The Lived Experience of Being an Adoptee

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Abstract

Adoption can initiate many sentiments. Notable differences between adopted and nonadopted children are clearly indicated in research. Because limited research looks at the gradual development of the adoptee, this research looked at the lived experiences of Maltese adoptees and their coping mechanisms.

Following Smith and Osborn (2015) guide on interpretative phenomenological approach, six participants shared their experiences in semi-structured interviews conducted remotely.

Four superordinate themes and ten subordinate themes emerged from the data analysis.

Findings showed unique ways by adoptees to accept the often challenging reality of the adoption process. Resilience was clearly what led adoptees moving on with life. Society and related bodies are therefore called to avail professional services to assist adoptees in their coping of a painful past.

Keywords: adoption, adoptee, lived experience, interpretative phenomenology analysis, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Adoption is a personal phenomenon for both adoptive parents and adopted children and can be a complex legal and moral process. As Finely (2003) notes, adoption is the interference in the infant's life who has no parents or whose parents are unable to raise them. Adoption, as the legal process of taking a child from their biological family and raising them as one's own, can initiate many sentiments (Finely, 2003). Although this definition of adoption can be clear and straightforward to understand, the concerns and themes that may arise from this subject matter can be delicate. While adoption brings happiness, excitement, and affection, these sentiments may be followed by feelings of sadness, regret, and guilt (Finely, 2003). Baltimore (2009) claims that adoption research is often criticized because participants who have been adopted do not have the opportunity to communicate their realities in the absence of the researcher's presumed beliefs and preferences.

Unfortunately, the development of adoption throughout history has been theoretically imposed by misjudgements, negative beliefs, and stigmatization. In addition, hostile impressions about adoption have been disseminated through digital media to gain the attention of the masses (Wegar, 2000). In-depth research on adoption is essential in resolving this stigma by questioning and analyzing adopted individual's lived experiences whilst identifying therapeutic interventions that can be utilized to support them.

The National Statistics Office (2010) found that the registration of Maltese adoption reveals that adoption is prevalent among Maltese families, as 71 adoptions were completed yearly between 2004 and 2008. 2018 was the best year for adoptions in the last 10 years. Of 54 adoptions, over 70% were from India. On the other hand, only 27 Maltese children were adopted in the last decade (Zammit, 2022).

In this study, a qualitative approach was chosen to identify and better understand issues on how adoption impacted adopted individuals' identity, relationships, and trauma. Several adoption studies find notable differences between adopted and nonadopted children and adolescents. However, little research has looked at the gradual development of life experience from the perspective of an adopted individual. Even in Malta, where the population and sample size of adopted individuals is relatively small, little research has been carried out to appreciate and listen to adoptees' lived experiences (Cassar, 2010).

The main psychological challenges and effects adoptees encounter throughout their lives as adoptees include loss and grief, challenges with identity formulation, lack of pride and self confidence (Reynolds et al., 2021). Literature presents a plethora of related themes, which can be surmised into four categories, namely: a) adjustment and bonding, b) identity formation, c) race and adoption, and d) post-adoption support requirements (Walton, 2015).

While all the research addressed adoptees' actual experiences, several gaps in the literature were discovered, such as the lack of social services assistance throughout the adoptee's life and the lack of knowledge and information on how to cope with racial, ethnic, and cultural challenges. According to Reynolds et al. (2021), adoptive parents must be trained to help with coping methods if and when problematic behavior is demonstrated by the adoptee caused by a variety of challenges. It is evident that there is a severe lack of post-adoption counseling for adoptees. For the adoption process to be successful, there must be communication, support, and expert assistance.

