting room. For participants M1, D2, D5, and M6, determining the location

or method of interviewing presented no issues. However, M3 and M4 lived in rural communities that made it difficult to find public meeting spaces. For example, the town where M3 lived did not have a public library, and the closest library was a single-room building with no meeting rooms. I attempted to secure a third library's meeting rooms, but because it was also in a small town, it was only open a few days per week, and I was met with a voicemail upon calling to inquire about scheduling a meeting room. I was able to reach out to a bank in a neighboring town, and the manager was willing to allow us to use the conference room. When scheduling an interview with M4, a similar issue occurred related to her residence in a small town. We planned to meet at a local library in a larger town near her, and they required an application to reserve the room. However, they overlooked approving it, and we were waiting that day to get approval, which concerned the participant since I was driving to meet her there closer to her hometown. Despite the few issues, I completed the interviews with no obvious problems related to the issue of finding meeting locations.

After completing the first interview, I became aware that the second question that I was using, specifically the phrasing of "what were some of the most significant occurrences that led to finalization rather than disruption," caused confusion for the participants and did not translate into productive answers. I did not ask that question in the subsequent five interviews and instead took advantage of the semistructured interview process to ask follow-up questions after their first broad answer (see Patton, 2015). That decision resulted in no confusion in the subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

After completing each interview, I listened to a recording of it in its entirety and created a word-for-word transcription to use for coding and analysis. I transcribed the interviews as I completed them so the process of analysis would remain emergent and I could use the information to inform my questions in subsequent interviews (see Patton, 2015). As suggested by Giorgi et al. (2017), I read through the transcripts from beginning to end to capture the entire lived experience as the first step in the analytical process. After transcribing all the transcripts, I made the mental shift to assume the attitude of phenomenological reduction, which places the researcher in a place to experience the written descriptions as phenomena rather than, in this case, events to be interpreted (see Giorgi et al., 2017). The second step in the analytical process also corresponds to the process of bracketing, or the checking of preconceived ideas and notions about experiences, in traditional transcendental phenomenology (Giorgi et al., 2017; Tufford & Newman, 2012). The third step in analysis was creating meaning units from the descriptions in the transcripts that could be organized into themes, and the fourth step was transforming those units into phenomenologically, psychologically informed descriptions (Giorgi et al., 2017). For Steps 3 and 4, I read through each transcript and assigned meaning units to the experiences, and then revisited the meaning units to develop them into more phenomenologically, psychologically informed descriptions for easier integration into themes (see Giorgi et al., 2017). In the final step, I organized the structure of the general experience and used the ecological model as a framework to guide the organization of the themes (see Bronfenbrenner, 1997; Giorgi et al., 2017).

As a result of using the ecological model to inform the interview questions, I was able to collect a significant amount of data related to each ecological level. As such, I discovered 26 major themes within the four levels of the model, eight of which had two to four subthemes attached to them. At Level 1, the individual level, the participants identified 10 areas of their personal characteristics that were supportive to their positive adoption outcome including (a) commitment to the adoption and/or the child, (b) focus on the child's needs/selflessness, (c) empathy for the child's experiences, (d) the ability to reframe negative behaviors, (e) resourcefulness, (f) education/willingness to seek continued training, (g) assertiveness, (h) determination/confidence, (i) self-sufficient, and (j) spiritual or faith connection. At Level 2, the relational level, the themes identified were (a) spouse, (b) adoptive parent's children (siblings), (c) extended family, (d) workplace, and (e) friends/peers. The themes of extended family, workplace, and friends/peers each had subthemes of support from members of the group and lack of support from members of the group. Additionally, the friends/peers theme contained two additional subthemes that related to friendships with people who have foster/adoption experience and the importance of social media. Under Level 3, the community level, eight themes emerged including (a) Child Protective Services (CPS), (b) private adoption agencies, (c) other system influencers, (d) church, (e) school, (f) other community sources, (g) value of unutilized services, and (h) value of flexibility availability for consultation. The first five themes contained the subthemes of support and lack of support. At Level 4, the societal level, four themes emerged including (a) dichotomy of opinions about adoption and foster care, (b) stigma related to transracial adoptions, (c)

stigma related to older children from foster care, and (d) voluntary normalization from others with similar experiences. A final overarching theme that the participants presented was the desire to influence the system at each level beyond themselves (relational, community, and societal) in a positive way for adoption.

As part of the data analysis organization, I organized supporting statements from the participants under each theme and was able to see significant overlap, with consistent overlap in the themes presented earlier in this section. Though some participants had additional experiences of support not represented in the themes, they were singular instances and could be described as an individual nuance rather than the general lived experiences. Important to note, no prospective themes had two or three supporting participants; the themes either had one instance or four to six supportive participant experiences leading me to believe that I effectively reached saturation of the data (see Fusch & Ness, 2015). At that point, I was secure in the effectiveness of the six participant sample size and found no reason to collect additional data.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To provide a foundation for trustworthiness in this study, I have offered a clear description of the methodology I followed in case future researchers find it beneficial to expand or revisit the topic (see Gunawan, 2015). By using a well-established methodology that has been refined over the past 40 years by respected qualitative experts, I secured a sense of credibility for my findings. When considering the transferability of the study findings, I had hoped to secure a diverse demographic of adoptive parents related to race, age, gender, and adopted child demographics. Though all the parents

involved in this study were White, they represented diversity in age, gender, and child demographics. Since the primary focus of participant selection in qualitative research relates to specific shared experiences, the findings are likely to resonate with families in similar situations (see Patton, 2015). Additionally, transferability was increased by the strength of support from all participants for most themes.

Dependability in qualitative research is controversial, as some experts suggest member checking, expert review, and triangulation are options to ensure the dependability of the themes (see Cope, 2014; Gunawan, 2015). I did not utilize member checking or expert review as a means of trustworthiness checking because it was not required by the established analysis process I chose and could alter the natural process of qualitative data collection (see Gunawan, 2015). As such, I opted for triangulation using current literature to substantiate the themes. Finally, to offer an assurance of confirmability that the information reported in the themes was the ideas and experiences of the participants, I provided extensive quoted responses to support the themes that connect them back to the original data (see Cope, 2014).

Results

The research question for this study was as follows: What are the lived experiences of adoptive parents during the time between child placement and adoption completion that they perceive affect the outcome of finalization? After analyzing the data provided by the participants, I discovered clear themes of support experiences at each of the four levels of the ecological model. The data yielded 10 themes under the individual level, five themes under the relational level, eight themes under the community level, and

four themes under the societal level. See Figure 2 for a visual model of the themes highlighted at each level.

Level 1 – Individual Level

During the interviews with participants, I asked for them to specifically indicate their personality traits or personal and internal characteristics that they identified as supportive to a positive adoption outcome. Unsurprisingly, most were hesitant to claim many individual characteristics directly, but their traits also emerged as they offered their experiences in general. As such, 10 themes emerged regarding the parent internal experience within these parents' stories.

Theme 1: Commitment to adoption and/or the child. The participants were clear about their commitment to the adoption and/or to the child and made it clear that they did not see the placement time as a trial period for decisions. Testa et al. (2014) established that negative behavior was only connected to placement disruption if the parent thoughts of ending permanency were not considered in the analysis. When mediated by parent decisions to continue or discontinue placement, child behaviors were no longer significant as an indicator. So early commitment, even before placement, makes a difference in the outcome. For example, Participant D5 stated:

I remember...dealing with all that stuff with the foster parents and the lawsuit and all that. The supervisor with the state came and she goes, you know you can change your mind. And my wife looked at her and said we've got her name on the wall...She's ours.

Similarly, Participant M4 provided:

And we saw that there were lots of behavioral issues there was a lot of things we didn't really understand but we knew we could do it because he's supposed to be our child... I think that to send him back into care...that is what I was determined more than anything else to keep from happening and because I refuse to give up on him. He has had 15 years of people giving up on him.

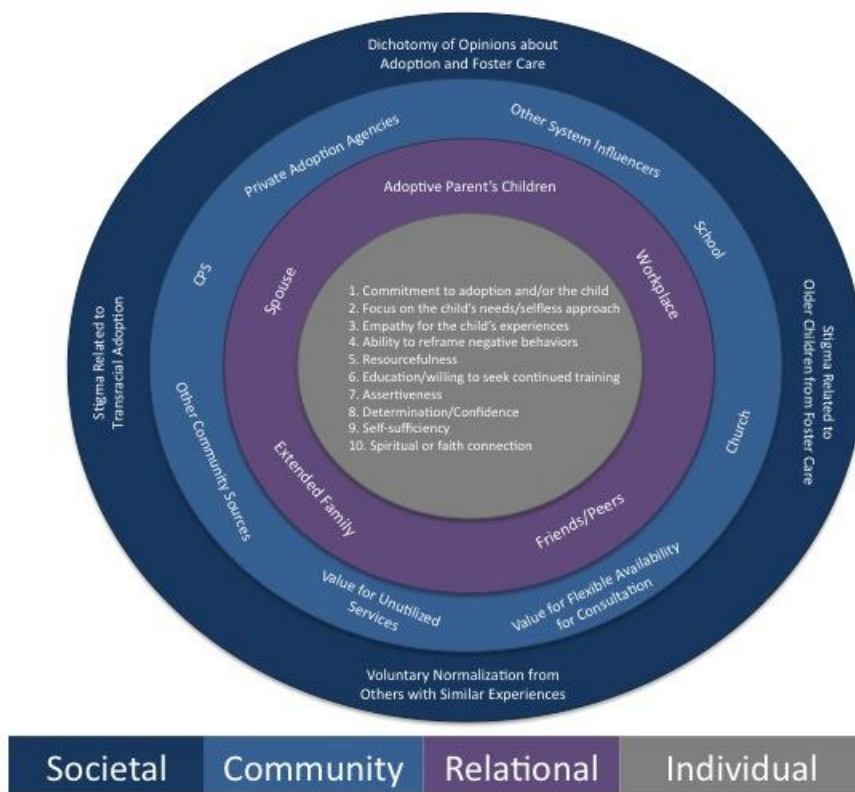


Figure 2. Sources of support experiences at each of the ecological model levels.

Parents who commit to the child ahead of time establish that they are committed to working through negative behavioral issues or risk factors rather than returning the child to foster care. Participant M3 offered:

There's no way we wanted to bring him home and it not be successful... I already felt like it was a risky placement. Not that any placement is not risky, but he'd already had two failed adoptions. And so, my heart was already there with him as far as, I can't imagine what he's already heard, what he's already been promised, what he's already been told... there's no way he's getting that from me. He's not getting that from me until, until he gets it from me and then it's going to be 199%.

Theme 2: Focus on the child's needs/selflessness. Though the children adopted by the participants in this study spanned a wide variety of ages and situations, each parent offered a clear commitment to the child's needs and best interest above their personal desires and comfort. Since children who have been in foster care have experienced abuse and neglect, they require a nurturing environment that can help them heal (Goldman & Ryan, 2011). One way that arose from the data was in the parent's desire for their child to be placed in the best home with the type of connection most likely to benefit the child. For example, M1 stated:

The only thing I can think of that would cause a disruption would be a family came forward particularly my daughter has three older siblings who live in two other houses were adopted by two other houses, so I imagine if either one of those families had said actually we do we can take her, we would have lost her. And it would have been the right thing to do just to let her go.

Similarly, Participant D5 described a time before placement where the foster parents changed their minds numerous times about whether they wanted to adopt the child. D5

and his wife were willing to step aside since the child had been placed with the foster parents for a while and already had a connection:

They said that they were just a foster home and they said they were not interested in adopting her, so we went forward, and we get to moving, and then all of a sudden, they said no we want her. So, we start backing up and they say no we don't. And they went through this about four different times. This transpired over a long period of time. I don't recall exact amount of time it was seemed like eternity.

The ability for parents to prioritize the child's needs over their personal needs is one that several parents mentioned as evidenced by M3's statement:

And that six months was just really wild...really wild... Life just kind of stopped. We had to be home at 6:30. If we pushed to seven, we were going to pay for that day, the next day. You know everything comes with a consequence. We already live pretty routine and we're pretty simple. And we just kept finding another layer of simplicity and another layer of trying to do whatever we can do to keep him from going into fight and flight mode.

Though children from foster care struggle and their negative behaviors can be discouraging and confusing to the parents, Participant M4 summarized a selfless commitment to the child's needs by stating:

But you have to do what you have to do because it's your kid. I refused to give up. And my husband refused to give up. My son is still waiting on us to give up. I refuse. And I think that had a lot to do with it.

