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Life Stories of International Romanian Adoptees: A Narrative Study

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This study sought to explore the life stories of Romanian adoptees who were internationally adopted following the fall of communism in 1989. Ten participants were recruited via social media and took part in a life stories interview. Data were analysed using narrative analysis, which led to the development of four life chapters centred around identity construction: Chapter 1: Setting the scene -- The adoption story; Chapter 2: Constructing the self; Chapter 3: Who am I? Quest for self-discovery; and Chapter 4: Negotiating the selves. Clinical implications, research limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Key words

International Adoption, Romania, Qualitative, Narrative Analysis, Identity

Under the Ceaușescu regime between 1965-1989, policy was introduced to expand Romania's workforce through increased birth rate (Hord, David, Donnay & Wolf, 1991). This was enforced by an abortion and contraception ban, with women encouraged to have at least four children. If this was not adhered to, financial punishment was a consequence (Zeanah et al., 2003). Because of the population policy in Romania there was a substantial increase in the number of children living within orphanages/institutional care. Moreover, the country's worsening economic situation (Dickens & Groza, 2004) meant that by 1994 approximately 40% of all children were living in poverty (UNICEF, 1997). Following the downfall of communism, the challenging living conditions for children in Romania attracted international attention (Hord et al., 1991). Media coverage of impoverished living conditions for Romanian children led to an international response to rescue them (Castle et al., 1999; Wilson, 2003; Youde, 2014), and between 1990-1991 over 10,000 children were internationally adopted from Romania, initially from institutions, then by 1991 they were being adopted directly from their biological parents (UNICEF, 1997).

The poor physical health of children adopted from Romanian institutions led to this population being deemed 'high risk' (e.g. Johnson et al., 1992). Consequently, the Department of Health in the UK commissioned a research study to explore the long-term growth and recovery for children adopted from Romania, and to establish the policy and practice implications of the phenomenon - The English and Romanian Adoptee (ERA) study (Rutter, Kumsta, Schlotz & Sonuga-Barke, 2012; Rutter, Sonuga-Barke & Castle, 2010).). The ERAStudy has researched the development of 144 children adopted into the UK following institutional care in Romania (Rutter et al., 2010). This study has provided evidence spanning over 20 years, showing a significant

physical, developmental and psychological ‘catch up’ following adoption for many adoptees. Concurrent research supports these findings, documenting improvements in physical health and developmental delay following adoption (Benoit, Jocelyn, Moddemann, & Embree, 1996, Morrison, Ames & Chisholm, 1995). Similar findings come from a longitudinal study of foster care placement as an alternative to institutional care in Romania which demonstrated a significant resolution of psychological difficulties for fostered children, compared with those remaining in institutions (Bos, Zeneah, Smyke, Fox & Nelson, 2010; Zeanah et al., 2003). However, a proportion of Romanian adoptees have been shown to display ongoing psychological difficulties (Kumsta et al., 2010) which has been associated with time spent in orphanages (Chisholm, Carter, Ames & Morison, 1995; Groze & Ileana, 1996; Rutter et al., 2007).

Romanian adoptees’ ‘ethnic’ identity -- the sense of belonging and commitment to an ‘ethnic’ group (Roberts et al., 1999) - has also been explored. The majority of participants in the ERA study at age 15 (Beckett et al., 2008), and in a study by Scherman and Harré (2008) including Romanian adoptees up to age 19, reported an interest in finding out about Romania, learning the language, and enjoying cultural activities. In the ERA study, discrepancies were found between parent¹ and child reports of interest in Romania. Some parents reported a decline from age 11 to 15 in their child’s interest, with 70% stating they no longer asked questions about Romania and they had difficulties discussing their backgrounds (Beckett et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2007b). However, some adoptees reported being unhappy with the level of discussion about Romania and thought their parents had difficulties talking about it, and that they did think about their birth parents. Moreover, 50% were interested in finding their birth families, but some

¹ The term ‘parent’ refers to adoptive parent unless otherwise specified

thought that it would hurt their parents if this were known (Beckett et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2007b).

These studies also found that adoptees identified with Romania to different degrees. For instance, over half identified with their host country; a third identified as a mix of the birth and host cultures; and approximately 15% identified as Romanian (Beckett et al., 2008; Scherman & Harré, 2008). Furthermore, although parents' interest in Romanian culture was associated with children's interest, it was not related to their Romanian identity (Beckett et al., 2008; Scherman & Harré, 2010). In the ERA study, children who identified as 'Anglo-Romanian' were more likely to have adoptive parents who showed earlier interest in Romanian identity, however, this was not the case for those identifying as Romanian (Beckett et al., 2008), suggesting that other factors play a role.