For this study, two theoretical frameworks, namely the primal wound theory and attachment theory, will help to guide the discussion of this theme and to further understand the repercussions of adoption. According to Verrier's (2003) primal wound theory, this wound follows immediately after birth, as the detachment of the birth mother impacts the adopted child by feelings of neglect and void. Based on this theory, adoption results in a primal/narcissistic wound that leaves the child craving connection with the biological mother due to the separation. The repercussions result in emotions of worthlessness, doubt, hopelessness, and solitude, as well as emotional/behavioral issues, relational issues, low self-esteem, and thoughts of unworthiness. Similarly, attachment theory also helps to guide this study. Attachment theory postulates that humans have a basic need for protective attachment figures to survive, from the beginning of life itself (Flaherty & Sadler, 2011). Literature demonstrates that both adoptees and adoptive parents may face various social and psychological challenges throughout their lives, but sadly, neither group receives the necessary help or training (Darnell et al., 2017). Scarvelis et al. (2017) noted that adoptive parents had difficulty teaching their kids coping skills. Support is essential for adopted people; it is not optional. The primal wound theory expressed a sense of loss concerning the hurt caused by the birth mother's separation. In addition, attachment theory determines multiple perspectives in understanding a child's specific behavior, demands, and challenges since it provides a theoretical, detailed, and realistic framework for making sense of the process involved (Walker, 2008).

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

This study's main goal was to seek and focus on the lived experiences of adopted adults in Malta. The research question was: *What is the lived experience of being an adoptee ?* This study intended to clarify such research aims, namely to better understand the real life experiences of adoptees, to identify which factors may help or hinder the adoption process not only prior, but also during and afterwards. Hopefully, this may result in better and more concrete recommendations to further assist adoptees in their challenging journeys.

An IPA was chosen as it offers a thorough analysis of the human lived experience that can be represented in its own concepts instead of following pre-established categorizing frameworks. Because most studies seek the experiences from the adoptive parents' perspectives (Macdonald & McSherry, 2011), this study looked at the lived experiences of the adoptees themselves. Pringle et al. (2011) argue that, while a small sample size as in the case of an IPA, may be considered a constraint, if the findings obtained are meaningful, clear, and associated with current research, they can still be transferable. Through purposive sampling, six competent participants were included, male and female adults between 18 and 35 years who were adopted (local and foreign). The inclusion criteria included participants who were interested in conveying their stories and had no cognitive impairment that might have affected their communication since this study's objective is to collect adoptees' stories and their thoughts and feelings about their adoption. Potential participants were chosen and contacted through an intermediary from the Foundation of Social Welfare Services to exclude any pressure for participation. Participants were given an information letter about the study. Furthermore, they signed a consent form after all related information was relayed to them, individually by the researcher. The original objective of this study was to explore the lived experience of adoptees adopted from local and foreign countries, however, through intermediary, the potential participants were all adopted from Romania.

2.2 Procedures

A semi-structured interview was the method for gathering data in this research, as it gives participants the freedom to reflect, express and be heard - thus producing in-depth findings, according to the guidelines by Smith et al. (2009). A pilot study with one adoptee, who was not included in the final study, was done, to further guide the researcher in this research. Free psychological support was also available to participants who sought further help as from the interviews. However, no one availed of this service.

2.3 Measure

Interviews lasted around one hour. They were conducted virtually via zoom at a time convenient to the participants. Translation into English was done by a professional translator, as all interviews were conducted in Maltese, the preferred choice by all participants.

Participants were interviewed on their lived experience of adoption and its impact on their emotional well-being, the challenges they encountered, their relationships, and their identity. Moreover, the questions addressed coping mechanisms and support approaches utilized throughout this delicate phase. Further questions were asked to examine the research issue and objectives of this exploration and help keep the conversation running smoothly (Smith et al., 2009). To validate the comprehensive and thorough details acquired from the adoptees, probes and prompts were also used, such as "can you elaborate further", "can you give me an example", and "how has it affected you", among others (Parahoo, 2006).

2.4 Data Analysis

According to Smith and Osborn (2015), it is essential that observations, participants' accounts, and data on their expressions are collected. The researcher observed for non-verbal signs to assess the reliability and richness of the participant's accounts. Therefore, field notes were ideal for jotting down non-verbal signs and behaviors that could not be acquired through audio recordings. Furthermore, the researcher obtained approval from participants to contact them if any additional explanation was needed, but this was not required.

The six participants in this research were all residing in Malta and adopted from Romania between the ages of 3 months and 2 years, with five being female and one male. To maintain anonymity, the participants' ages were not specified, but they ranged from mid-twenties to late thirties.