Theme 3: Empathy for the child's experiences. All the parents interviewed expressed a deep empathy for their children's difficult life experiences. When reviewing research related to risk factors associated with disruption, many of the risk factors are associated with negative childhood experiences and things that are out of the child's control (Barth, 1991; Rosenthal & Groze, 1991; Smith & Howard, 1999). Because those items are the same that put the child at risk for disruption, parent empathy for the child's background may mediate their interpretation of interactions that could otherwise be seen as detrimental or unfixable. Participant M4 described reading the file that CPS provided her before she committed to adopting her son:

So, we read it. It is over 1,700 pages long and my husband and I stayed up all night reading it and was one of the most heartbreaking things I have ever read. I wasn't even able to read it all. Because it was... how does a person function going through all that and mean just... Wow.

Empathizing with the child's experience was also evident in their expectations for the child's adjustment to a new family and the attachment and bonding process. Carnes-Holt (2012) noted that children from foster care might resist close relationships or have trouble attaching, so the ability to reframe sabotaging behaviors is vital related to relational bonding. M3 explained meeting her son:

...and she introduced us all, the worker did, and she said, now what do you want him to call you. And I was like, oh... Whatever he wants to call you know whatever he's comfortable with and he was so cute. He was like...I think I want to

call you my mom and I'm like, well that's awesome. But if you don't, that's okay too, you know.

Rather than worry about his success or failure with bonding, Participant D2 considered the experiences of his son:

I mean I was the last one he had bonded with... he had a foster dad... I'm not saying the guy was bad or anything, but I don't know how involved he was with the foster kids because they had another older child that was disabled of some sort. I don't even know the whole story, but I think he spent most of his time caring for her full-time as a full-time caregiver and then she [foster mom] dealt with all the foster kids. So, my son wanted a father. You could tell that from the get-go that was his desire, but he did not know how to take it.

Similarly, Participant M6, who adopted older children, determined to work with her sons to build an intentional bond and allow them to grow into it:

So, we tried really hard to get that bond and to get where all of them have felt comfortable talking to us. [It was not] we need you to be like this... It was OK, let's see what you're like and get it to work.

Finally, an additional level of empathy expressed was the long-term experience of the children's experience as foster and adopted children, and their reflection later in life. For example, participant M1 stated:

I don't know I want that burden, obligation for them to be a poster child for preventing cruelty to children. Just because I want to volunteer to wrap presents

for CASA, should I make them too? I don't want to feel like, especially my adopted daughter, I don't want her to feel like she owes anyone anything.

Theme 4: Ability to reframe negative behaviors. A valuable skill for adoptive parents was the ability to reframe the negative behaviors expressed by their children as indicators of needs, expressions of pain, and responses to the traumatic experiences of entering and exiting family systems. Duemer et al. (2016) suggested themes that provide healthy adoption outcomes for children, and one of those themes was a caring environment during the child's struggles. In adoptive families, the ability for a parent to understand negative behaviors beyond the inconvenience to the current family situation is vital to fostering a loving environment that can promote growth and healing. That process can be difficult for parents as they may struggle internally to connect and understand what their child is experiencing. When adoptive parents actively engage with their children's grief processes and maintain healthy self-care and internal processing, they strengthen the family system (Fineran, 2012). Participant D2, after explaining some of the physically destructive behaviors their son expressed in the home, noted, "But I mean he's done lots of stuff around the house. You know just to everybody and everything else probing for weaknesses. Well, do you really love me, those kinds of things." With an older adopted child, Participant M4 expressed difficulties trying to communicate with her son. However, rather than internalize the issue, she was willing to trace it back to its likely roots:

He wasn't understanding what I was saying. He wasn't understanding that I was trying to help him. Because all the maternal roles in his life to beat the crap out of him. Had left him. Had literally beat him and then left him.

Additionally, Participant M4 explained her son's difficulty with the adoption finalization and expressed how great of a joy adoption day was, but how her son's emotions were varied:

And what we didn't realize in the celebrating of his adoption is we were celebrating that he didn't have a birth family that's his anymore. And that's hard to want to celebrate... that you have a kid, but you're celebrating... that he doesn't have his other parents. So, I didn't fully get that. I was caught up in me.

As a summarizing example, Participant M6 gave an example of a conversation that occurred before they were placed with their sons regarding the potential for negative behaviors:

I said yes we're going into it with the best ideas. But we are prepared if, you know, it's not exactly like we think it's going to be. But we're going into this as you don't know that's going to happen with your own kids that you birthed. So, you can't go into this thinking that, oh what if they do this or what if they do that? So how is it different? They're older. They're going to have issues. You know, we have issues. And we are all just going to deal with them together.

Theme 5: Resourcefulness. The adoptive parents explained many instances when they realized that they needed information, training, and other things that required a level of resourcefulness to either find what they needed or find the right people to ask for help.

As primary influencers of the system, parents have a significant amount of influence over the outcomes of the family system (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010). As such, when there are problems within the family system, parents have the primary responsibility to find options for solving the issues. When Participant M1, a White female, adopted an African American daughter, she asked her agency for the advertised trainings related to hair and skin care. When she was met with no resources from her agency, she reported:

So, I went to a hair school, like a professional hair school, and got certified in African braiding. I took a course, I bought a mannequin, and I learned all sorts of braids. Yeah, that was like an important part for me in like becoming her mom just learning how to do her hair.

In situations where system resources do not work, parents may need to figure out ways to meet immediate needs outside of the resources that are supposed to be available. For example, Participant M4's son had Medicaid for vision insurance, but because of the system turnover, no one related to his case was designated as the primary medical consentor, the only person who could change the consentor was the current designee, and the state would not release the name of the designee. So, during the placement, she was unable to use her son's medical and vision insurance. She offered:

If I had not had if I had not been up to bat for him, he would have never gotten the glasses that he was getting headaches and he couldn't read. How many kids are out there that don't have that? And I didn't know how to go about getting those things, so I paid for them out of pocket because nobody gave me an answer.

In many cases, resourcefulness included asking for help from system influencers or conducting personal research. Participant M6 reported:

And so, every time I had a question I mean our caseworker got an e-mail or text message because I want to know the answer, or I'd inform myself a lot. So, I went on the Internet and found out all kinds of things... that's what I did for the whole process. I informed myself on almost everything, found who I needed to find for whatever.

Another aspect of reframing negative behaviors that emerged was a narrative within each adoptive parent's story that emphasized their sense of being lucky, fortunate, or blessed that their situation was not as difficult as others and their awareness of what they have gained from adoption. Though each expressed difficult experiences, with some noting struggles many would consider extreme, they all felt they got the best child(ren) and were grateful they had the ability to handle the issues they encountered as opposed to other imagined issues that may have been more difficult. Participant D5 said:

I see a lot of foster kids. It's the kids who have clear memory of what just happened and then they're going into another home and I think...it takes longer for the kids to accept them. That's the stories I'm talking about. And as I said, I don't think it's just older kids. I think it's a lot of kids...any age. But we just, we didn't feel it. It was something special.

Participant M6 shared a similar sentiment when she offered:

...We had all that trauma training and our boys certainly are affected by trauma and we're affected because they were affected... I think because we got so many

horror stories of worst case scenario when we went into it, about like you know RAD [Reactive Attachment Disorder] and all that stuff that could have happened that when we got our boys, it's like, ok, this isn't bad at all... I know we had it lucky with our boys because we've talked to people that have had so many more issues than we did. And so I mean, we had our own issues, but it was nothing we couldn't deal with which makes us want to do it again at the same time.

Participant M3 mentioned several times how fortunate she felt and said, "I feel like I got the best kid out there and I got my kid." And Participant M1 offered the broader perspective of her journey as a foster and adoptive parents: "I feel like I owe something because I got so much out of [this process]... I still feel like I can never repay what I took out since I have my adopted daughter now."

Theme 6: Education/willing to seek continued training. During the interviews, adoptive parents often referenced their personal education, training experiences before placement, and training sought after placement as helpful during the adoption process. Though similar, to the previous theme of resourcefulness, the meaning units that supported education and training were more related to the information gathered and the desire for continued training rather than the ability to find answers or solutions to problems as they arose. This theme highlights one of the ways parents can use their influence over the family system to guide it into the healthiest system it can be (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010). Previous research has connected mother's education levels to positive adoption outcomes, which could support the value of continuing education as well (Coakley & Berrick, 2008). Parents interviewed mentioned their education and

training in fields like law, education, and physical therapy as helpful during their placements. For example, Participant M1 stated:

And I was told, "Usually we don't get back to a parent until the day before the adoption." I was like, are we talking about a couple pages and he's like we're talking about like two big binders, like dictionary thick. I'm a lawyer... I looked up in the family code and I saw that they had to give it to us if we requested it, if the prospective parent requests it.

Additionally, Participant M3 mentioned her training in physical therapy and her work with children with special needs as helpful when they met her son for the first time to help make him feel comfortable and put him in a position of power and control so that he did not feel threatened. Additionally, M3 expressed her willingness to seek additional cultural training after being placed with her son, who is Hispanic. She noted:

He started pointing out to me because he had like several different little kids Bibles and different things, and he was like, "Momma, why are all the Jesuses in your Bibles white?" And I'm like, "You know, good question...we've got to go get some new books. Will you help me?" And so, he opened our eyes to a lot of cultural stuff.

Participant D5 suggested that effective training before placement helped mitigate some of the concerns they may have had:

A lot of the training we did through the state, as I was telling you earlier, some of it was out there, but some of it was very useful and you didn't realize until you get in the middle of it and you're like that's why they cover that... So, they really

helped us prepare a lot for the interaction and some the issues we deal with along the way.

During placement, parents expressed that they experienced things that they do not know how to handle, and the willingness to seek education or training aided in their effectiveness to help their children adjust. Participant M4 stated, “I had no idea how to read a psychological evaluation. I had to Google it.” She also noted watching trainings individually to help her change how she interacted with her child for more positive outcomes:

I was on the TBRI [Trust Based Relational Intervention] website just trying to get more information. It was a couple of weeks ago and it was probably the best thing that has happened to mine and my son's relationship. It was talking to the effect of children from trauma, they don't understand long, lengthy things. They can't process all that. And they use the analogy similar to "In my residence on the second floor someone left a cigarette out next to my toaster that caught a towel to be inflamed therefore causing smoke to engulf my residence..." I mean it was this long... You can say all that with just: Fire. That's how I have to talk to my child. And it works. You have to be able to change yourself. It's hard.

Theme 7: Assertiveness. Parent assertiveness, or the willingness to speak up and ask for what they need or advocate for their child and family was consistent in the data collected. While assertiveness and asking for items needed yielded results in most cases according to the parents in this study, research also shows that parents who coach their children in interpersonal reactions and empower them to speak for themselves produce

children who have better peer relationships and are less likely to be victimized by bullying (Healy, Sanders, & Iyers, 2015). So, assertiveness may serve as a benefit in both immediate and long-term ways. Interestingly, a couple of parents were not comfortable labeling their assertiveness as such, some referring to assertiveness as though it had a negative connotation similar to aggressiveness. Participant M4 explained a time before placement when she was trying to connect with her future son and did not receive a response:

I started to call supervisors at this point. Nothing. So, after the Christmas holiday, I made more phone calls. More supervisors. I had bent over backwards trying to get some kind of information from these people. Anything. And I finally get to the point where I go to my caseworker's office... I said you have given me no information, nothing. What is going on?

Other parents owned assertiveness as a significant part of their personality. Participant D5 stated, "Yeah I'm very assertive, and especially about something I'm passion about it," and participant simply explained, "I guess I'll ask for anything and that's part of my personality." Participant M4 offered a metaphor as she expressed her willingness to advocate for her son: "I mean a lot of people laugh and say they're a mama bear and, I'm like, I so wish I was a mama bear. I'm more like a mama orangutan."

Theme 8: Determination/Confidence. Children from foster care often exhibit struggles and negative behaviors associated with their experiences of trauma and grief rather than normal developmental milestones (Fineran, 2012). This engagement is emotionally taxing on adoptive parents and can be interpreted as rejection of the family

or parent's love. Additionally, the process of adoption was described as extensive and, at times, exasperating. However, a theme that arose was that of determination and confidence in their abilities to succeed as parents and families. For example, M1 stated, "I never had any reason to doubt that this would be any different...that parenting would be any different, that I wouldn't be successful at parenting, that I couldn't make a relationship work..." Participant D5 described working through the process:

I mean I can't tell you how many hoops and stuff we had to jump through for our private adoption agency on all kinds of stuff. I mean just even after we got through the required training again. I mean, the training was hard enough in itself but when we got through the training, it was it was always turned around and we had to do some kind of project. We had a build...we had to write a welcome home book, we had to write this kind of poem, we had to build this thing, and we had to go make sure that there's fire escape, or you know I mean just I don't know...just on and on and on and on.

As an example of persistence and dedication with difficult behaviors that result from trauma, Participant M4 offered:

And you have to have giving heart because it's going to get stomped on, but you had to keep giving it to them. Because they don't know how to deal with it. And they're going to mess up a bunch, but when they get it right, it's going to be wonderful.

Theme 9: Self-sufficiency. The parents expressed attitudes of self-sufficiency.