For example, Scherman and Harré (2010) found that age related to identification with and interest in birth culture, i.e. older children showed more interest in their heritage culture and identified more strongly with it. Although this was not reported within the ERA study, the potential for cultural identity to become more salient during adulthood was highlighted (Beckett et al., 2008; Rutter et al., 2009).

Moreover, although over a third of participants in the ERA study reported bullying at age 15 (Beckett et al., 2008), as did those in Scherman and Harré's study (2008), the role of negative treatment from others was not considered in relation to identification with Romania. Furthermore, Scherman and Harré (2008) found that over 50% of children reported feeling different to their non-adoptive peers. The ERA study reported that Romanian adoptees do not feel 'different' to others (Rutter et al., 2009), however this was asked only in relation to their

perceived difference to their adoptive family (Hawkins et al., 2007a) rather than peers who, during adolescence increase in importance (Erikson, 1968; Marcia 1980), and comparisons with others become central to one's identity (Argyle, 1994; Mead, 1934). Adolescence to early, or emerging adulthood is considered a crucial a time for identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson, stages of identity development in childhood are concerned with building trust, gaining autonomy and developing initiative and competence, whereas adolescence offers a time for identity exploration to consider who one is, their values and goals for adulthood (Erickson, 1950, 1968). Erikson proposed that successful navigation of this stage provides a coherent sense of self for moving into adulthood. For adoptees, identity development involves additional layers of identity exploration as it involves consideration of oneself as an adoptee and what being adopted means which is evident by the extensive exploration of adoption information and birth relatives during adolescence (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). Moreover, for international adoptees they are tasked with understanding their relationships with birth and adoptive families with whom they do not share cultural similarities such as language or heritage and considering how to carry out identity exploration across these 'cultural divides' and norms (Grotevant& Von Korff, 2011).

Erikson (1963) also identifies the social and cultural context one is exposed to is influential for identity development. For adoptees, the willingness of the adoptive family to discuss details of the adoption and the reactions from those in the wider community shapes their identity exploration and development (Grotevant & Von Korff. 2011).

Current Study

Although research into adulthood has begun to emerge (Kennedy et al., 2016), current understanding of Romanian adoptees continues to be based mainly on quantitative research findings focused on psychological testing of adoptees up to adolescence, leaving the voices of adoptees only heard when they have had negative experiences, or not at all (Feast, Grant, Rushton & Simmonds, 2013; Patel, 2007). Quantitative evidence provides merely a ‘snap-shot’ at one point in time (Patel, 2005) therefore lacks a lifespan perspective. It also leaves unknown the processes behind Romanian adoptees’ identity development, discrepancies between parent and child’ accounts, and the impact of perceived difference and discrimination unknown. Moreover, there is a media narrative about Romanian adoptees in the public sphere, which has continued since the 1990s where Romania was synonymous with international adoption (Dickens, 2002). Such media narratives not only contribute to societal discourse, but also to individuals’ personal identity (Weilnböck, 2009). For Romanian adoptees, some consideration of identity development has been given in the context of ethnic/cultural identity, yet it remains largely unexplored. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore how Romanian adoptees construct their identities within narratives of their life stories.

Method

Recruitment

The study was reviewed and given ethical approval Participants were recruited through social media forums/support groups set up for international adoptees. These forums were found by searching key words such as ‘Romanian adoptees’ or international adoptees’ and were invited to share a study advert and potential participants were provided with an information sheet.

Inclusion criteria were: (i) age 16 and over; (ii) capacity to consent to the interview; (iii) English competencies sufficient to participate in an interview. Participants were also assessed against the exclusion criteria: (i) international adoptees from countries other than Romania; (ii) adopted prior to 1989.

Participants

Ten participants participated in the study (nine females, one male), ranging from 21-28 years of age (mean 24.7 years old). Participants were geographically spread: America (5), Britain (3), Netherlands (1), and Australia (1). The age at which participants were adopted ranged from six weeks to eight and a half years. Pseudonyms are used for all participants for purposes of anonymity.

Data Collection

Prior to interviewing, an information sheet was reviewed with participants and questions answered. Written consent was obtained for face-to-face interviews and verbal consent given for Skype™ interviews. The interview followed a narrative life stories approach (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Peacock & Holland, 2009) guided by one prepared question asking participants to tell their life story with no interruptions and subsequently giving them the chance to add to their narrative:

I would like you to tell me your life story. Start from wherever you would like and you can include any events or experiences that have been important to you. Please take your time. I will listen and not interrupt you. When you have finished, I may ask you some questions about some of the things you have said.

Follow up prompts consisted of immanent questions which are those relating to the topic area and events mentioned in the participant's narrative and use their own language (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Three face-to-face and seven Skype™ interviews were carried out. On average interviews lasted 63 minutes and were audio recorded. Following the interview participants were provided with information of international adoption support agencies should they experience any distress as a result of participation in the study.

All interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Following transcription, summary stories were created for each participant. These were a condensed version of the participant's narrative which sequenced the events told in their interview and were sent to participants to invite them to correct or add additional information should they wish to. Four participants provided additional information to their narratives which ranged from clarifying facts to elaboration on events told in the interview.

Researcher Position

Narrative analysis acknowledges that the narrator and researcher co-construct narratives, thus stories are influenced by each person's social, political and cultural viewpoints and experiences (Riessman, 2000, 2008). This study was approached from a social constructionist position, recognising a need to question taken for granted assumptions (e.g. 'identity') and to view them within social, cultural and historical contexts (Harper, 2012). Attention was paid to the potential intersection of the interviewee with similarities and differences with the life experiences of the interview. To enhance trustworthiness of the analysis, four transcripts and summary stories were reviewed by the research team, emerging interpretations and core concepts were discussed in

research team meetings, the lead author kept a reflective journal, and an audit trail of the analysis was kept.

Analysis

Several texts were used as the analysis developed (Crossley, 2000; Mischler, 1995; Murray & Sargeant, 2012; Riessman, 2008; Weatherhead, 2011). First summary stories were created to organise participants' narratives into a sequence of events across time (Crossley, 2000) and to honour individual narratives.

Interviews were then transcribed verbatim alongside a memo for reflections which were discussed within the research team. Individual transcripts were reviewed and segments of narrative speech to capture the ways in which participants constructed their stories were marked (Weatherhead, 2011). Second, the essence of the narrative segments' contents and common shifts (e.g., topic, tone) were noted along with core elements of participants' narratives (Crossley, 2000).

Narrative analysis recognises the individuality in story construction, yet is interested in the shared accounts of groups in which people exist that shape their lives and identities (Murray & Sageant, 2012). Therefore consideration was given to similarities across narratives to develop a shared plot to present the findings. Despite considerable differences across the stories told by participants, commonalities were identified throughout the analysis phase (as reflected in transcript memos, reflective journal and discussions within the research team) regarding the ways in which participants' narratives constructed identity. As it is acceptable to focus on one aspect within narrative analysis (Murray & Sargeant, 2012), identity became the focus of further interrogation. A shared plot consisting of four life chapters centred around identity emerged in

the analysis and is presented below (Crossley, 2000). Moreover, as the narrative approach moves beyond the surface of a text to provide a broader commentary (Riessman, 2008) chapters are presented as situated within wider narratives of identity development.

Results and Discussion

The first chapter focuses on how narratives set the scene for stories of self-discovery whilst the remaining three chapters explore the ways participants constructed and negotiated their identities.

Chapter 1: Setting the Scene -- The Adoption Story: “...let’s be honest, it’s a communist orphanage” (Sonya)

All but one participant told their adoption story as the first event in their narrative which ‘set the scene’ by orientating narratives within the socio-political context of Romania in the early 1990s. Participants moved between descriptive and educative accounts, inviting the listener to enter the storyteller’s perspective (Riessman, 2008) and laying the foundation on which subsequent plots would be built. As most participants were adopted before an age from which they could consciously recall memories, they were reliant on stories from others. Participants also drew on later acquired knowledge of Romania and documented information about their adoption, and their focus moved between self, other and context to weave together their adoption story:

...I was born in 1988 which was the year before the revolution in Romania and then I was adopted in 1990 which was the year after...when my father went to get me he had a lot of trouble because, you know, the government the system was sort of, you know was in the middle of being changed so, things were crazy (Caitlin)

Through the use of factual descriptions and educative accounts of their adoptions, participants' narratives created neither a self as known by others - 'me'; -- nor a response to the attitudes of others and what is learnt about the self - 'I' (Mead, 1934). By constructing neither 'me' nor 'I', participants' identities were reflected as passive items to be selected in the adoption process: "it's like shopping for a baby" (Christina), i.e. void of an identity. Moreover, the shifts in focus between self, other, and context indicated a lack of autonomy during this phase of their lives, suggested as an essential task in early identity formation (Erikson, 1968).

Chapter 2: Constructing the Self

The next chapter centres around the period of time following participants' adoptions where, after gaining autonomy, narratives reflected development of a 'Westernised' identity, displacing their Romanian self. However, as their identity was questioned by others, participants developed a sense of difference.