As mentioned earlier, a pilot study was utilized as a trial of the interview sample to determine any issues that may arise whilst the author is learning. Even so, the study was a successful trial. The researcher acknowledged her role in the research through personal reflexivity that may have affected the participant's answers throughout the interview (Parahoo, 2006). Relative to Holloway and Freshwater's (2007) suggestion, a reflective diary is considered essential to the interpretive and systematic approach.

Smith et al. (2009) define the interpretation procedure as a continuous process which can be done by looking at the transcript in a structured manner. Hence, the transcribed interviews were analyzed utilizing Smith et al.'s (2009) strategies, namely step 1: linking to accounts of the participants; step 2: identifying emergent themes; step 3: forming connections between emergent themes, and step 4: finalizing the narrative account of the findings.

2.5 Ethical Approval

An intermediary contacted all participants, supplying them with an information letter and consent form which were duly explained to them. Participants returned the signed consent forms to the researcher, and agreed on time and place of their own choosing for the interview to be conducted. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could stop and withdraw from the study at any time, without any adverse consequences, that all data will be anonymised, thereby any publications related to this study later on will not have any information which can identify the participants. The coded audio recordings and transcripts were saved on the author's password-protected private computer and kept in an encoded design. All ethical clearance from the University of Malta - Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Board was duly given.

3. Results

Using the methods described by Smith et al. (2009), a range of emerging themes from the participants' life stories were extracted from the interview transcripts. The superordinate and subordinate themes designed in this study and any interpretations that answer the primary research topic are presented in this chapter.

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that metaphors and word repetition were the most frequently utilized language components among participants. Metaphors can provide original and imaginative perspectives to comprehend familiar processes and induce emotion (Carpenter, 2008). Repetition was employed in nearly all of the interviews conducted. According to Oostdijk (2011), individuals use these repetitions to emphasize something or to express strong emotions.

Analysis of the interviews resulted in the formation of four superordinate themes and 10 subordinate themes among the six adoptees who participated in this research. The superordinate themes include: "the chosen one", "the grafted tree", "sandcastles of the heart", and "on eagle's wings".

Table 1. The identified superordinate themes and emergent themes

Superordinate Themes	Emergent Themes
The Chosen One (adopted child)	The adoption story The adoptive family Acceptance
The Grafted Tree (dynamics of adoption & identity)	Identity exploration Bullying Anger
Sandcastles of the Heart (adoptees' fantasies about biological parents)	The biological family Connection
On Eagle's Wings	Post-adoption support Resilience

The next section individually portrays each superordinate theme and provides supporting excerpts.

Superordinate Theme 1: The Chosen One

In the first superordinate theme, "the chosen one", all participants expressed their unique adoption story and process as a critical transitional point when their lives were significantly altered. They also described this process as challenging for various reasons, most often influenced by what their adoptive parents told them when they were very young.

This theme was inspired by the participants in this study which focuses on the family triad and gives a thorough explanation of the process of adoption and its impact on adoptees. All participants began their interviews by recalling when they were adopted from orphanages, foster families, and the streets. They all expressed feelings of being lucky and being chosen by their adoptive parents. Still, some felt they had no choice and no consent in the adoption process, as they were adopted between the ages of four months and fourteen years: *"It's lucky… I got a second chance for life."* (Leah, p. 3, line 10).

The Adoption Story

Each of the six participants provided a detailed and distinct account of their adoption experience, including the reasons for their adoption and any complications or issues that arose prior to the adoption process. All adoptees stated that they were given up for adoption because their biological parents were in poor health and unable to care for them: *"You're given into the hands of someone else because your biological parents couldn't at that time."* (Rebecca, p. 2, line 2).

Difficulties with the adoption process were prevalent at that time for various reasons, including financial issues, paperwork, lawyers, conflicts, and health problems caused by poor personal conditions. *"It wasn't a smooth process, and I was not well; if I was planned, she hadn't put me into the system yet"* (Leah, p. 2, line 4)

Therefore, the adoption process was quite prolonged on nearly all accounts, leading to complications, for instance, postponement in the adoption system and the need for extensive medical and psychiatric care.