Though all were willing to be assertive and advocate for their children, many admitted

their personal difficulty with asking for help. Participant M6 represented both sentiments when she said, “We were also the personalities where we like to be self-sufficient. Or if we have a question, we'll find it out on our own or we'll ask what we need to ask..” Some parents felt disappointed by others not offering help, as M6 reported when she adopted older children:

We weren't brought meals or anything like that, which was kind of discouraging, because at the same time this other family had had a baby and they had meals brought in for 2 weeks and it's like OK here we are going from a family of three to five... and yes, we're very self-sufficient and take care of ourselves, but that kind of hurt.

Others turned down offers of help or did not know what to request when asked what they needed. For example, Participant M3 said, “I'm pretty independent even though I needed things. [My friend] just called and said what can I do? And I'm like, I don't know just pray.” Similarly, Participant M1 noted, “A couple of people asked if they could throw me a shower with her. I don't need anything. This is my second daughter, like my third child that I raised, so we have everything.” Participant D2 described his wife and himself in the following manner:

We're pretty private people, so getting a lot of help is not necessarily something we're going to go out and do. As far as, you're not going find me post on social media, "Today is terrible, y'all come help!" ... We're not those kind of people.

Theme 10: Spiritual or faith connection. Though not all participants claimed a faith background or specific spiritual or religious beliefs, the participants who did were

clear that their spiritual connection played a role in their positive outcomes. Duemer et al. (2016) found that adults who were adopted as children noted that their parents providing a spiritual example and connection was significant in helping with struggles during their development. Several of the parents noted that they felt a divine connection to the child or children they adopted and that it helped offer perspective during difficult times.

Participant D2 said:

But if it wasn't for our faith we wouldn't ever made it. I mean it just that was what we knew we were supposed to do. And that's where we were headed and there wasn't much going to change my mind.

When asked what individual traits he attributed to a successful adoption outcome,

Participant D5 said:

With me it's God. Period. I can't define it better than that. He's my leader. So, He got me through that and helped me understand it, helped me to appreciate it, and helps me to be where I am today and continue to deal with it. So that's me.

Participant M6 noted that her husband and she expedited their adoption process of their older boys because they had prayed about it and felt a peace from God that it was right.

Parents also offered a reliance on understanding that they were not the only ones working to help their child adjust and heal, but trusted God in that process. Participant M3 stated, "But I was sat back and watched God just breathe life into this child was just beautiful... a beautiful thing. Before, he didn't have any confidence, he didn't have any hope..."

Finally, parents noted a connection to God through church attendance and as a revitalizing practice. For example, Participant M4 described how difficult it was after

placement and feeling separated from church and from her spiritual connection. After reconnecting, she felt more hopeful and encouraged. She offered:

And since we went back to church, it's helped... to help longer look at all the crazy mess surrounding us but to focus on God and go, OK, I know you've [God] got it. We're depleted and we're defeated and we need help. And it's sad to say that we were in a bad place. And when you're at the bottom, all you have to do is look up... It's made it better. It's made us refocus on things. I'm thankful to get to go back to church.

Level 2 – Relational Level

Theme 1: Spouse. Adoptive parents credit their spousal connection and support as valuable in their success as an adoptive family. Previous research offered that family systems that were already healthy promoted successful adoptions and that support groups for marriages during the adoption process helped strengthen the whole family and increased placement stability (Leung et al., 2005; Schwartz et al., 2014). Participant M3 explained the connection by describing:

Probably my biggest [source of support] was definitely my husband because I felt like...the whole time he was just he was determined that we were in it together. He was determined that we were going to spend time alone and that we were going to continue going on dates and that you know he was going to take off to go to any and all counseling appointments during that time... just very, very in the ditch with me in it.

Similarly, Participant D5 stated, “But, I have a tremendous marriage that I’ll brag on and we helped each other deal with it, helped each other cope with it.”

An interesting note regarding the experiences of spousal support is that no participants mentioned a lack of support from their spouse. Though several noted the strain the adoption process took on their marriage, their conclusions about their connection with their spouse were positive. That finding connects to Timm et al.’s (2011) study that explored adoptive mother experiences and whether the experiences were strengthening or challenging to the mother individually and to her perception of challenge to her relationship with her spouse. Ultimately, the mothers reported experiencing issues that influenced their couple relationship but reported higher measures of strengthening rather than challenging (Timm et al., 2011). Participant M4 discussed her relationship and the strain it was under in the following way: “My husband is my very best friend and it has been hard to find that best friend because we are dealing with so much.” In the midst of the challenge, Participant M4 also explained several instances where her spouse encouraged her to grow and foster a stronger relationship with their son. For example, she said:

And my husband at that point was so tired of being the mediator. [I would say] I can't talk to him, so you make him do it. Or [our son would say] she's not understanding what I'm saying, you talk to her... He said I can't be your go-between. You're going to have to learn how to do it.

Another aspect of spousal support noted was the division of the overwhelming amount of physical and mental work that is required for adoption. Parents explained the

amount of documentation related to behaviors, traveling, discipline, and incidents required. They explained the number of appointments that new adoptive parents must make and attend with their placed children, both for adoption and at times to catch up on appointments they did not meet while in foster care (like dental, medical, and psychological). In addition to those items, the bonding and connection to the child, care for other family members, and navigation of the system created an overwhelming situation for most parents. In that environment, the parents separated tasks and “divide and conquer” according to Participant D2. He was discussing their need to gather information and mentioned, “I’m not as good at it and she’s very good and very, very passionate about it. And so, I mean, there’s no reason for me to duplicate that when I can’t do as good of a job.”

Theme 2: Adoptive parent’s children (siblings). Though often overlooked in adoption and family system experiences, siblings play an influential role in each other’s experiences (Farr, Flood, & Grotevant, 2016). The parents interviewed expressed gratefulness and recognition of their other children’s efforts of support in the family’s adoption process. Though the adoptive children studied were private, domestic adoptions, Farr et al. (2016) found significant evidence to suggest that adoptive child experiences in adolescence and emerging adulthood were associated with sibling dynamics, this data suggests that sibling dynamics in foster-care adoptions may also play a role in positive outcomes. A few parents noted their biological children’s acceptance or effort to connect with the adopted children. Participant M1, when speaking of her young biological daughter, noted, “Our biological daughter was overjoyed to have a sister in the house and

it was just a really happy occasion.” Similarly, Participant D5 offered, “I have an older daughter, a biological daughter, that would visit once a month so getting her acquainted with her and getting to know everybody was extremely smooth.”

Though sibling acceptance was important, parents also noted the help and influence that older children had when adopting a younger child. For example, Participant D2 offered a story of his youngest, adopted son watching his older adoptive siblings take the stand in court and testify that they wanted him to join the family and how important that was. Participant M3 suggested that her older adopted daughter helped normalize the environment for her youngest adopted son when he arrived:

So, when he first met my daughter, the first time... she got right beside him, and she was like I'm adopted, so I'm your go-to. I'm your chick, you know, and so he was like all about that. And so pretty much for the first month he was glued to her and she was glued to him.

When the environment was difficult and the family experienced struggles, Participant M3 also noted the value of her teenage children stepping in to help with the day-to-day household duties. She said:

I mean there were a lot of times we were just in the yard and our youngest son was just melting down, and I would look in the kitchen window and there's the 14-year-old cooking supper. You know, and it's just like. Lord, I did not deserve that child, you know.

The engagement from siblings in the home whether through emotional acceptance or taking on additional work to help the home run smoothly suggests that the other children in the family system have an influence on the overall outcome of adoption.

Theme 3: Extended family. In this study, extended family support experiences ranged from high levels of connection and dedication to separation from extended family as a result of difficult interactions related to the adoption or adoption process. After giving birth to a baby, new mothers and fathers experience stress as they transition into parenthood (Chong, Gordon, & Don, 2017). Likewise, when adding a new child to a family through adoption, the stressors of becoming adoptive parents (even if they have been parents before) can be overwhelming. Adoptive parents seek family support just as new biological parents do when faced with the stress associated with changes in the family system (Chong et al., 2017).

For the adoptive parents who experienced extended family support, the appreciation was clear. Since Participant M6 had adopted before, she explained the experience of her family support during their second adoption:

I have my parents who live only 30 minutes away...extremely supportive. Plus they've already gone through this with their youngest getting to the idea of, okay, my daughter's not going to birth a child but this is still my grandchild. They had no problem acclimating on. They'd already had stuff in the rooms for the kids on weekends. They made sure to come visit and see them. And get that relationship was well, and at the same time they backed off sometimes we could get that bond. So they're extremely, I mean like they right away, and the kids took to them

because they're so loving and it wasn't just about like them giving gifts but they were coming to spend time with them and get to know them and talk with them. So that made a difference.

Participant D5 noted additional family support and the excitement of the adoption experience:

Outside of that I had a lot of family that they really stepped up and I don't know if it was because I was getting a new child...it was the adoption thing and they'd never been around somebody who went through that because a lot of families don't have that experience in them.

And Participant M1 offered a similar sentiment about her family's excitement just after placement:

Everyone was happy. It was probably overwhelming for her. But my family was all in town even from as far as Asia. They came to spend Christmas with us. And so everyone got to meet her. Everyone was happy.

The other side of extended family support experiences revolved around the lack of support or understanding of the adoption process and the difficulties associated with it. The parents offered their discouragement, pain, and confusion at some responses offered by their extended families. Before placement, Participant M1 noted that her parents struggled with some of the paperwork requirements. She said:

We did have a couple of challenges actually when we first became licensed my parents did not want to submit their social security numbers to have background checks done. And so that was sort of like it felt like a stab in the heart. I thought,

one of these kids someday will be their grandchild. Why aren't they taking this seriously?

Participant M6 noted issues with in-laws regarding their acceptance of the children before the process was final and how difficult it was to try and navigate their hesitancy. She said:

We didn't have any hiccups except my husband's family... I mean they wouldn't hold the baby shower [for their first infant adoption] until we'd had him for three months in case something happened... They didn't ever say, you know, these are not your kids or things like that. They just weren't as openly like, hey, let's come out and get together so they can meet their cousins and stuff. It was, okay, we're going to come out for this birthday party, you know bringing our kids... here are their names. They didn't come the finalization or anything like that.

Participant M4 described her family as supportive and accepting of their transracial adoption, as her family was already diverse in race before she was placed with her son. However, after she adopted a teenager, her family had a very difficult time understanding the unique struggles associated with that dynamic. She offered:

My family is big and loud and messy and supportive. But it is hard for my family to understand that while, yes my child is broken, and yes he's rude. He is disrespectful. He can be downright hurtful on purpose. It's because he's broken and I'm trying to parent different. Because once he's not so broken, he won't act that way.

Ultimately, Participant M3 offered a statement that highlighted the overall sentiments of the parents interviewed. While extended family was important and they wanted to stay connected, those relationships took a backseat to the connection and dedication to their adopted children. Their families made some requests about their adoption process and she explained as she laughed, "...we honored those wishes because family means everything, though in a lot of ways it means less after you adopt sometimes."

Theme 4: Workplace. Workplace as a theme, was another area that produced stories of both support and of challenges in the adoption process among the parents interviewed. Specifically, flexibility in work structure was noted as beneficial with the demands of the adoption process. For instance, Participant D2 worked from home and stated,

So you know so without me being at home I don't know how we would do it. I mean we've talked about that with her job and everything... If she wants to be at home, do I need to go get another job where she doesn't have to work? And if we do that what's that going to do to our whole schedule because...a lot of it was built on my flexibility.

Alternately, Participant M6 experienced a workplace that made the adoption process more difficult, and she had to find a new job. She reported:

Another reason I left where I had been is because when we adopted our first child, they wouldn't let me use any of my sick time that I'd built up. I'd built up like 120 hours of sick time to use when I knew we were going to adopt our kid and I knew we were going to take FMLA leave and all that. But they said because I didn't

actually, physically birth a child, I couldn't use my sick time for my FMLA leave. Like, are you kidding me? They were like, if I was breastfeeding the child it would be different.

Other items related to working environments included support from peers at work like encouragement, offering maternity and paternity leave, and throwing showers for adoptive families. Participant D5 said,

My wife is a teacher, so she took maternity leave...with our oldest. Our second one came in the summertime so we had all summer off with her. I did not take extended...I took a few days off but I didn't take an extended time. I could have. It was offered. Once again I'm a Generation X...so I got to go to work. But no I could have. My work even threw a baby shower for us and everything. It was pretty cool.

And Participant M6 reflected on the difficulty juggling two work schedules as they both worked during the adoption placement time period, and she was in a new job. She said:

I didn't have any time off built up because I hadn't been there enough, but I needed to take all these days. They're very family oriented in that department. It was a more faith-based organization. I mean, like, we had devotionals and things like that, so they completely understood because the adoption agency we went through was more Christian based. People knew people from there and they were more understanding. As long as we gave them notice, I was ok... Now, my husband was a teacher and it's not as easy to get time off. But he's a schmoozer and so he's friends with everybody and their brother at the high school that works

at and so they would understand... It may be unpaid, but just let us know when and we'll make it work on both sides because everybody knew how important this was to us.