All participants narrated striving for autonomy to navigate their new environments, akin to Erikson's (1950, 1963) autonomy versus shame stage of identity development. However, rather than being an experience between ages two to four in childhood as Erikson suggests, the process was narrated as occurring directly following adoption, regardless of age. As is documented in research with Romanian adoptees (Johnson et al., 1992; Rutter et al., 1998), participants described initial cognitive, developmental and/or physical delay, linking these difficulties to their previous experiences. Yet, as has been found in previous research (e.g. Rutter, Kreppner & O'Connor, 2001), they caught up quickly:

...the orphanage - I was just in cots so I was a little bit maybe delayed in a sense...and then also, living with...the foster carer um she, like we collected water there was no like running

water... when I came here [UK] they had like a dishwasher and stuff [laughs] and I'd just stand on the lid, and I broke stuff all the time and I flooded the room, 'cos i'd just leave taps on...And, stuff like that. But I think it was a really quick transition of it being fine (Kate)

Constructing the 'Westernised' Self -- "if anyone asked me, I'd be like "oh I'm English" (Kate)

Following adaptation to the environment, the focus of this chapter was on how participants developed a 'Westernised' self, identifying with their host country. This supports findings from the ERA study where by age 15, the majority of adoptees identified as 'English' (Beckett et al., 2008).

Participants' narratives depicted how they soon learnt the language of their host country, irrespective of their level of Romanian language or age at adoption: "I came to America and I had to learn the language and I learned it really quick in like six months" (Anthony). As a consequence, Romanian language "faded away" (Sally). Language is considered a central way that one comes to represent the self (Mead, 1934), therefore, with only English available, participants were only able to construct their identity using this language and associated culturally defined meanings (Newton & Buck, 1985).

It is also proposed that identity develops through viewing the self from different social roles. Children develop a range of social roles to guide their own behaviour and, in turn, internalise a 'generalised other' -- the attitudes of those in one's community (Mead, 1934). As the roles of 'Romanian' or 'adoptee' were unavailable, participants internalised a generalised other from the views of their host family and communities - constructing the 'Westernised' 'me'. This was reinforced by messages from others (Argyle, 1994), either verbally: "No, you're my

daughter” (Sally); symbolically: “when they got me they put American clothes on me” (Caitlin); or through active displacement of the ‘Romanian’ ‘me’: “they [parents] did everything they could for me to forget it” (Anthony).

The ‘Westernised’ self was not internalised without attempts to explore the Romanian self. Narratives shifted from adaptation to the environment to curiosity, a process proposed in Erikson’s (1950, 1968) stage of ‘initiative versus guilt’ stage of identity. Consistent with previous findings (Beckett et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2007a; Scherman & Harré, 2008, 2010), participants began to ask questions about their life in Romania, their biological families and their adoption story:

...I used to say things like why did I get adopted? Who are my actual parents? Who’s my dad, where’s my dad at? Who’s my mum? Why would my mum do such an awful thing? Why would just leave me in the hospital without telling me any records of her, or who she is? Why would she leave me so confused? Why? Just all like why and what and how (Vienetta)

However, decisions about accessing information continued to be made by parents, and participants described varying parental support with questioning. Erikson (1950, 1968) suggests that if parents are unable to answer their child’s questions due to intellectual challenge or embarrassment, the child may develop guilt, leading to inhibited initiative and curiosity. Although participants’ narratives did not indicate permanent inhibition of initiative or curiosity, during this chapter they ceased to explore their Romanian self. This was due either to parents’ inability: “the questions I was asking went a bit above their heads” (Gillian); or unwillingness to answer questions: “It was more or less, ‘we adopted you from Romania and you are Romanian

and you're part of our family now'. And there was really no additional anything added to that” (Hannah); or their perceived discomfort with questions: “I always was kind of a bit nervous about asking my adoptive mum too much about it. I didn't want to upset her or anything” (Beatrice).

Participants also described limited or restricted access to documented information and being misinformed about the amount of information available to them. For several participants, documentation was held in a physical location such as a book or box, yet parents controlled its access. Hawkins et al. (2007b) found through parent reports, by age 15, the majority of adoptees no longer asked questions about Romania, concluding that they had become ‘uninterested’ over time. In light of the narratives told in this study, these findings are misleading as adoptees’ exploration was bound by parents’ willingness to facilitate it, which led them to suppress their interest. Indeed, Hawkins et al. (2007b) reported that some Romanian adoptees found it difficult to talk about their adoptions. The study did not explore adoptees’ reasons for discomfort, yet 20% perceived their parents to have difficulty in talking about adoption (Hawkins et al., 2007b). In the current study, participants’ narratives indicate that it is not that their interest declines, but that it is modified by parents’ approach to exploration.

Participants temporarily terminated their questions and, along with a lack of language or social roles available to represent the Romanian self, participants’ identities were internalised as ‘Westernised’ and their Romanian self was displaced. The way participants constructed their identities continued to lack autonomy. However, as this chapter progressed and their social environment expanded, they began to construct their responses to the attitudes of others --the ‘I’ component of the self (Mead, 1934).