The Adoptive Family

All participants described that adoption was never kept as a secret or hidden subject. Instead, it was always openly discussed from a very young age and as they were growing up, which participants felt was ideal and very helpful.

Abigail also recalled her memories by stating that: *" I grew up, from a very young age knowing that I was adopted."* (Abigail, p. 4, line 12)

Adoptees recalled their adoptive parents' disclosure of their adoption to them in various ways, including reading children's books, presenting photos, using metaphors, and presenting objects significant to the child's development. *"They were very informative. They even had a photo to show me of my mum. They showed me my documents, my Romanian passport."* (Leah, p. 5, lines 13–14)

Acceptance

Acceptance of their adoption was not always a smooth process. Confusion with what to do with any information given at the time often ensued: *"I couldn't understand because to me they were my parents… to me, they were my parents, and that is who I knew"* (Leah, p. 5, lines 3-6).

However, most adoptees' upbringings allowed them to accept the adoption without hesitation. It was explained that acceptance begins with one's acceptance of themselves. In fact, Rebecca said: *"I just sort of grew into it accepting it"* (Rebecca, p. 1, line 20). Some tried to hide that they were adopted because of fear of rejection or of getting bullied as in the case of Ella: *"Nearly no one knew. No one, except a girl in secondary… we had an argument, and she used it to ridicule me. And from that day onwards, no one ever knew."* (Ella, p. 2, lines 15-17).

Despite these realities, almost all adoptees reported feeling fortunate to have known they were adopted at a young age and considered themselves lucky.

Superordinate Theme 2: The Grafted Tree

Adoption further affected the identity and self-perception of the participants over time, as well as their adoption experiences, since some participants discovered they were adopted at the age of 14. As a result, "the grafted tree" theme emerged as the second superordinate theme, as grafted trees generate in non-"normal" ways but are handled with care and love.

Identity Exploration

Identity development is a lifelong process that begins in childhood, evolves in adolescence, and continues in adulthood, resulting in an adoptive identity. This theme is based on how adoptees see themselves in relation to others since adoptive identity makes them unique. The developed adoptive identity aids adoptees in answering fundamental questions. For instance, Isaac expressed that asking these questions is self-evident and crucial since such questions are integral to his life: *"You'll ask, obviously… I thought, who do I belong to? Who am I truly? Where am I from?"* (Isaac, p. 2, line 22)

For Abigail, growing up meant a confusing journey, and it was only when she reached her mid-teens to adjust and accept her adoption status.

Some adoptees who participated in the study felt uncomfortable disclosing that they were adopted and did not want to face their reality. They even lied about their identity so that no one would question them apart from their close family and friends. The researcher speculated that there was truth to their claims and investigated the possibility that bullying, fear of rejection, and a desire not to hurt their adoptive parents were the primary motivations for lying and concealing their identity.

Throughout the interview, Leah described the annoyance she felt whenever people made comparisons between her and her adoptive parents, knowing perfectly well that such a thing was impossible given that her adoptive parents were not her biological parents.

Still, all six participants described how, throughout their lives, they experienced periods of conflicting identities.

Bullying

Fear of rejection or fear of disappointment or disapproval by others may also lead to hiding one's adoptive reality. This could lead to a lonesome existence: *"In secondary school… once we had an argument, and she used it to ridicule me… I felt angry and lonely."* (Ella, p. 5, line 13).

Desiree also recounted that she was bullied at a very young age. *"When I entered school, like, from a young age, I started to suffer from a lot of bullying... From a young age, I was bullied because I am a quiet girl."* (Desiree, p. 5, line 13) .

Bullying creates a wound that can ultimately affect adoptees' evolving identity. Unfortunately, they could not escape these differences and had to learn how to adjust and understand them.

Anger

Adoptees recounted various episodes related to their feelings of anger. The source of this anger frequently stemmed from being abandoned by their biological parents and the resulting separation. Rebecca expressed her anger and hurt by the following excerpts: *"I was given into the hands of someone else."* (Rebecca, p. 2, line 2).