When reviewing the literature related to work-family conflict and flexibility in the workplace, Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, and Shockley (2016) analyzed the connection between the two variables and found little significance to suggest that work flexibility made a difference in the conflict. However, they did note a difference in the breakdown of the results between the benefits of flexibility for parents as opposed to adults with no children (Allen et al., 2016). In light of those findings, the current information suggests that the additional responsibilities of adoptive parenting during placement likely increase the helpfulness of workplace flexibility.

Theme 5: Friends/peers. A final theme that arose within a relational ecological level regarding support for adoptive parents was friends and peers. Social support through social networks offer opportunities for people to experience trusting relationships, exchanges of information, and promotion of change or action (Geens & Vandebroek, 2014). In addition to the benefits of social support to parents directly, it also can also help prevent negative child outcomes (Geens & Vandebroek, 2014). The value of the friend and peer relationships was clear from parents interviewed for this study. However, they expressed that, while some friendships were supportive to their adoption pursuits, others were not.

Participants described long-term, committed friends and their willingness to dive into the process with them, including offering help without guidance. For example,

Participant M3 noted that she struggled to know what they needed, but her closest friend did not wait for a request:

And then one of my best friends she was just like she would just show up with a meal. Because she knows she asked me I would say we're fine. You know, I mean, I would be honest with her. But, she was just whatever... I'm going to bring you some food. You know, we rented this movie...can you just please bring the kids all over here. She was just determined that she was going to help and she was going to do.

Participant M6 noted the selflessness of friends who threw her a shower for her adoption of older boys, and did not try to host it in a way that satisfied them, but aided her in the most practical way:

We have three church friends that super stepped up and threw us a shower when they knew we were getting the boys. They were like, do you want to shower before or after the boys? Okay, can we have it before if we give you the sizes so we can be ready with this stuff, you know. So...that was a huge support and a big help.

In addition to family, friends and peers were another group where actions that communicated a lack of support occurred, especially related to responses about their choices to adopt. Participant D5 explained two separate interactions he had with peers related to their challenge of his decision to adopt. He said:

I remember... we accepted our daughter before we ever even saw a picture of her. And there was a lady at work one day and she said, "I can't believe you would

accept her without seeing her.” I looked at her and I said, “You got kids, right?” She said yes. I said, “Did you get to see them before they came out?” She said, “All right, I’ll shut up.”

Participant D5’s personality showed a commitment to being a change agent with his peers and helping them see where they were biased or inconsistent. However, even that personality trait had its limits, as he stated, “I had one idiot try to preach to me literally out of the Bible how he couldn’t believe I was going to raise somebody else’s child. I was floored by that one.” Participant M6 highlighted the same challenges from friends or peers, but related to her decision to adopt older children. She also expressed her interactions as a catalyst for change among her peers by providing information. She relayed:

So especially when we said we’re going to adopt foster children, we got a lot of concerns from, not really from family, but from friends as far as, “Oh, but aren’t you afraid of this... aren’t you afraid that they’ll be standing over you with a knife one day or something?” Or you know, “Aren’t you afraid that, you know, they may do something with your kid that you already have?” And we really quickly said things like, “Okay guys, look, we’ve done our research into this. We’re being highly trained and we’re prepared.”

One important item that was expressed related to friends and peers was the vital need for friends who had adoption and foster experience, even if they were relationships built during the process. Finding support with parents who shared experiences were

related as a great relief. Participant M1 explained meeting another mother who completed a transracial adoption and their connection:

And we met and it turns out like she's amazing. I love her. She's a great friend and she has three biological boys. Two teens. And a five year old boy. And then they adopted a black daughter who is also five. So it's like she has twins. A white boy and a black girl and they're going to an elementary school one year ahead of my biological daughter. And they're together in the same class. So they are just going to pave the way for my family, which I absolutely love and I love her. She's a great support.

Participant D2 noted their connection to a friend who had foster and adoption ties that served as a resource to them as needed:

There's a lady here in the city where we live that has been doing foster/adopt for years and years and years and she's been a great resource. [We will ask her] what do we do about this...call her up...what do you do about that. Their side of the CPS is saying this. What do they really mean? You know, she's been invaluable for the whole process.

Even when the friends were not foster or adoptive parents but had knowledge or attachment to the child protective system, their resources were important to the process.

Participant M3 discussed her difficulty just before placement and gaining information about their son. When the caseworker challenged her reason for asking for additional documentation, she reached out to a friend with experience and unlimited support:

I have a friend who's very high up at CPS... she's one of my best friends she's been my best friend for a long time. She said if you keep pushing, you're going to lose this child. So you've really got to ask yourself some hard questions. And she said you know, I'll support you whatever you do, she said, but if you push it you keep pushing then they're going to pull. So that was hard...that was really hard.

Participant M4 described the relief to be around others who just naturally understood her transracial adoption situation by stating, “Yeah there are some difficulties, but then you get families and you get a group of people who have adopted children and they look at it different. It doesn't matter what color skin my child has, that's my child.” Participant M6 echoed the same sentiments, but also added the benefit to her sons:

We met them at the camp that we go to for all of the adopted and foster families. And so we'd meet and it was just three days where our kids could hang out. Nobody questioned why no families look alike, and everybody looks different, and it's a fantastic environment. If we didn't have that, I don't know how we would've done it. We needed that because the boys got to realize that, hey, this isn't just me that this happens to... there's people around me that this is totally normal and it's fine and so that helped them.

A primary connection for these friendships was hosted by social media connections, especially private foster and adoptive parent connection pages where parents could be honest with peers and not fear judgment or suggestions to terminate their adoption process. Though Participant D2 did not participate in the social media engagement, it was important for him to mention it related to his family's support

experiences. He said, “My wife has really picked up the social media resource page and some of the foster/adoptive parents inside of our agency, too, and working with them and learning and sharing with them.” Participant M4 explained the relief of hearing stories that helped normalize their situation. She offered:

I'm thankful for getting support for post-adopt services, for the social media group that I can... One mom posted, "Am I the only one? Because I'm feeling like I'm the only one that their kid wipes snot on their walls." My kid does it, too!

Participant M6 highlighted the same advantage regarding normalizing her experiences. She said:

Especially in the beginning when I was first on there, you know, I'd ask a lot of questions like, “How did you deal with the fact that this youngest son keeps stealing paper at school?” I mean just something so silly, like what can you do about that, is this normal?

Even without regular engagement, some parents watch the interactions and feel more connected. Participant M3 said, “The private social media page... I knew I could get on there. I knew it was a safe place and even just sitting back and reading everybody else's struggles.” She noted that seeing that she was not the only one struggling helped her refocus.

Level 3 – Community Level

Theme 1: CPS. The caseworkers who were assigned to the parents, the children, and the adoption were identified both as sources of support and as hindrances in the process by the parents interviewed in this study. All of the parents expressed their

concern for the overworked caseworkers employed by their state, and most expressed beliefs that the caseworkers had good intentions, but oftentimes were unable to deliver the services or support needed. Participant D5 expressed those sentiments and the dedication of the CPS caseworkers to provide a smooth transition for his daughter:

CPS... I can't say enough about in a positive manner. Great amount of respect for them. They have way more than they can do on their plate. And they were they were wonderful to us, just wonderful are from our caseworker, which we liked her so much we had her on both cases by request, to her supervisor who went and got our daughter for us and brought her to us to avoid all that.

Participant D2 explained a similar dynamic, where CPS workers

And then when we got to his adoption and everything, we had a good worker here they used an adoption worker from the state. [They all] tried to coordinate visits to where it wasn't so much a disruption for our son. It was a terrible disruption, but they had tried their best to do what they could to minimize those.

Caseworkers assigned to adoptive families and their children play a valuable role in normalizing expectations and helping families understand what services they can request (Merritt & Festinger, 2011). Participant M1 shared her gratefulness that CPS supported and advocated for them to be able to finalize their adoption earlier than the required 6 month waiting period:

CPS had been in favor of us adopting early and I'm not sure exactly why. This is a resource-rich household, relatively calm, we don't have a lot of children. We had that prior relationship with the family who adopted one of the other sisters.

They're not sure if any of those are factors. But CPS was pushing the judge to let us adopt early but the judge ultimately decided no.

Even though the decision was not in favor of what they wanted, the support was valuable. An additional support mentioned was the amount of time and attention caseworkers provided children and families, even though they were overloaded on cases:

It wasn't just, okay, I'm here to meet with the boys. Even when she came to meet with the boys, she'd meet with us first. Nothing was rushed. She worked around our schedule. You could tell she loved the boys, but she also loved us and she understood that she needed help us so if she was going to help them. So that made a huge difference and she did more than our own caseworker to that regard, which made a huge difference. She was just a great person to work with and she's busy as all get out. But she still made time to do her job and then some.

Another valuable support mentioned was honesty and truthful preparation in training. Participant D2 said their trainer offered them information that eliminated the option for surprises after placement:

[Our trainer] was telling us how it was really going to be the kids are going to tell you F-this and F-that. And you know I mean she prepared us, she really did. She was good. She's good at what she was doing and she's scared a lot of people off and rightly so.

With the last sentiment, D2 was referring to situations where adoptive parents do not feel adequately prepared by their state-required trainings. That nuance was expressed by other

parents in this study as a lack of support. For example, Participant M4 felt unprepared and offered:

Our [state mandated] class was a joke. Most of the state mandated trainings are a joke. Nobody tells you your kid is going to cuss you out. Your kid is going to try to punch your husband in the face. Your kid is going to throw things. Your kid is going to hurt other people. How are you going to deal with that? They give you no skills, no training. They want you to treat the kids normally. You have normalcy training.... literally, they tell me you should treat the child like you would any other child. No. Duh. No, it's not the children's fault that they're in the foster system. You're stupid to think that it is their fault... but you have to have training on that? But they don't give you training on how to handle a child who's having a 2-year-old temper tantrum on the floor and how to calm them down and give them the things that they need. They need to give you that training.

From these interviews, the most frequent comments related highlighted the areas of CPS that made the process a struggle rather than provided support. To begin, the interviewees expressed the lack of communication and extended process times that resulted from CPS workers being overloaded with work. Participant M4 explained that she called, emailed, and reached out regularly for more than three months while trying to submit her homestudy for her son only to be told afterwards that the caseworker never received anything from her. Similarly, Participant M1 explained that they received confirmation about their match with their daughter, only to be met with an extended timeframe until she was placed in their home:

Even after the parental rights were terminated, we were told they weren't considering any other families, they didn't do a search for any other families, and we were told that CPS was understaffed and they just didn't have a caseworker to move her [to our home]. She just sat in foster care even though that family couldn't or wouldn't adopt her for several months, and she was not moved to our home until December. So there were several months of just like, "Why is she still in foster care, what are they doing?" And we knew that it was only us being considered but like no definite answer. So that was extremely frustrating.

During placement, when crisis occurred, some families had trouble reach caseworkers to get assistance and were left trying to determine how to handle issues they were not trained to address. Participant M4 provided the following illustration:

Call the caseworker...I don't know what to do. He is literally trying to get out of a car while it's moving because I told him to stop smacking his gum. What do I do with that? I can't get a hold of my caseworker. It takes days multiple phone calls, multi-way emails to return your calls. I have a child, I'm trying to come to a home goods store to get a water bucket for the dogs that is trying to exit a moving vehicle because I told him to stop smacking his bubblegum.

When she was unable to reach her caseworker, she called her son's caseworker to see if she could gain support there:

I was able to get a hold of his caseworker. She was able to talk to him and at one point she literally said to him, "I do not have time for this. You have to make this

work. This is probably your last chance. You have to make this work. Just get over it." And at that point, I was crying, and I didn't know what to do.

Another aspect that created problems for adoptive parents was the lack of appropriate record keeping regarding medical and educational information while children were in foster care. Participant M1 described requesting her daughter's records:

And as we got closer to the adoption I requested her, I think it's called a HESIG, like her health social... I forget what it all stands for and that was clearly not custom written for her. It was like it was her older sister's and her name. And so a lot of the information they don't think actually pertained to her. There were a lot of blanks. There were a lot of things that I felt I could fill and just from my five minute conversation with the maternal grandmother before the hearing that I don't understand by CPS could have taken five or ten minutes to give her a little bit more history about herself. So, that was a little disappointing, so I feel like when she gets older we have a lot of blanks to fill in...

Participant D2 explained the frustration with his son's educational records and the fact that CPS did not disclose that his son had been enrolled in special education classes the year before, which meant he was not getting the level of services he needed after he was placed:

There's stuff we didn't know. I mean, we didn't find out that that the school our son was in... he was in a 504 program during his kindergarten year and the story from CPS and ...best I can tell she went to all the ARD meetings and all IEP meetings at that time and they were telling us that they were dismissing him from

the IEP program. But we found out after we got our son here and placed...that they had already put him in special education. And nobody told us... That's just one major thing and I mean there's all kinds of other ones... withholding that kind of information is not is not legal. I know that and it's not fair to anyone. And more importantly it hurts our son because we had nobody we couldn't prepare our school to take a kid that was special ed because we didn't know it.