Constructing self as different: “I knew I was from Romania, I knew I was different”

(Sally)

As participants moved into adolescence their social groups expanded, indicated through an inclusion of friends and teachers in narratives. Expanded social groups provide more social roles to develop the self (Mead, 1934), however as the roles of ‘adoptee’ or ‘Romanian’ were still unavailable, it was through exposure to further Western social roles that participants constructed their identity as ‘different’.

This finding contrasts with the ERA study, which reported that Romanian adoptees did not deem themselves as ‘different’ (Hawkins et al., 2007a). However, this was asked in relation to the adoptive family, as opposed to peers, who become more salient in self-development in adolescence as individuals develop the capacity to imagine how they are judged by others (Piaget, 1959) and begin to make comparisons between the self and others (Erikson, 1950, 1963). As one’s knowledge of the self is proposed to develop simultaneously with knowledge of others (Mead, 1934), making comparisons with others facilitates one’s sense of self by allowing an individual to see what it is they are not (Argyle, 1994). A change to developing a sense of self as different to others was evident in participants’ narratives as they detailed occasions where their backgrounds were pointed out by others, including negative comments from peers: “...when I say I’m adopted from Romania then all you get is ‘oh cos your parents didn’t want you.’ I mean, they’re really cruel” (Sonya).

The ERA study found that over a third of Romanian adoptees, particularly those identifying with Romanian identity, experienced bullying at age 15 (Beckett et al. 2008). The content of the bullying was not explored, but an association with ‘ethnic status’ was speculated.

In the current study, negative comments or unanswerable questions were received when participants chose to disclose information about their family composition. Thus, developing a self as different was not narrated in terms of feeling excluded based on ‘racial/ethnic’ differences, as speculated by Beckett et al. (2008). Rather, participants developed an identity as different through the dominant idea of the ‘nuclear family’ as normal.

Participants’ narratives indicated that developing a sense of difference led them to consciously respond to their internalised sense of self as ‘Westernised’ and the attitudes of others -- constructing the ‘I’ aspect of the self (Mead, 1934). In this chapter participants became explicitly aware of their lack of self-knowledge, important in identity development (Harter, 1983): “...one of the students asked well if you're here and your family's there, why aren't you with them? And I remember being like, I don't have an answer for that” (Sally). As a result of limited knowledge, lack of representative social roles and language, and exhausted attempts or restricted opportunities for gaining information, participants embarked on a search for self.

Chapter 3: Who am I? Quest for Self-Discovery

Participants constructed their search process as a quest to answer “who am I?” -- a conscious and autonomous process of ‘doing’ rather than being ‘done to’, as illustrated in earlier chapters.

Establishing a sense of identity has been identified as a key aim for adolescence and has been termed ‘moratorium’ (Marcia, 1980) or ‘identity versus role confusion’ (Erikson, 1950, 1963) -- exploration of different identities before establishing a coherent sense of self. Erikson’s version of adolescence is hypothesised to be ages 12 to 18 (Sokol, 2009), however participants in this study were actively continuing to search in their twenties. This finding fits with the more recent concept of ‘emerging adulthood’, coined in response to demographic shifts across the past half

century and associated extension of identity exploration spanning 18 through 25 (Arnett, 2000). To reflect recent shifts in conceptualising identity and in recognition of participants' exploration in younger years, the searching period in this chapter refers to age 12 to the twenties.

Search for the self: "I've been like crazy searching" (Vienetta)

Participants' increase in skills during adolescence supported them to conduct more sophisticated searches, recognising their shortcomings in former years: "I think when you're thirteen or fourteen...not only do you not, when you don't have the resources on top of it, you don't really have the research skills" (Sonya). This is supported by the idea that adolescence is a time when physical development, cognitive skills and social expectations coincide allowing an individual to examine childhood identities to construct a pathway toward adulthood (Marcia, 1980). Moreover, developed cognitive skills enable systematic and methodological searches allowing adoptees to ask more sophisticated questions about the self (Piaget, 1959; Kroger, 2004).

In adolescence, parents have less of a direct influence on an adolescent's identity development, whilst their reactions during earlier stages of identity development may inform the adolescent's later exploration (Erikson, 1968). For instance, an earlier inability to foster a child's curiosity may leave them reluctant to explore untried options in adulthood (Gross, 1992). Although parental responses during earlier attempts to explore influenced participants' searching to a certain extent, they did not lead to a reluctance to explore untried options as searching commenced irrespective of parental support or constraint.