Leah harbored resentment toward her birth mother as she was not always intended for adoption, but her birth mother intended to make money off of her. Her birth mother was expecting another child as Leah was going through the adoption process. Leah described the complexity of her conflicting emotions as, despite the resentment she harbored toward her biological mother, she also felt gratitude toward her adoptive parents. In fact, she expressed: *"I wasn't initially planned to get adopted, but then you know you cannot take care of the… child, and you get pregnant again. In the sense that it defeats the purpose of the concept of what was going on, that is the anger I had towards her."* (Leah, p. 10, lines 14–18).

Anger resulted also because the adoptees were not mature and old enough to express their thoughts: *"When I was small, and I needed to sort of speak, to say something… for example, 'no, don't let me go, I want to stay', I couldn't. I had to let go without consent."* (Abigail, p. 3, lines 17–18).

The complex dynamics of adoption caused the adoptees to experience a range of challenging emotions at various points in their development. Although they got along well with their friends and family, some participants said they were angry because they were the "only child" in their family and therefore the adoptees felt "overprotective". Some adoptees also expressed loneliness or an empty feeling as if something was missing in their lives. *"I had friends, and I got along with everyone, but I always felt very lonely… something is missing."* (Rebecca, p. 4, lines 4-5).

Superordinate Theme 3: Sandcastles of the Heart

The third superordinate theme that emerged was "sandcastles of the heart", as some respondents expressed the desire and curiosity to return to their roots and search for their biological parents to build the connection they longed for throughout their lives. Others were not interested at all due to mixed feelings of pain and anger. Some participants adapted to and overcame life's challenges through resilience, but others needed help from healthcare professionals to acknowledge their loss and begin healing. The final superordinate theme, "on eagle's wings", revealed aspects of the adoptee's journey in overcoming their painful past through various support and adjusting to a new identity as an adoptee. All interviewees expressed gratitude and faith toward their adoption experience by describing themselves as "lucky", "grateful", and "blessed".

A participant mentioned a song by Beyoncé titled "Sandcastles" as an expression of suffering caused by people who walk away from relationships for various reasons, only to find out that their hearts continue to love the people they abandoned even after they have moved on. The researcher felt that this metaphor was appropriate in this context since most adoptees expressed the desire and fantasized about their biological family.

The adoptee's genuine feelings to give their life meaning are personified by their interest in building sandcastles. Every person takes great care and pride in building and protecting their mental dreams and sandcastles. The time spent together and the bonds formed while building the sandcastles are well worth the risk of having them destroyed by the elements of life.

The Biological Family

Almost everyone expressed a desire to find their biological relatives, whether out of curiosity, the desire to finally feel loved, or a sense of belonging. Their adoptive parents were willing to support them in finding their family.

One adoptee had in fact traveled back to her birth country to meet her biological family. Interestingly, she was somehow reluctant to inform her adoptive parents about this journey, perhaps for fear of being misunderstood.

Connection

Almost all adoptees wished to find their birth families to fill an emotional void and "*close the circle*". Therefore, this section primarily focuses on connection and attachment following the participants' desire and need to know more about their biological parents.

Following the meeting with her biological mother, Abigail revealed that she was not disappointed by the encounter or the story behind her adoption, as she could see and hear the story from her biological mother's perspective. Nevertheless, Abigail discovered that despite this encounter and the relationship that developed over a year and a half after meeting her biological mother, the void she had felt her entire life remained. Abigail also mentioned that she now keeps in contact with her family and looks forward to visiting them: *"But then I realized that meeting her, meeting all my family… it still didn't fill that void… so I think it will remain there. But I am aware of it."* (Abigail, p. 5, lines 16-18).

Superordinate Theme 4: On Eagle's Wings

The researcher was inspired by her spirituality for this theme and chose this metaphor since the eagle is unique, and its wings symbolize the affection of God's refuge upon us. The choice of this metaphor relates to the following subordinate themes because despite the obvious loss experienced by most adoptees, solace and empowerment found in one's own resilience, pre- and post adoption process, and one's spirituality may serve as crucial to help conclude the adoption process in a positive resolve, even if it remains a learning curve to the individuals involved.