In addition to missing records and information, several parents noted that after placement, their caseworkers told them that their children were behind in required routine medical visits. According to the parents, the caseworkers disclosed that the children had to have their vaccinations on the recommended schedule, regular dental visits, annual psychological evaluations, and other services. However, several were told they were behind after placement and the requirement to catch up was placed on the adoptive parent since it was not monitored when the children were in foster care. For example, M3 mentioned having to take her child for vaccinations:

We realized he didn't have all the shots that he needed. That really made me mad that I had to take him to the pediatrician and get his shots because I thought that was just undue stress on him. He could have gone to a doctor that he already knew with the foster mom who was already bonded with and got his shots.

Participant M4 noted that her son could not use his Medicaid because they did not know who was his medical consentor on his account, and the caseworkers said they did not know either. Additionally, her placement was almost compromised and her son moved

back to the group home temporarily because of a lack of moderation of regularly required visits:

And then in the middle of all that they tell me that my child is home but he's probably not going to get to stay and then he can come back. We were like what? They told me that he hadn't had his psychiatric evaluation done in, like, two years. And they said, well if he didn't have it then that he can't be put in an adoptive placement he has to be put back in a foster home because he can't be placed for adoption without it.

With those required visits and records, adoptive parents often had the responsibility to follow-through without having the resources to do so. Participant M6 said:

... We get another e-mail saying, oh yeah, they need this to get set up and you know they need to go see this doctor for this. Oh, and they need to see a psychiatrist and there's none in this town, so you'll have to make an appointment and they need to get seen within 30 days. When I'm calling, the earliest appointment is six months away. I'm like how do I get around this? Because you're telling me this has to be done you're not giving me a way for it to happen other than I have to call and get this done.

Theme 2: Private adoption agencies. In some of the earliest parent satisfaction research related to adoption experiences, Berry et al. (1996) found that adoptive parents were most likely to report satisfaction with their adoption experiences if they used a private adoption agency (as opposed to adopting straight through their state of residence). While there was some mixed information about the support experiences from private

adoption agencies, the overall report was positive. In many cases, parents reported private adoption agency caseworkers as advocates for them in the system, and shared stories of the private agency caseworkers' willingness to help the adoptive parents navigate the system to get things accomplished. For example, private agencies may help unite adoptive parents and children quicker as described by Participant M1:

So then, when she did move in, it was right before Christmas. And since the other family and I share the same agency, she moved here on respite care because at that point we knew CPS was going to do it. They just didn't have the manpower to do it. So she moved here on respite care, a few days later CPS showed up right before Christmas Day and made it official.

Participant D2 mentioned the private agency caseworker staying focused on the steps that needed to happen and ensuring the process continued to move without many issues. He said:

So when we got to our son, we went back through a private adoption agency, I mean we had somebody there and our adoption agency worker was there with us. And you know, she made sure that everything was moving and following up on stuff and dealing with the state and all of that for us. And I feel like that really helped us more than anything.

Another aspect of private agency support that Participant D5 mentioned that when his second adoptive daughter, a biological sibling of his first, was available for placement, the adoption agency made a plan to get them certified and placed as quickly as possible:

So I had a wonderful experience with agency, with our private agency... They worked with us as much as they could through all the turmoil we had with the foster parents. When we got, we found out about our second daughter, they pulled us to the side and took us on a beeline to get us certified as a foster parent. I mean, they were on it, which was very, very cool. If not, to have gone through the whole process, it would have probably been six or eight more months... I mean they actually brought in special classes for us.

A few families also expressed struggles with support from their private agencies depending on their relationship with the caseworker, their expectations for process timing, and the need for services that were not offered. Participant M1 expressed interest in advertised trainings related to her African American daughter's hair, and was met with an excuse that it had been offered before, but that they did not provide it regularly. She said:

So when she moved in I asked them, "OK I'm ready for my hair training." And they were like oh well we don't actually have it. We had it sometimes like in the past or we can like suggest conditioner. I was like, no, like I need hair training... So I just I didn't really know what they could offer me. They offered diversity training but it wasn't it wasn't practical. It was like, "Don't forget to remember your biases and don't be a racist" and stuff like that. But what I really need was like when you're out in public and a six-year-old said hey there should never be a black baby in that family, what do you say? Practical things like that.

The availability of support services near them was another struggle with support from their agencies. Even though private agencies were reported as having more services for the parents, which supports Berry et al.'s (1996) suggestion of the same, it was difficult if the services were not available close, as M3 expressed that she “had to drive an hour and 20 minutes to get [support groups and training]” because those are offered in larger cities only.

Finally, Participant M6 expressed the problem of the lack of time to invest in any services that were not required due to the amount of time the required documentation and trainings took. She said:

Our adoption organization was helpful in the sense where they said, hey, all these services are available if you want them. But at the time, we were so overwhelmed with everything we had to do that we didn't do anything extra optional because it was like, okay, we we're going to have three kids, how would we do child care to be able to do this good little workshop that you keep telling us about and saying we need to go to? If we don't have to go, we're not going. So we learned really early on we didn't have time to do anything or they have you know like monthly mixers things like that for families. We didn't have time to do any of that. You had to pick and choose what was going to work, because we went from a family of three to a family five. It was a big deal.

Theme 3: Other system influencers. Besides the caseworkers involved in the adoption process from both CPS and private adoption agencies, there are other professionals who influence the system and cases of children in foster care like attorneys,

post-adoption service caseworkers, and volunteer advocates like court appointed special advocates (CASA). Adoptive parents expressed experiences of both support and lack of support from others involved in their child(ren)'s case. Parents explained that attorneys guided the process and were instrumental in the finalization process and how smooth it went. Participant D5 shared:

You know I feel like our, as far as part of the process, the attorney we hired... she was just phenomenal both times as far as taking care of everything and making sure everything was done. There were not any steps they missed... You know, any reasons anything would come back or anything like that. I mean she was another good resource the whole time

Participant M6 shared a similar support from her attorney, who was a family friend, and worked in the system to make sure their needs were met through the process.

Participant D5 also mentioned CASA and their advocacy involvement in his daughter's case. He said, "I actually learned a lot from CASA... I didn't find it as intruding on us at all. I enjoyed it. I love seeing people who want to help children." Interestingly, their work as volunteer advocates inspired him to consider training as a volunteer advocate after his adoption was final. Finally, Participant M4 explained the importance of the support of post-adoption services and the role it played in supporting her family:

And I didn't know about post-adopt services until [finalization] day at the courthouse. And it was a wonderful thing to get to meet the post-adopt case worker because in meeting her, I had somebody to go, okay, how do I do this? At

one point, I called the post-adopt worker crying...we're all fighting and we're miserable. She said, "Okay, here's what we're going to do. We are going to find some help for y'all."

She continued to explain how the post-adoption services caseworker helped her make a plan and provided the resources and referrals to put the plan into action.

Though most of the interactions from other system influencers was positive, a few parents reported instances where the people in those positions made their process more difficult. Participant M1 struggled at times with her child's CASA worker because of insensitive comments and personal probing questions. She relayed:

[The CASA worker] visited monthly and she was supposed to and ... we're not a religious family. And she's a religious lady. So there were a couple awkward moments where she would say something like, "So you guys really don't go to any church?" And we'd be like, "Nope." And then in her next breath she'd be like, "Well, you know Kwanzaa is not a real holiday," because our daughters black and we're white.

She also experienced a difficult conversation with her daughter's CASA worker at a public restaurant where she asked questions in front of her children that M1 felt were intrusive and inappropriate for the setting, like if it was love at first sight when she had her biological daughter.

The final note of other system influencers was the number of individuals that were present on any single case and the responsibility of the adoptive parent to juggle appropriate and professional relationship with them all even if they had differing opinions

between themselves. Participant M6 shared the list of people who were parties to her children's case:

We had the licensed CPS worker that was the head of that, we had CASA worker, we had the head CASA worker, we had our caseworker, we had their caseworker, we had the state adoptive caseworker that was going to be taking over the case as soon as we became involved.

With so many individual ideas, questions, and suggestions, it is easy to see how the process could become overwhelming quickly as parents attempt to navigate the system.

Theme 4: Church. Participants identified churches as important support systems during adoptive processes due to both community and spiritual engagement.

Additionally, they found it helpful in creating a stable environment for their children entering the family. Duemer et al. (2013) discovered that when adults adopted as children reflected on protective factors for healthy adjustments during adoption, they identified a spiritual connection as important. It would stand to reason that if adopted children reflect on the stabilizing factor of spirituality, parents would likely feel support and stabilization from their spiritual connections and places of worship as well. Participant M6 explained her boys' connections and adjustment:

They had been going to a very different style of church with their foster family, so it was a little bit different. But we sat down and talked about it, like here's how the day goes...here is what it's like. You're going to classes with these people, this age group. And so their first Sunday was a little overwhelming because everyone came up and introduced themselves and made them feel welcome and we loved

it... And by the time placement happened, they wanted to go to church and the Sundays that we didn't go, it was like, why aren't we going?

She also mentioned the importance of their regular interaction with other kids at church and noted that the group in their age range “latched on to them. They made friends really easily in that group.”

Participant M3 was overwhelmed by her church’s willingness to diversify the look and feel of the children’s area since they attended a racially homogeneous church. She said:

I told them I was like, "Oh my goodness, my son just told me all the Jesuses in my house are white. And they were like, "Well, we are going to fix that"... the next thing I know, I'm seeing all this color in the church and I'm just like, this is just a beautiful thing...

She further discussed their voluntary diversification of toys, dolls, and books in the children’s areas. Participant D2 explained that they changed churches after the adoption of their older daughter and before the adoption of their youngest son, but that families from the church they previously attended continued to reach out in support of their family even after they no longer attended. He said:

Everybody there was still supportive. There's people from that church that still check on us every once in a while, you know, I mean there's like a lady that just has a dramatic gift for helping people and a big heart and she still checks on us and wants to keep up with us some.

For some families, the struggle during the adoption process was tempered by church attendance. Participant M4 relayed her need to seek help through her connection to God and finding that easier with church attendance:

Since we went back to church, it's helped... to help us [step back from] all the crazy mess surrounding us and to focus on God and go, okay, I know you got it.

We're depleted and were defeated, and we need help... It's made it better.

The church was also noted as a resource for support through training. Participant M1 did not share the faith connection or personal tie to a church, but she found training for her transracial adoption needs through a church that offered it. She said:

It was a little bit awkward since we're not religious, but I mean there was a little bit of prayer and stuff like that but I did feel like I was welcome. They had a psychologist who's an expert on transracial adoption. And he was very informative talking about how it's important to provide examples in the community of people successful people of your child's race because if you don't provide examples of what it means to be black your child will go find them on their own, maybe not where you want them to look. And that was really useful. But they also brought in a black dermatologist who talked about different skin care needs. They brought in a lady who had her own line of hair products. She sat her little daughter up on the stage and just like did three hairstyles all we sat and watched.

She noted the practicality of the training offered, especially when she was unable to attain it through her private adoption agency. Participant D5 also expressed his church's outreach to serve foster and adoptive parents with training and paid childcare:

They have continued education that they have to do for foster parents, which they can get that for free at almost anywhere. But what they can't get for free is the daycare. So we provide a conference at our church and we cover the cost of all the daycare for all the foster kids so that foster parents can come in, get their training, and they have a place for kids to stay at same time.

He noted that his church found a practical way to serve these families because, though their agencies and other groups offered trainings, the families found it difficult to afford and sometimes secure childcare due to the requirements for sitters to be background checked with the state and other regulations. Additionally, some foster and adoptive parents needed childcare for older children due to continued struggles and delayed development.

Though church was a significant source of support during adoption, a few parents noted struggles associated with church support. For example, Participant M4 struggled when her adopted teenage son did not want to go. Participant M4 said:

We went to church for a while and then we didn't go to church because it was like a fight about everything. I wasn't fighting about going to church, we just weren't going to go. It was.... yes, you have to wear clothes. Yes, we have to leave it this time. It got to be too much, we didn't even go to church.

And Participant M3 explained the difficulty when members did not understand their family situations while adjusting to a new child who was easily overwhelmed:

Church became really hard and I really thought that was going to be one of my best supports. It ended up being one of the hardest places, and it really broke my heart because when our son first came home, they wanted a big party or to have big shower and I'm like, that sounds wonderful. But you don't understand...like, he's over here coming apart. So, it was like they just didn't get it and I couldn't help them get it. I kept trying and I was like, you know, because it took me a while to even bring him to church, and they were like, why aren't you bringing him to church? Well I don't want to overwhelm him. She was like, if you don't hurry up and let us overwhelm him, we're going to show up an overwhelm him.