Some participants were given control of their search, symbolised by the physical transmission of documented information. Where parents were facilitative of identity exploration,

participants made a more gradual self-exploration. For participants whose parents showed discomfort with their exploration, they searched in secret, constraining the amount of time available for searching:

At that point my search was very unsuccessful because I had very limited access. I couldn't do stuff at home, because at that point I didn't have a computer of my own that I could search on so I didn't, I mean I pretty much had to do everything at school...because my parents would have gotten mad at me (Hannah)

All participants narrated how they searched for information about Romania, their past or biological family. Most central to participants' narratives of searching was the use of media. For instance, they gained knowledge of Romanian culture, language and history through television and internet: "I started researching just more background of Romania, um, anywhere from I mean little things like climate...and the people there, what they wore, what that [sic] ate." (Hannah).

Moreover, according to Lloyd (2002), during identity formation, it is possible that 'significant others' (Mead, 1934) extend beyond peers to include media modalities (e.g. television or internet). Thus, with increased access to media representation such as television documentaries, participants had access to multiple roles unavailable in their immediate environment with whom to compare.

All ten participants engaged with social media in their search, enabling some to directly search for family. Some participants were successful "Facebook's there. It's just too easy, it's just no effort involved and you type it in, and it all comes up" (Kate), whereas others met barriers: "I did find multiple people with my mother's name that I added on Facebook, but the

birthdates didn't match up" (Hannah). In addition, participants used social media to connect with other Romanian adoptees. However, this was not narrated as a desire to replace their existing social group (Tafjel & Turner, 2001). Instead, narratives reflected that this met a need that could not be fulfilled by existing groups -- to provide information about searching:

I am part of a group on Facebook for Romanian adoptees only. Um, and one of the girls on there...sent me a message and she said 'hey, this is, I'm just kind of throwing this out here but I found my parents through this organisation, they're kind of pricey but they have a 100% success rate in finding parents of adoptees and here's the information' (Hannah)

Visiting Romania was also a key event in the search for self. Six participants had travelled to Romania, three of whom had met members of their biological family. Of the three others, two had made unsuccessful attempts at finding their parents and one did not want to search for family. At the time of the interview, those who had not visited Romania all described planning to visit in their future script (Crossley, 2000). This supports findings from the ERA study that by age 15, a third of participants had already been to visit Romania, and the majority wished to go in the future (Beckett et al., 2008).

The process of searching for information or biological parents was not without challenges. An incongruence was evident between the use of the internet during their search and the adoption information documentation in Romania. Thus despite the internet providing novel ways of accessing information and connecting with others, due to a "digital divide" (Kirmayer, Raikhel & Rahimi, 2013, p. 173), for some participants, despite attempts to find it, information about their families or their own adoption was inaccessible, inaccurate or non-existent. This resulted in a continued gap in knowledge making it impossible to develop a coherent past

narrative to integrate into a current self. Instead, participants held multiple, distinct selves (Mead, 1995).

Constructing multiple selves: "...it's kind of like having two separate me's"

(Beatrice)

Participants' narratives constructed the development of a separate Romanian identity. Both language and role-taking are thought to be fundamental for representing the self, and knowledge of self and of others develops simultaneously through social interaction (Combs & Freedman, 2016; Mead, 1934). Thus, through newly acquired knowledge of Romanian language, culture and history, and exposure to new social roles from which to view the self, attitudes from the Romanian community were assumed -- internalising a Romanian generalised other (Mead, 1934). Narratives in this chapter conveyed more autonomy as participants storied their responses to the Romanian community and actively negotiated which aspects of Romania, or their own histories, would become part of their identity - constructing the 'I' component of the Romanian self (Mead, 1934).

The internalisation of the Romanian generalised other, response to the Romanian community and new positions on their own backgrounds led participants to construct a Romanian identity. Holding of multiple selves is considered, by some, a natural process, as we naturally divide ourselves according to the relationships we hold and places we occupy (Combs & Freedman, 2016; Mead, 1934). Thus, although fragmented in the sense that the two selves were not integrated, the Romanian self existed alongside the 'Westernised' self and participants were not in conflict, nor holding a negative or diffused identity (Eriskon, 1968; Marcia 1980). The construction of two individual selves led to the final chapter: self-negotiation.

Chapter 4: Negotiating the Selves: “blending the two” (Sally)

In the final chapter, participants’ narratives portrayed a process of self-negotiation. Some participants explicitly narrated the process of assimilating their ‘Westernised’ and ‘Romanian’ self: “trying to, you know integrate, you know Romania and such into my life’s a bit, I can’t do without it anymore” (Beatrice). However, some participants’ negotiation of the selves was constructed in ways other than ‘integration’ such as keeping the selves separate, or distant: “it’s it’s not something that [pause] goes. It’s like, it’s just part of you isn’t it. And it’s not a big part of me, it’s not something that comes up everyday” (Kate). Moreover, some participants who did not desire to connect with biological family negotiated their identities as an ongoing connection and/or commitment to Romania: “...my hope is a diplomat for either the European Union or Romania” (Anthony). This way of negotiating identity supports the notion of ‘intentional state understanding’ of identity, as opposed to internal state understandings (e.g. ‘Romanian’ or ‘adoptee’), which refers to one’s commitments, hopes and dreams (Combs & Freedman, 2016; White, 2007).