All adoptees, even if not explicitly stated, shared a common experience: loss and grief brought on by the disruption of their lives caused by the separation from their birth families. Their history is painful because it is full of missing pieces and unanswered questions, as they were thrust into a world of unknowns. All participants mentioned different coping strategies and support they needed and used to cope with their pain. On eagle's wings captures

this often challenging journey of adoptees not just to find a new home, but also to resolve as positively as possible the healing from the bereavement process inherent in such a process.

Resilience

Some adoptees mentioned that they never received support from their family or professionals whenever they encountered challenges growing up. Despite this, they successfully adjusted on their own to the problematic aspects of their life experiences: *"I found a lot of strength alone."* (Rebecca, p. 4, line 21). Resilience was also highlighted in Ella's excerpts: *"I used to go home like nothing happened."*(Ella, p. 6, lines 13-14).

Post-Adoption Support

During the healing process, some adoptees expressed the need for support. However, each individual received different types of assistance throughout their life. Leah and Desiree needed the help of psychologists because they struggled as children with issues like night terrors and bullying. It helped them tremendously as they gradually overcame their difficulties and found inner peace. Meanwhile, Isaac felt that confiding in his family was very helpful, as his adoptive parents always supported him: *"I always found support, when I used to talk about it [the adoption], I always found support from my family members… and that helps."* (Isaac, p. 6, lines 7-8).

Abigail was the type of person who preferred to reach out for help. She recalled how, as a child, a priest consoled her by telling her that her birth mother could have aborted her but chose to give her life. This helped her accept adoption as a permanent part of her life: *"In a way or another… someone always cushioned me or made me open my eyes or made me see a different perspective to the situation."* (Abigail, p. 6, lines 10-11).

This chapter presented four major themes that emerged from the data analysis of the interviews with adoptees. The following chapter discusses and compares the testimonies of the six participants' experiences with other relevant literature.

4. Discussion

This study explored the impact of adoption on adoptees through their perspectives as they recounted their lived experiences. In the first superordinate theme, "The Chosen One", results indicated that the adoption process was challenging and lengthy for most participants as they explained how complex it is due to financial issues, language barriers and more. Moreover, the findings indicated the adoptees' thoughts and feelings on their adoption status. Most adoptees expressed appreciation for being adopted and felt fortunate to have been placed in a loving family. Although overall, findings showed that most adoptees were raised in a way that made this adjustment relatively easy, this was not reflected throughout. In fact, some adoptees struggled to accept their adoption because they did not understand the process or how to apply the newfound knowledge. Corresponding to Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory, the main variables of effective attachment are approachability and support (Bowlby, 1969). Notably, adverse consequences can develop if this bond is hindered during adoption (Hughes, 1999).

Adoptees' identities were examined as a common theme within the second superordinate theme, with participants discussing how adoption impacted and shaped some characteristics of their identities through personal struggles, feelings of loss and abandonment and eventual misunderstanding. "The Grafted Tree" is a metaphor for adoption as a process in which a child, represented by a branch, is removed from one family tree and transplanted into another family tree, where they become an integral part of that new family tree. The child's identity continues to develop, shift, and transform with love and care throughout their lifetime as they grow. This theme addressed the adoptees' identity formation as well as the effects on the identity development of the adopted individual.

Results from this second superordinate theme indicated that adoptees struggled with conflicting identities as they grew up since their identity is changed and evolved differently to what it would have been like had they not been adopted. The data showed that adoptive and biological parents are crucial to adoptive identity. Study findings indicated that although most participants adjusted and accepted their identity as adoptees, a few felt uncomfortable identifying themselves, indicating the existence of secrecy and stigma about their adoption. Furthermore, bullying may be a common consequence of adoption, as described in the findings. This related to adoptees' experience of loss, fear of rejection, and loneliness. Emotional turmoil was another footprint in the participants' trajectory. Anger was perhaps the most prominent, resulting from the choice of their biological parents to give them for adoption, often resulting in rebellious behavior. Some felt misunderstood and lacked bonding to their adoptive parents. This suggests a link between anger and attachment. The concept of anger is connected to Verrier's (1993) primal wound theory, which explains that adoptees go through life with unconscious wounds that they frequently carry into adulthood, implying the importance of having adoptees feel safe, surrounded by love and assisted with compassion. Bullying and racial discrimination was yet another issue raised in this study, most notable with related studies particularly with adoptees from different cultural backgrounds (Reynolds et al., 2021).