Theme 5: School. According to the parents interviewed, their adopted children who were school-aged had an added level of stress related to school adjustments.

Participant M6 explained that since they were placed in the middle of the school year with their boys, they were required to enroll them within 3 days of placement in a new school. They took a day off to try and get used to being in a single house, but her sons quickly had to add a second range of adjustments through a school transfer mid-year. The importance of school support and the difficulty when that support was lacking is unsurprising since, with adopted children, early adverse experiences can continue to have a negative effect, including increased negative behaviors as children reach school-age (Goldberg & Smith, 2013).

Participant M3 explained her relief that the school administrators and teachers were overtly connecting with her to ensure her son's success. She said:

Our school, our diagnostician, the aid that was coming into his classroom, our teacher, all those people we were...the communication lines were just wide open. And we were just you know... I still tell them thank you and hug their necks because we were just all in the ditch together.

Similarly, Participant D5 mentioned his interactions with his daughter's teacher and the open communication and support his family received during the process:

Show and tell from a kindergartener...usually they you know, bring in toys or something. No, my girl wanted to tell about her adoption life. That's cool. I don't mind it, but some kids don't, at that age, don't really know what that is and understand that. So we have had to have some sit down with some teachers and explain especially for my oldest one because she is very vocal. I mean, she wrote an autobiography the other day that I still have not read, but her teacher said that brought her tears.

Participant M3 also explained the ownership a school paraprofessional took more of a role with her son and his adjustment than she had to take:

In hindsight she was the one that felt like she was the most comfortable and ready and she wanted to bond with him, so she just kind of took that role on. And so she's in the office so when the buzzer went off for the teacher to help. You know. And she just she just kind of jumped on that...took ownership of it.

The primary difficulty expressed regarding school support was the issue with records, especially regarding the timeframe during placement when children often want to be called their adoptive names, but school records do not reflect those names until after the adoption is final. Participant M6 said:

We had a hard time with the schools and the fact of the oldest kid wanting to go by the name he was going to have even though his records had his biological name. So we had our time with, well no, this is on his record. So his teachers were really good. But every time they published anything or he would get on the honor roll, it would always have his given name and they're like, "Who is that kid?" And he didn't want to explain to everybody at school that he was adopted or that he was going to be adopted.

Theme 6: Other community sources. There were a variety of other resources and sources of support at the community level that, while not every parent experienced them, the ones who did noted their influence on the outcomes. For example, Participant M4 explained the relief it was when she discovered that she qualified for postadoption services and was connected to a caseworker at their adoption finalization. That caseworker provided resources, including a counseling referral:

Our post-adopt caseworker introduced us to a counselor with a local agency and she now comes to our house and we are reading *The Connected Child*. It's one of those things that you can read and then you can go back and read just a little bit here and there and it helped me look at it different. And she suggested that I go to counseling because I am having a difficult time with the nontypical parenting.

Participant M3 also expressed the helpfulness of counseling to prepare their family, especially their teenage children, for the placement:

The counselor was like, you know, what do you think your parents are going to be good at? What are they going to flop at? And what do you think you could do to help? You know. And what are you going to do when he comes in your room and he takes something of yours and hides under his bed and you know. So, at this point, we had his file and we knew the things he struggled with, and the counselor was hopping on those things. And preparing them for it... It was huge for us four.

Participant D2 expressed the hope and practical resources that counseling appointments provided. He explained that the counselor was flexible with who attended sessions depending on need, provided perspective, and offered guidance. He said, “We would always go in there at our wits end and we come out feeling a lot better and a lot more determined to keep moving forward.”

Other community groups and support systems offered opportunities for connections with people who were similar or had similar experiences. Participant M1 noted that a mother from a community group she attended that focused on women raising strong, African American girls reached out to offer advice or help:

Like there's a woman in [my community group], when she found out that I could braid, she came up to me and really made an effort to be friends and wanted to get our girls together and said If you ever have any questions about hairstyles just let me know.

A final group mentioned in other community support was former foster parents. Since all the children in this study were adopted after they became legally free, they were each in foster homes that did not plan to adopt them. The support from former foster parents was mixed according to the interviewed participants. From a positive standpoint, Participant M3 offered:

He had been with the foster mom for three and a half years. And so I really tried to develop a relationship with her and really tried to lean on her what's going to work, what's not going to work. And she was real good about face timing him and you know talking to him and he really wanted that communication with her and so we kind of had it like twice a week...

However, other parents noted lack of support or direct sabotage from former foster parents. Participant M6 shared:

And you know foster mom and dad had had them for two and a half years. So, we thought, you know, for sure let's keep in contact. We had her hone number and everything. She never called them and when we called her, she wouldn't pick up the phone, so that was rough initially for the boys because, you know, that had been their home for two and a half years and it seemed like, oh, they're just done with us.

Participant D5 and his wife had to engage in a legal battle with former foster parents after they decided to fight to adopt the child even though they were clear before that they were not interested. It put a damper on their finalization day:

We were still in turmoil with the foster parents because of legal battle with them but our adoption process or adoption day which is supposed to be this real big celebrated thing was kind of just sitting over in the corner waiting for them to call our names and we run in and do it and run out before anybody else would show up.

Theme 7: Value of unutilized services. In previous literature, researchers were interested in the parental lack of awareness and lack of utilization postadoption services (Merritt & Festinger, 2011). The interviewed parents in this study confirmed that many of the resources that they were offered, even some they felt would have been helpful, were not resources they chose to use. Several parents alluded to the difficulty fitting in additional non-required services, even though they would have been more beneficial than the required elements of placement that monopolized their time. However, there was a significant appreciation for the knowledge that services were there, even if they were not being used. Participant M3 explained it well when she said:

And then a physical [support and training] group that meets once a week in a nearby city and that met on the phone as well and that, even though [I] didn't always participate, [I] knew it was there. So I didn't always participate in it, but knowing that it was available was a big deal, right? Like I had on my calendar on my phone. Most of the time I did not go I did not do it, but it was there. I had that reminder.

She expressed that her son needed such a structured evening schedule that she could not accommodate the time it took to drive so far to the meetings. Participant D5 explained

unutilized work benefits like extended paternity leave by saying, “I don't know if it was helpful. I think it is just a reassurance that they thought about it was pretty awesome,” indicating that the support was experienced more through the offering and respect for their experiences than the actual benefits extended.

Finally, Participant M1 explained her compliance to file paperwork and secure post-adoption services even though she had no need for the offerings:

We have postadoptive services for my adopted daughter. I don't feel like we need them. I hope and think that we will never need them. But someone told me you should sign up now because when you need them that's when it's too late to sign up at that point.

Theme 8: Value of flexible availability for consultation. At the community level of support, parents found support at a variety of levels, but overwhelmingly, the support people they indicated as the most helpful or supportive were those who were flexible and available when the parents needed them. Postadoption agencies attempt to provide a wide range of resources to cover a vast array of potential needs (see DFPS, 2017a). However, because the needs of families differ in such drastic ways, Merritt and Festinger (2011) expressed the need to evaluate what types of services were effective in helping adoptions succeed.

Participant D2 offered that the availability to reach out to his private adoption caseworker at any time offered the most help when things were tough:

I felt like we could always call our private adoption agency worker. I mean she was she was there to handle anything any questions we might have. You know

you might shoot her an e-mail or text or whatever to and she'd get back to you.

Those were those were all definitely things that were really helped us along during the hardest times.

Participant M3 noted the same about her private adoption agency related to their perceived “24/7 availability” and desire to intervene as quickly after incidents of struggle as possible. She said:

So our private adoption agency, could call them 24/7 and I did. I had to. They became like my family to me, those workers did. And I didn't have it the first time around... When we had an incident to report, they wanted it reported just almost immediately, like if you had to use any kind of restraint. So I would call them and they would do all the logistics and stuff that had to be done and then they would just sit there and talk. “Are you OK? How are you?” You know, just keep on phone and talk to you and that was extremely helpful. Our worker came more than she had to come. And that was... I felt like it was a professional relationship. But at the same time she allowed it to be casual and therefore I could be pretty vulnerable and open.

Participant M6 shared similar sentiments about their CPS caseworker who provided flexible support and filled in the areas where they needed help:

I mean we're still Facebook friends with her and any time we have random questions that come up or things like that, we can still ask her. We had to get the boys social security numbers and our oldest had one name on his birth certificate and one name on his original social security card, and it's like, ok, which name do

we use when we are doing our taxes? It's not working with either name. Is there something that happened that we didn't know about? And of course, she didn't know because she didn't have a case for the whole time. But she looked into it and let us know. So that made a huge difference.

Participant M3 also noted the help that their counselor's flexibility provided them. She explained that the openness to allow whichever members of the family needed to see the counselor that week to attend was helpful because they did not have to reschedule if one of them had to work or if one or more of their children were not interested in attending that week. She said:

And it was just like whoever is coming we don't care. Like if all said just mom needs to go. Or just the big kids need to go, or if all five of you show up... She was very flexible as far as...whoever or whatever. Just come.

Finally, Participant M4 offered a summary of the hope and security that available information and services provided her. After realizing that her postadoption worker was willing to hear her concerns and provide guidance and resources, she felt more secure in her ability to help her son:

That's how you get kids, so many who entered the foster system, so many kids from broken homes, in prison. I do not want my child in prison. I will do everything within my power to help him rise above that. And knowing how strongly I feel about that caused me to reach out for help. And I think that's important. You have to know your boundaries. That, okay, I know I'm not going

to be able to do that. And if that happens, you've got to have a backup plan or somebody to help you.

Level 4 – Societal Level

Theme 1: Dichotomy of opinions about adoption and foster care. All of the participants in this study alluded to the polar responses they received regarding their choices to adopt. The wide differences in responses and belief systems were often from the same people, creating confusion related to whether the person was a safe supporter or not. Participant D5 said, “When you say you are going to adopt, you get opposite ends of the spectrum.” Participant M1 offered the dichotomy of responses by expressing the following examples:

On one hand I feel like because it was an adoption, people were almost more excited... On the other hand people didn't really treat it as if I was becoming a mother again. Like, just for example, in my book club when a baby is born in the neighborhood, we all buy the baby a baby book and sign our names from the book club. That didn't happen for me when I adopted my daughter. I think people were excited but they didn't really see it the same way as if I was having a baby.

Participant M3 explained the shift in responses from people when the adoption moved from theory to reality:

Well I was concerned about that because he's a different race than we are, and we go to a small school. It's primarily all white. Our church is the same way. And we got a little bit of grief from some of the family that I was really surprised about because when you talk to them about that beforehand, there wasn't any issues.

As a summary, Participant D2 offered the following explanation:

But in general, when you tell your friends and family you're considering adoption, you are a hero in a lot of ways because... everybody thinks you're well-intentioned and you're going to get this perfect little kid... You know, "I could never do that." You know all the sad stories sad stories you know all these well-intentioned things. But when the rubber meets the road and you bring a kid into your family that's been in foster care for several years and they come with baggage, people tend to step back and avoid you in a lot of ways. Because they don't know... how to say... a lot of it is ignorance. They don't know how to take it. They don't know what's going on there. People take a step back... we kind of call it the hero to zero effect.

Theme 2: Stigma related to transracial adoptions. Historically, adoptive family situations have experienced societal stigma related to the legitimacy of family outside of the traditional birthing relationship between parents and children (Katz & Doyle, 2013). Even more specific and common is the stigma related to transracial adoptions, especially when the racial majority adopts minority children (Katz & Doyle, 2013). In this study, 5 of the 6 parents reported that their child's race was different from their own, and the experiences of cultural stigma related to their family's racial makeup was noted throughout their explanations of their experiences. Participant M1 particularly noted that children were likely to directly mention the racial differences in her family and adults struggled to know how to address it. She said:

So from time to time since my daughter looks different from the rest of us, mostly children will come up to us like, "She doesn't belong in your family," or even like, "I never want to see a black child with a white family" or something like that... I won't say rude because they're not intended as rude, but those sort of comments tend to come from young children who are just noticing race that at about that age but their parents haven't realized it. So, haven't told them, "Hey, you don't go around saying those kinds of things." So, child might come right up to the stroller get in her face and be like, "Hey that's not your baby." And then adults standing nearby will be like, "Did you hear what he said? Haha, come listen to this, he just said that's not your baby."

Participant D2 explained his suppositions related to part of his family's interaction with them after placement and believed racial tension played a role in the disconnect:

My brother lives just down the street down here you know, a stone's throw away almost, a little farther. But he's my nearest neighbor anyway... And they were there for us with a whole with our daughter's adoption. I feel like, I don't know... I haven't asked him for sure. But our adopted son is Hispanic and I feel like that a little bit of their lack of involvement is regarded to his race... But you know I didn't ...I never have directly asked him that about my son, if that bothers him about him being Hispanic or not, but I feel like it does. I feel like that has an impact on it.