Regardless of the way in which participants negotiated the selves, this was constructed as a work in progress, with no stories reflecting a finite identity. Although theories acknowledge that identity in adolescence is not set “once and for all” (Marcia, 1980, p.161), they imply one reaches a ‘complete’ identity. (Erikson, 1968; Mead, 1934). However, this view does not comprehensively take account of contextual influences. For instance, if identity is bringing together “all the things we know about ourselves...plus all past experiences, thoughts and feelings to integrate all images of the self into a whole” and, in turn, is associated with a positive psychosocial identity (Gross, 1992), for those whose stories remain incomplete as a result of

historical, social, and political influences, this may be impossible. Therefore, those with increased access to contextual resources, for instance exploration possibilities, are inherently privileged (Schachter, 2009).

For Erikson, the more disjointed an identity, the more confusion exists (Schwartz, 2001) and despite an evident theoretical shift in the way identity exploration is conceptualised (Arnett, 2000), the dominant message of needing a complete and stable identity remains. This is evident through the current ways that identity is pathologised within mental health systems (Combs & Freedman, 2016). Accordingly, having multiple or fluctuant identities is seen as pathological as it deviates from the Westernised discourses of identity (Berger, 2014), perpetuating the prevailing idea that a ‘complete’ and assured identity is synonymous with “psychological well-being” (Erikson, 1968, p.165). Indeed, several participants spoke of receiving psychiatric diagnoses, however these were a result of post-adoptive circumstances rather than identity confusion.

Central to this chapter were the ways in which participants related to their identities. This finding may fit with more recent findings that show that identity moratorium and diffusion are increasing, whereas reaching identity achievement has decreased (Beyers & Seiffre-Krenke, 2010; Sokol, 2009). Moreover, participants’ stories of continued searching were not told with a tone of turmoil, despair or psychological distress, rather as a continued quest of hope. This is not to suggest that hardship or discomfort was not evident within narratives of incompletely integrated selves, nor to detract from the real challenges participants continually faced in their search. However, despite an ‘incomplete’ integration of selves, participants managed discomfort, and at times put aside their search to attend to other commitments: “I was like it’ll be ok to step

away from it for a second...if something develops, or I have an ‘aha’ moment... maybe it wasn’t meant to be at the time. I’ll keep going with it” (Caitlin). This supports the idea that although identity exploration may cause some anxiety, individuals do not respond to challenges by becoming overcome by fear, but by gradually making their way towards laying the foundation to their adult life (Arnett, 2007).

Limitations and Future Research

Although offering global participation, the sole use of social media for recruitment is a limitation - it relies on participants having computer access, technological skills, and the ability to read and converse in English. This potentially excluded adoptees of differing socio-economic status, cognitive ability and non-English speakers. The inclusion of one male may also be due to the recruitment strategy. For instance, due to a range of societal factors, males are found less likely to seek support than females (Möller-Leimkühler, 2002) and are less likely to access the internet for communication (Weiser, 2000). Thus, males may have been at a disadvantage in accessing the study. Furthermore, as the internet was central to participants’ narratives, its use for recruitment leaves unknown the life stories of adoptees who do not use it. Future research could seek to recruit participants using additional recruitment methods to explore life stories of adoptees who do not use the internet.

This study is limited by single interviews. Although participants were given the opportunity to comment on the accuracy of their summary stories, further interviews or participant checking may have provided more in depth accounts of identity. Future studies could focus on identity for further exploration.

Clinical Implications

Whilst recognising discomfort for parents, professionals could offer reassurance that questioning and searching is a normal process and does not suggest that an adoptee is unhappy. Guidance should be provided to parents on facilitating searching; talking openly about Romania and providing age appropriate information; and being honest if the requested information is unknown/unavailable. As social media was a key searching resource, professionals could support its access and use, offering guidance on safety. Where internet searching is unavailable, families could be provided with alternative methods. Furthermore, while it is recommended that searching for family is open for discussion, professionals and parents should be guided by the adoptee and support them in decision making (Rutter et al., 2009).

Professionals should be mindful of the potential impact of missing information on adoptees' identity. Although narratives did not suggest undue psychological distress, some participants were still actively searching. It is possible that complete absence of information could affect adoptees' identity and/or psychological well-being. Thus, psychological support could be offered to help make meaning of their experiences in light of missing information. Where participants experienced psychological difficulties, they were related to post-adoption experiences. It is therefore important that professionals are trained in a lifespan perspective on international adoption - a model of maintained communication between families and adoption services is encouraged (Fassee, Horton & Magnuson, 2014). This allows for individually tailored support across the lifespan, such as education about challenges, signposting to appropriate services and support with searching.