According to McAdams (2001), when adoptees try to understand their identity, they yearn to imagine a clear narrative that helps them make sense of their lives and establish connections between their past, present and future.

In the third superordinate theme "Sandcastles of the heart", the findings indicated that most adoptees shared a common desire to discover their origins, to feel loved and a sense of belonging. Returning to one's roots is essential because it initiates the process of healing from the trauma caused by adoption, and also helps in forming an identity (Darnell et al., 2017; Fronek et al., 2018; Walton, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2021). In agreement with attachment theory, this study's results emphasize also that the connection between mother and child remains a crucial factor in the child's development. In line with Fronek et al. (2018) and Reynolds et al. (2016), this study's results highlighted the importance of the comfort given by the adoptive parents to their adopted children in times of struggle.

Finally, loss and grief due to the separation from birth families was a consistent finding shared by all participants. The fourth superordinate theme, "On Eagle's Wings", indicated clearly this shared component. Meaningful and beneficial relationships were preserved as adoption was openly discussed. Most adoptees reported that their adoptive parents helped locate their biological parents, thus cushioning the initial impact of separation. Furthermore, this study revealed that support and personal resiliency helped adoptees overcome social and psychological obstacles. Thus, assistance from mental healthcare professionals and adoptive parents may be essential for coping with and overcoming a painful past. Several studies shed light on the significance of post-adoption support needs, given that adoptees face various difficulties due to adoption (Scarvelis et al., 2017; Fronek et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2021). It was suggested that adoptees can maintain a positive outlook on life by accepting change, exercising self-control, and being resilient in response to challenges (March et al. 2000). The relation between the main caregiver and the adopted child remains crucial for the child's development, in line with attachment theory.

4.1 Recommendations of this Study

A number of recommendations result from this study. First, adoption is a unique process that elicits a number of strong emotions in the adoptee. In order to find a manageable closure or rather positive resolution to this very personal and existential reality, one is bound to face squarely and process the many strong emotions involved. Having a system that caters and addresses this aspect among adoptees, especially for those who show the need for it, is a must for a society that needs to meet the demand not just for parents seeking to adopt, but also to equip both adoptive parents and adoptees with the journey post-adoption.

Moreover, the input of mental health professionals together with the adoptive parents is sought for, for the positive resolution of any painful past involved in the adoptee's life's trajectory. Indeed, acceptance is a key ingredient in the adoptee's life, in order to respond appropriately to life's challenges.

4.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study focused on the lived experiences of adopted adults, in a novel culture, through the use of IPA. Although the initial scope was to recruit participants who were adopted from any country, in reality all participants hailed from Romania. The in-depth exploration of the experiences recounted by adult adoptees highlighted the effects and difficulties encountered throughout their adoption journey.

A number of limitations need to be noted as well. Although this study was intended to recruit adoptees from various countries to obtain diverse perspectives from different backgrounds, all participants hailed from Romania. Another limitation related to the gender of participants, as only one male adoptee participated in the study. Finally, because all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, some sensitive information and non-verbal communication could have gone unnoticed, considering that the topic is naturally sensitive.

4.3 Conclusion

This study's aim was to acquire a greater awareness of adults' experiences with adoption, including the difficulties they encountered throughout the adoption process and the emotional challenges they faced while growing up. Findings showed unique ways by adoptees to accept the often challenging reality of the adoption process. Resilience was clearly what led adoptees moving on with life. One main contribution to knowledge that results is that society and related bodies need to create an environment whereby assistance from mental healthcare professionals and adoptive parents be availed, which may be essential for coping with and overcoming a painful past. This is also in line with attachment theory.

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