In fact, Participant D2 elaborated on their openness personally to a child of any race, but their understanding of the reality of bringing certain minority race children into their family:

We live in an area of the country where you've got a lot of racial tension and everything underlying there. I mean that was one of the things we weren't necessarily opposed to ourselves bringing in an African-American kid, but we knew that that would not be something that would be good for them. Whoever that kid would be... would get more grief and they were due. So, we knew that was not a good idea.

Participant M4 specifically addressed the societal mixed-messages experienced by nontraditional families, especially those of multiple races:

Society in general... you never really understand how people are like, "Oh, everybody is okay to be an individual. Everybody's okay to be unique," until they stick out. So as a white woman, you take a couple mixed children, an African-American child, and some white children to the store...you could play bingo on the type of looks you get.

Participant D5 was the only parent in this study who reported adopting a child of the same race, but when asked if he felt adoption was a societal acceptance, he made a specific distinction for interracial adoptions:

I would say they are except for the interracial ones, because I do not think our society, which we live in... unfortunately, this part of the country, there are racist pigs and I could get off on a big tangent on that, but I won't even jump in. But, for

those situations, no I do not think it's supportive in any way. But I think the actual adoption itself, I think it is supportive as long as you do it by their standards, whatever you want to call that. So, there're just so many cruel people out there.

Though overt discrimination against minority groups is far less tolerated in society, issues for transracial adoptive families remain a concern (Sue, 2010).

Theme 3: Stigma related to older children from foster care. Another societal stigma that garnered support from all the parents who adopted in the age bracket is the issues related to perceptions of older children with foster care experience. While there is a significant amount of literature addressing diversity, stigma, and microaggressions, adoptive families and adopted children are frequently excluded from the topics as groups who are exposed to issues related to acceptance (Garber & Grotevant, 2015). Though society's acceptance of different groups has progressed in many ways, stereotypes about adoptive families, but especially adopted adolescents persists (Garber & Grotevant, 2015). The experiences of that adoptive parents in this study confirm those findings. Participant D2 explained the differences in reactions and long-term commitment when adopting an infant versus an older child:

Unless people are really, really dedicated and really close to you, they are going to pull back when you start bringing any a kid who's been in care for a while. It's a little different if you have a baby that you brought in and they may have medical problems or whatever else. But most people know how to deal with those things these days, you know. And so I don't think it's as bad when you have when you

have a itty-bitty one you bring in, but when you bring in an older kid you know they're going to pull back.

Participant M6 related a similar sentiment when she offered:

And so I just remember the times thinking, "What the heck is wrong with people when they say certain things like that? Why would you say that to people?" But it's for just stigma or the filters that people don't seem to have when they're voicing their opinions.

When asked if she would elaborate on the types of things people said that elicited that reaction from her, she said:

Just about kids in foster care, or how horrible of children that they are, and how they'll steal everything you own, and abuse your youngest child, and just things like... you don't even know these kids. Not everybody is that and anybody can do that whether they've been in foster care or not. "But aren't you afraid to leave them alone with your youngest?" No. No. No.

Participant M6 also noted the media portrayal of foster children, especially older children, and stated, "And then, of course, you notice every little thing on TV, too, that every time they mention something about foster care, it's always a negative light."

Finally, M4 discussed how she would love to have a resource to offer people because she wanted to change the stigma that people could not do what she is doing and adopt and older child. She said:

I think it would be good...I know everybody's family is different... But I think that it would be good to have something to give to your family or like, maybe a video,

I don't know. Everybody learns differently. But something... I had lunch with my dad the other day and we were talking about my son. And he is going, "I couldn't do that... Oh I could not do that. That is just...I couldn't do that." There has to be some way that the general public and your family...that people would understand that you could handle it if you knew how to look at it differently.

Theme 4: Voluntary normalization from others with similar experiences. A

final theme that emerged within the societal level was the voluntary normalization of adoption, foster care, and transracial families by people who shared those experiences. Participants shared stories of friends, new acquaintances, and strangers telling stories, showing pictures, and offering support by showing them in some way that they were not the only ones who experienced a nontraditional family situation. Participant M1 said,

We had a braider come to the house one time... I braid well but I wanted to have like a backup in case I wasn't available to braid. And the first thing she said when she came in, well not the first thing, but she said... I have two adopted children. So, I really feel like she was trying to tell me, relax, this is good, I feel comfortable here and this is great.

Participant M3 explained an aid at her child's school who took ownership of his situation and intentionally connected with their family:

I was really surprised...that the aid that was really coming in and being hands on and helping him. She was all showing me pictures of her grandbabies. And they were not all white. You know, like people just started showing me, hey, our world's not white either. And they just really kind of opened my eyes up to that

and I wasn't aware of it before. But they wanted me to know that they loved him and they were so excited about him being in their life

Another example was provided by M6 related to her realization that more people than she realized had been connected to foster care and adoption either personally or through someone they loved:

I actually thought it was interesting because after we did this, you find out how many people are actually touched by that kind of situation because then, of course, you get everybody wanting to share their stories. Oh I know so and so was adopted, or, you know, hey, I was adopted. Oh, hey, I was in foster care. You get a lot of that from everybody around you as soon as you mention that your kids are adopted. You've got all those stories and you find out how many people are actually touched by it.

Desire to Influence Each Level

A final theme that emerged was the parent's desire to continue to positively affect foster care and adoption at each level outside of themselves. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model explains that outer layers of the system influence internally, even to the individual level, but that the individual also has the ability to influence the system out to the broadest level. The parents included in this study seemed to understand that concept and adopt it as a personal mission. For example, several parents explained how they influenced people in their relational level by helping other foster and adoptive parents and encouraging friends to get involved at some level of the system. Participant M6 said:

I check [the Facebook page] now because I feel like I'm in a place where I can help people who are just starting out. Or they'll ask questions like, "How does it work with the staffings?" And, "Ok, we're in the adoption unit now. So now we're having this meeting, what can I expect that meeting?" So there're still sometimes where I have to post on there. But now, more so, it's I just respond to some things. She also mentioned encouraging friends to volunteer as advocates for children in foster care: "My best friend became a CASA worker around that time. She was impacted by that because she was like, OK what can I do?" Participant D5 described his efforts to mobilize a team of people to support others in the foster and adoptive process. He said, "So I lead a team through my church and we educate, support, and recruit foster and adoptive parents out in our community." Participant M3 stated:

And so and that's something I try to empower my parents with, the patients that I work with, "Look, you know, get what you need from that doctor. Ask your questions, write them down before you get in there. You know, ask me. Call me, text me. They've got one mama. Go for it.

She decided to use her experiences advocated for her son to empower the parents with whom she works. She also makes herself available as a resource for them like her agency was for her

At the community level, parents explained ways they became involved by volunteering and serving in places like CASA, their churches, and foster and adoption boards. Before taking a leadership position with a group through his church, Participant D5 said, "I actually learned a lot from CASA and also went into CASA because of it."

But he realized his church had the resources and opportunities to meet needs in our community and they just needed a leader. He said:

My volunteer group, it's a whole mass of about five people. With that, we do gatherings for all of foster kids in our county. We do that at least twice a year, so it will be party for them... bounce houses, hot dogs, snow cones... things some of these kids may have never had an opportunity to do in the past. During placement, another thing to do with the state, when they remove children they try to first get in place with kinship placement. So they try to get them with a grandmother or an aunt and uncle, whatever it may be. And sometimes [those relatives] can't pass home studies because they don't have fire extinguishers or smoke detectors and all that. So in the instances they don't and the state likes the fit, they'll reach out to us and we'll finance that. So we'll pay for all the smoke detectors and fire extinguishers and things of that nature.

Participant M1 explained that she is on her county's CPS board and is also the president of a nonprofit related to foster care. She explained:

I feel guilt for all the children that I'm not able to help. I feel guilt because I only have two kids and I live in this big house and we have resources and in theory I could keep going if I was willing to put myself and my family through that. And guilt is one of the reasons I think I'm... not the only reason, but one of the reasons I'm so involved with nonprofits are CPS board and advocating for foster care and doing this study for example.

The last portion, related to participating in this study, also connects to her desire to make changes in foster care and adoption at the broadest societal and cultural level. She mentioned that she was willing to share any of her story if it could help future children and adoptive or foster families.

Likewise, other parents noted opportunities and instances where they addressed cultural biases or societal beliefs that were outlined in the previous section. Participant M6 said:

We set a lot of myths aside, you know, like everyone kept saying, just bad things and quickly we'd be like, "Okay, what about the positive? What about these kids or, you know, is that these kids' fault that their parents sucked? We just we combated it with the positive sides or are talking about it in a good way of, "Okay, does that mean we just shouldn't get them and we should leave them in foster care?" So it shut down really quickly and everybody was really positive about it.

Participant M4 shared a similar worldview perspective of her personal schema as a mother and the message she has offered to others. She said:

I did not finish college and I did not become a social worker. But, I am a full-time social worker at my house. And I think that's important in being an adoptive parent. You can't adopt a child for a paycheck or because they need a place to crash. You can't adopt a child because, "Eh, why not?" You have to want to make a difference. You have to want to make everything better for them, to fight every day for that.

The desire to influence at every level of the system further supports the value of recognizing the adoptive parent process as a multi-level experience. For traditional families, the day-to-day interactions with their children remain at individual and relational levels. But adoptive families experience a system where their daily life is affected by and influences broader community and societal practices and standards.

Summary

When considering adoptive parent experiences of support as they transition into parenting children who have been in foster care, it is important to realize the number of influencers that play a role in that experience. At each level of the ecological experience, there is opportunity for adoptive parents to find and recognize support, and the findings suggest that parents find support from new sources if former sources of support are not able to continue to offer it. Ultimately, the adoption process is a complex experience and support is vital to the success of adoptive families. In the final chapter, I will discuss the findings of this study, review the limitations, make recommendations for future research and practice, and offer implications of the findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Since children who age out of foster care without adoptive placement struggle more as adults than their peers and failed adoptive placements compound issues for those children, it is vital for researchers to explore options for creating stable environments for adoptive families (Helton, 2011; Zlotnick et al., 2012). While child factors are linked to adoption disruption, parent experiences and decisions have a strong influence on adoption outcomes (Duemer et al., 2016; Goldman & Ryan, 2011). Agencies design support services for adoptive families based on the knowledge that support during the process is critical for healthy systems (Watson et al., 2012). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of adoptive parents during placement and before finalization as they related to support. My description of support as experienced by the parents offers a foundational piece of literature to aid counselors, agencies, and educators in their work training and serving adoptive families.

After exploring adoptive parents' responses and structuring the results within an ecological framework, I found it clear that adoptive parents were aware of support from all levels of an ecological framework: individual, relational, community, and societal sources. They also reported instances of direct and indirect experiences that were unsupportive. In each of those levels, themes emerged that parents suggested were connected to their overall experience with a positive adoption outcome. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings from the study and limitations, offer recommendations, and explain the implications of the findings.

Discussion of the Findings

First and foremost, the findings from this study confirm the effectiveness of using an ecological framework to explain complicated experiences that engage people at multiple levels (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). There were 28 individual themes that emerged from the data, which could be overwhelming to view as a single list, but was more palatable and applicable when separated to relate the levels of individual influencers, relational influencers, community influencers, and societal influencers. I connected the themes within each framework back to findings and suggestions from previous literature, which added credibility to the method and results of this study.

Level 1 – Individual

At the individual level, the themes that emerged were (a) commitment to the adoption and/or the child, (b) focus on the child's needs/selflessness, (c) empathy for the child's experiences, (d) the ability to reframe negative behaviors, (e) resourcefulness, (f) education/willingness to seek continued training, (g) assertiveness, (h) determination/confidence, (i) self-sufficient, and (j) spiritual or faith connection. The 10 themes that emerged in the first level were primarily confirmed in the literature as issues in adoptive settings or struggles for adopted children. Additionally, the parents interviewed recognized their need for productive responses to things that could challenge the success of the placement.

For example, Testa et al. (2014) explained the power of parent contemplation of ending an adoptive placement as a factor that, when considered, renders child negative behaviors as no longer significant in failed placements. The parents were clear, with all

six noting that a significant support for their adoption was their personal commitment to the child and process, most often before they ever saw or met the child they adopted. Other themes that emerged, including a focus on the child's needs/selflessness, empathy for the child's experiences, and the ability to reframe negative behaviors, connected to previous literature that expressed the difficulty adoptive families experience due to the challenging experience the adopted children faced as a result of their early trauma and continued instability during foster care (see Carnes-Holt, 2012; Goldman & Ryan, 2011). Parents who know to focus and proactively build a healthy environment for healing help their children heal and connect (Duemer et al., 2016; Fineran, 2012).