Finally, as the importance of documented information was underscored, it is essential that birth certificates, information regarding biological family members and medical history are appropriately documented and accessible to adoptees.

Conclusion

This study presented an account of Romanian adoptees' identity construction. Central to narratives was a quest of self-discovery, throughout which adoptees were confronted with bureaucratic and personal barriers. However, in the face of difficulties adoptees continued in their quest, drawing on social media and the skills of others to aid their search. Adoptees found ways of navigating the complexities of their identities, managing discomfort and stepping away from the search when required. Narratives concluded neither with an end, nor a complete self, but as an unfinished quest to be continued.

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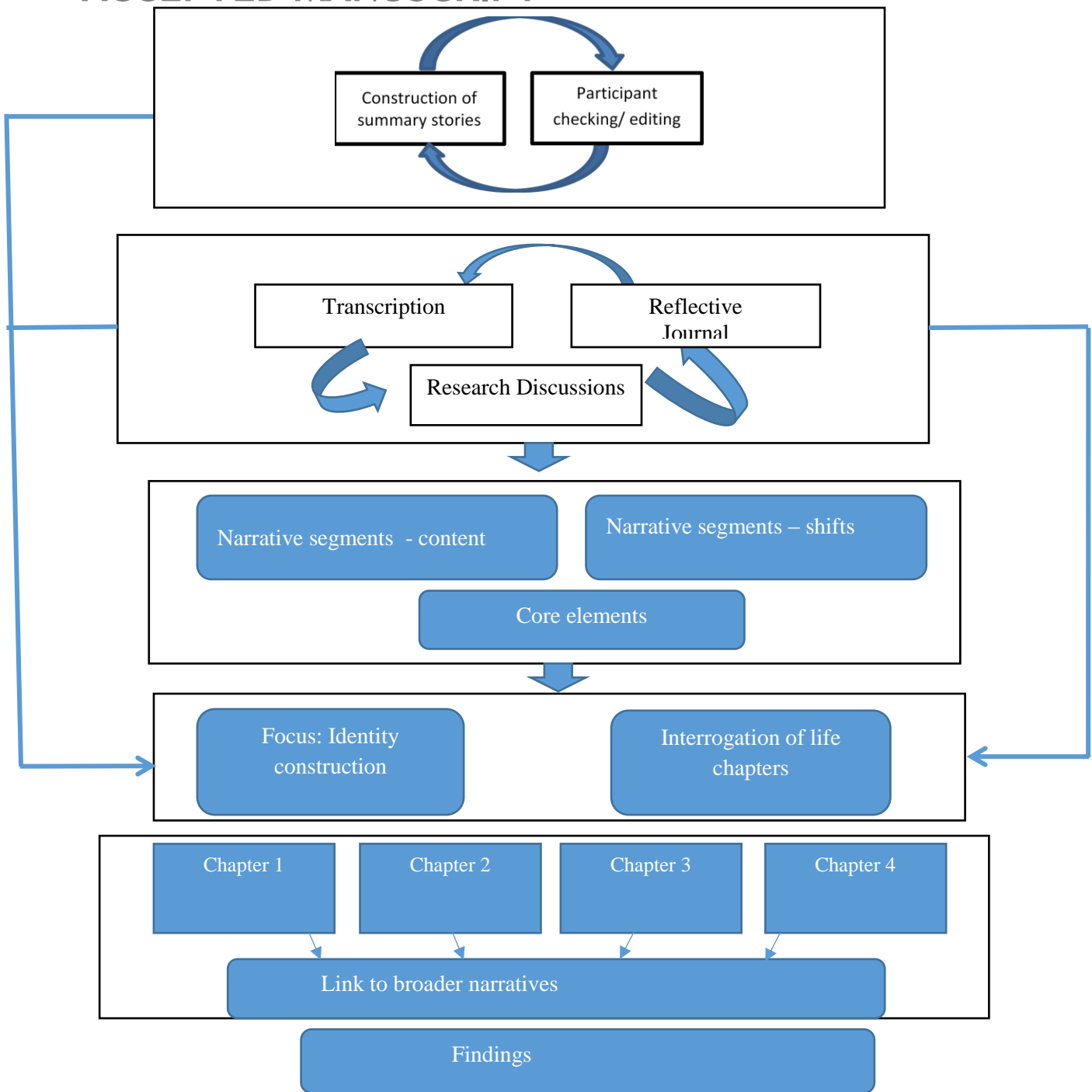


Figure 1. Process of narrative analysis.