The final six themes related to characteristics that affected but were unrelated to adoption. Though not all parents called them by name, each provided information and stories that showed their resourcefulness, assertiveness, and determination/confidence. Within the context of the complications that many experienced in the system, it is unsurprising that they identified these traits as valuable to completing a successful adoption. Parents have an immense amount of influence on their children's outcomes, and adoption may create a situation that requires parents to advocate for their children and themselves (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010). Parents who embrace these traits pass them on to their children through modeling or direct coaching, which can influence children to show the same traits (Healy et al., 2015). Since children from foster care have issues related to grief and trauma and may behave accordingly, it is necessary to have parents who are willing to stay committed to the process, seek out information, and directly advocate for what their families need (Fineran, 2012).

Other themes that emerged at the individual level were education/willingness to seek continued training, self-sufficiency, and a faith or spiritual connection. Many parents explained that their initial adoption training provided limited information, and they had to be able to seek continued training after discovering what their specific children needed. It also was evident that previous education, especially in fields related to their plight, was helpful when things were going wrong. All parents, though willing to train and seek guidance, mentioned that they were not the type of person who asks for help. The self-sufficiency and difficulty reaching out seemed to relate solely to their personal needs though, and they had no trouble asking for help for their children and advocating for their needs. Most of the parents claimed a connection to spirituality or faith and were clear that their feeling that the adoption was part of a bigger plan was a significant factor in their overall positive outcome. Duemer et al. (2016) found that adults who were adopted as children specifically noted a spiritual guidance and connection from parents as valuable to their positive development, so finding that parents identified the same supports former research findings.

Level 2 – Relational

At the relational level, the themes that emerged were (a) spouse, (b) adoptive parent's children (siblings), (c) extended family, (d) workplace, and (e) friends/peers. All parents need support due to the stress of adding children to their families (Chong et al., 2017). At the relational level, adoptive parents find support from many sources including family, friends, and their places of work. In this level, when adoptive parents spoke of their spouses and other children, they had only positive support experiences to note.

When discussing support from extended family, their workplaces, and friends/peers, the support was mixed because they felt unsupported by those sources at times. Several of the parents expressed that they had to accept that some of their longstanding relationships changed with family members and friends who either did not support their adoption from the beginning or expressed support early in the process but were not supportive after the placement. They found new friends to connect with, many of whom were other foster and adoptive parents who understood their situation. They also expressed the value of social media to connect with other families who could empathize and understand their day-to-day experiences.

Level 3 – Community

At the community level, the themes that emerged were (a) CPS, (b) private adoption agencies, (c) other system influencers, (d) church, (e) school, (f) other community sources, (g) value of unutilized services, and (h) value of flexibility availability for consultation. The community level is a critical source of support for families who are adopting due to the number of nonfamilial people who are engaged in the family building process. The parents explained that the requirements to host visits, provide documentation, and engage with community level members put a strain on the adoption process.

Like at the relational level, the community level contained key players who parents described as both supportive in some situations and who made the process more difficult in others. Since caseworkers are the initial people who help normalize the adoption process and aid families in the adjustment, their support is critical during

placement (Merritt & Festinger, 2011). In most cases, parents were met with mixed experiences with CPS but were more positive about their private agencies and felt supported by them, which relates to older research that found the same (see Berry et al., 1996). However, what became clear at this level when dealing with system influencers was that parents had one or two people from the various agencies whom they connected with and relied on during the process. As apparent by the theme of availability, that person was often someone who made themselves available when the adoptive parents needed them rather than at their convenience.

Churches, schools, and other community sources (like counseling, support groups, and foster parents) produced mixed support to adoptive parents as well. When the parents experienced support from those sources, it was greatly appreciated and provided an added layer of connection through the process. However, several parents felt an additional responsibility (especially with church and school) if they did not feel that they were receiving the support or services needed. An added layer of frustration was unmet expectations of groups that they believed would be supportive who were not.

A final interesting note related to this level was the common theme of appreciating services that they did not use. Some parents explained that they did not use some of the services offered because they had so many elements that required their focus that they did not have the time. Others wanted to use services but had trouble because they lived further away than was convenient to attend the groups and trainings. However, even for those parents, they noted that it was so valuable to know that the support was there if they needed it and they had access to it.

Level 4 – Societal

At the societal level, the themes that emerged were (a) dichotomy of opinions about adoption and foster care, (b) stigma related to transracial adoptions, (c) stigma related to older children from foster care, and (d) voluntary normalization from others with similar experiences. Two of the themes at this level were unsurprising because they had been referenced in research, specifically relating to the stigma of transracial adoptions and older children from foster care (see Garber & Grotevant, 2015; Katz & Doyle, 2013). Though culture has moved significantly on stigma related to adoption in general, these two groups still experience direct and indirect aggression related to their backgrounds. Parents interviewed noted the frequency that people would make negative comments about transracial adoptions and older children before and during their placements. Even the parents who were not part of these groups noticed the stigma.

The parents frequently spoke of the dichotomy of beliefs and opinions about adopting from foster care, and one parent said they had taken to calling it the “hero to zero effect.” They also mentioned that when they announced their plans to adopt, they were often met with excitement, obvious support, offers of help, and overall positive emotional experiences; however, once they offered their intentions to adopt transracially, an older child, or out of foster care, some of the people who formerly showed support changed their interactions. Additionally, for some who support through the process, they may be unsupportive after placement if they do not know how to help or cannot understand situations with the children that challenge the process.

Finally, a positive phenomenon that the parents explained was that of others recognizing their family situation and voluntarily offering information or support to help them now they are not the only ones with nontraditional families. Especially for visually obvious situations like transracial adoptions, the parents noted that other White adults would offer to show photos of their racial or ethnic minority family members with pride. The parents also said that, when they mentioned the topic of their adopted children, other people began to share their stories of how adoption impacted their lives or even their experiences in foster care, which helped many parents remember that their situation was not isolated.

Theme of Influence

A final overarching theme that was particularly valuable to this study was that of the parents seeking ways to influence their systems at each level. All of the parents noted times of encouraging and engaging with others at the relational level, especially new adoptive parents who may need support. The participants also sought leadership and volunteer positions of influence in the foster and adoption systems through direct committee work for the state, service in nonprofit organizations, or resourcing through their churches. Additionally, they discussed their obligation to help change people's minds and attitudes about foster care and adoption and provided stories of challenging belief systems as they were aware of them. In none of these situations did the parents adopt and say that were finished with their engagement in foster and adoptive services. Quite the contrary, they were more likely to express their inability to give back enough and their deep desire to help more children.

Limitations of the Study

For this transcendental phenomenological study, I recruited six participants and met data saturation, which met expert suggestions for this type of study (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Patton, 2015). This group of interviewees shared the experience of adoption of children who had been in CPS custody before; but, they also shared some other experiences. For example, all of the parents adopted in the state of Texas, so their experiences with the system and community support may be different from parents who adopt in other states. Societal stigma and culture vary among geographical regions of the country, so parents from other states may experience different stigma.

The parents who participated in this study voluntarily offered to share their time and experiences so that aspect of their personality may offer a filter for their experiences. Their willingness to volunteer for the study may especially influence findings like desire to give back and influence the system. The parents were all adoptive parents of children with foster care history, so their experiences are likely different from other types of adoptions including, but not limited to, private adoptions and international adoptions.

Finally, though I followed a clear plan to raise my awareness, address, and bracket my personal experiences and ideas, I share the same background and experiences that many of the parents expressed (Maxwell, 2013). I also worked for several years in an agency that provided advocacy for children in foster care, so I gained additional ideas and experiences within that setting as well. Those experiences offer a personal lens through which I see adoptive families and their experiences, so I monitored it through audio

journaling as a form of bracketing. However, it is the shared experiences that provide a background to know how vital it is to consider and study this population.

Recommendations

In this study, I followed the request of previous literature that implored researchers to study adoption beyond the scope of individual children or child characteristics and focused on the parents' experiences as they are system influencers in the family and set the tone for how the family functions (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010). As the findings of this study show, parents have multifaceted experiences with support, and researchers must continue to focus on adoptive family systems beyond the children who enter the systems. It would be beneficial for future studies to repeat this model with families in other areas of the country and with groups of adoptive parents not represented in this study. Additionally, this study could serve as an informative piece of literature for quantitative studies that could determine the amount of influence each of these themes or levels have on positive outcomes for adoptive families.

As this study was limited to the experiences of parents who adopted legally free children placed in foster care, it would be helpful to gather the experiences of families who experienced other types of adoptions and understand their experiences of support. Some of the families in this study also had experience as foster parents and expressed that it was very different. Families who foster to adopt, adopt internationally, or adopt through private sources likely have different experiences that would be beneficial to professionals and agencies that serve them. It would be beneficial for researchers to consider how their

experiences differ from straight adopt families and from each other to customize services offered.

The purpose of this study was to consider support experiences from the perspectives of the parents involved in the adoption process. However, it would be valuable to understand the experiences of others involved as well. For example, children who have been in foster care and were adopted can articulate their understanding of the system well, and their perspective would be valuable (Mariscal et al., 2015). It would be beneficial to capture those experiences both as adolescents and as adults in retrospect. Another valuable piece of literature would be explorations of the perceptions of the professionals who work with adoptive families. Those groups may include CPS caseworkers, private agency caseworkers, postadoption caseworkers, counselors, and others who serve families directly during the process.

Implications

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive framework to understand the adoptive family experience of support and further emphasize the amount of influence the parent experience has on adoption outcomes (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010). The themes that arose may be used for training purposes when adults choose to adopt. Adoption agencies and state agencies may find use in the individual level themes to discuss with parents during the vetting process and assess when families are struggling.

State agencies and private adoption agencies will benefit the adoptive parent experiences with their services to help guide the process and make changes to increase support for parents. Additionally, policymakers and politicians should use the findings to

consider state requirements and find ways to make the process more supportive of potential adoptive parents. The stress of the system and the struggle with overworked state employees puts undue stress on families that are adopting. Children from foster care are marginalized and face poor outcomes if they do not get placed in an adoptive family, so it would be beneficial to consider changes at the state and policy levels that would increase positive outcomes (Zlotnick et al., 2012).

Finally, CACREP (2016) requires counseling programs with marriage, couple, and family specializations to educate future counselors about family systems, including those that are nontraditional. Adoptive families have a unique set of experiences and frequently use counseling services, as they may be required and offered by their agencies. Counselors who work with adoptive families need specialized training to understand their needs. This research could be a helpful piece of literature to inform coursework in marriage, couple, and family programs.

Conclusion

Children who age out of foster care face difficulties at increased rates than that of their peers, but adoptive homes and healthy adjustment can change those children's futures (Helton, 2011; Zlotnick et al., 2012). For that to work, the adoptive homes must be healthy and able to integrate their new children into the family and support them during the adjustment, which ultimately is the responsibility of the parents as the primary system influencer (Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2011). During the adoptive process, those parents need support from a variety of individuals and agencies to provide the type of home and stability needed. Though the parents who adopt most often have the internal

fortitude and resources to navigate the process, they need the help of others because, as one participant said so well, “It definitely takes a village.”

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Research Opportunity: Exploring Parent Experiences that Influence Positive Adoption Outcomes

- Are you an adoptive parent?
- Have you adopted your children within the last 5 years through the Texas Waiting Children Program of the Department of Family and Protective Services?
- Are you willing to offer your time for an interview to explore your experiences during placement?



- The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of adoptive parents that contribute to positive adoption outcomes.
- Participating in this study may help state and local agencies to enhance preparatory training to better support families during the adoption process.

To learn more about this research study or to sign up to participate, please contact Deena Shelton, MA, LPC-S, NCC

Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX | Email: XXXXX.XXXXXXX@XXXXXXX.XXX

This research is part of a dissertation study for the completion of the Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision program at Walden University. Participants will be asked to offer 90 minutes for a meeting and interview in person or by video chat.

Appendix B: Letter of Agreement

XXXXXXXXXX Attn.: XXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXX

October 26, 2017

Dear Deena Shelton,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I am willing to distribute research invitations for your study A Phenomenological Exploration of Parent Experiences that Influence Positive Adoption Outcomes within the XXXXXXXXXXXX. As part of this study, I authorize you to send information about the study for me to distribute. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: distributing the information and communicating with you as the researcher. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that the student will not be naming our organization in the doctoral project report that is published in Proquest. I confirm that I am authorized to approve this agreement and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview questions for adoptive parents:

1. Will you tell me about your experience of placement before you were able to finalize the adoption of your child(ren)?
2. During the timeframe between the placement of your children in your home and your adoption finalization, what were some of the most significant occurrences that led to finalization rather than disruption?
3. Will you tell me about your personal or internal traits or experiences that you feel were related to your outcome of finalization?
4. Will you tell me about your experiences with family, friend, peer, work and school that you believe were related to you finalizing your adoption?
5. Will you tell me about your experiences with the community or your agency that helped promote a finalized adoption?
6. Will you tell me about your experiences within your culture or society that helped promote a finalized adoption?
7. Is there anything else that you would suggest contributed to your overall outcome of adoption finalization?