

BAR ILAN UNIVERSITY

# **Identity Exploration Processes among Adoptees**

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## **Abstract**

The past few years have shown an increase in the prevalence of psychological research dealing with adoptee populations (Zafran, 2007). However, those studies focus mainly on children and youth, as opposed to that of young adults adopted during their childhood, which has received much less attention (Wagar, 2008). This study seeks to examine identity exploration processes among adopted young adults in Israel who need to cope with the conflict implicated in accessing their adoption records to obtain information concerning their biological parents. Investigative research of this conflict among this population may shed light on germane issues vis-à-vis identity development, as the dilemma concerning whether or not to access adoption records is deeply related to questions of identity.

To this end, the objective of this study is to examine and characterize theoretical aspects related to personality structure development by examining the exploration process that occurs in cases of adoption. The professional literature widely examines identity exploration that involves making decisions regarding one's future; however, the adoption issue raises a distinctive question regarding exploration aimed towards formulating identity, since in this case, exploration ostensibly is not aimed at determining future commitments, as the adoption has already occurred. It is worth noting that due to constraints of the adoption law in Israel - which does not allow access to adoption records before the age of 18 - in early adolescence, identity exploration is

expressed predominantly through reflective thought on the adoption (Kohler, Grotevant & McRoy, 2002) and constructing a narrative that is not necessarily consistent with or based on real events and people (Grotevant, Fravel, Gorall & Piper, 1999) with the aim of avoiding internal conflict. Hence, the question can be posed as to whether exploration processes among adoptees might enable us to theoretically widen the meaning of the term identity exploration.

More pointedly, this study seeks to respond to two central research questions: (1) What are the psychological motives that the participants of this study describe when asked regarding their deliberations on whether to access their adoption records? (2) Are the psychological motives described by the participants of this study similar to the motives in constructing a coherent and unified account (as in 'modern' theoretical approaches to identity) or do the motives described fail to settle the conflict by constructing a coherent and unified life story (as in 'post-modern' approaches to identity)? The theoretical framework that facilitated examination of the research questions was the Theory of Identity Development (Erikson, 1968; Grotevant, 1987; Marcia, 1966, 1967, 1980; McAdams, 1988). In addition, insights were applied from post-modern theories dealing with identity formulation (Gergen, 1968; Lifton, 1993). These theories will be discussed further in the introduction.

In this study, 10 participants were interviewed (3 men and 7 women), all adult Israeli adoptees over 18. The participants were located by means of the social media Facebook. The age constraint of the participants was due to the adoption law in Israel that prohibits children under the age of 18 from accessing their adoption records. The sample was based on adoptees who had been adopted during infancy, having had no prior information regarding their biological family. Eight of the participants were born

in Israel and two in Brazil, their ages ranging from 25 to 59 with a mean age of 32, and have accessed their adoption records.

The qualitative research method was chosen for the research presented in this study to examine the topic via a narrative approach. The premise upon which choosing this method was based, was to evaluate people who - throughout a significant portion of their life – have been coping with a potentially conflictual issue among their peers that can possibly pose an impending threat to their sense of identity. To this end, interviewees were requested to tell their life story while relating to the topic in discussion. Responses to the research questions were obtained through a quantitative-narrative analysis of the texts (Schachter, 2000).

In the present study, the interviews were conducted freely, with minimal intervention from the interviewer. The interviews were first read as a group in order to obtain an overall picture and recognize common themes. Afterwards, each interview was read and analyzed individually, by "highlighting" the relevant theoretical concepts in the text taken from modern and post-modern approaches to identity. The analysis particularly focused on the following issues: the psychological motivation in deciding whether to access adoption records or not, manifestations of identity exploration and confirming that the interviewee has indeed explored identity, and manifestations for creating harmoniousness between the two stories and reconciling with the conflict (the gap between the imaginary story and the real story).

The qualitative analysis pointed to two central **psychological motives** that influenced the decision to access the adoption records in particular and identity exploration in general: **The need for belonging and the need to reconcile loss**. It can

be assumed that one still coping with a sense of exceptionality i.e. being different in adulthood due to adoption and dealing with adoption-related loss, may attempt to "compensate" for part of the loss through identity exploration dealing directly with adoption, as well as identity exploration in different facets of life: personal, spousal, societal, and professional. The actual **process of accessing adoption records** is highly contributory and enables the participants of the study to ultimately access their records, thus enabling them to go beyond the limitations of reflective thought and gain knowledge of the objective information of their adoption.

Furthermore, the present study has widened the understanding of the importance of the emotional aspect linked to adoption and its effect on the participants' ability to cope with the conflict created a result of accessing their adoption records. While two of the participants viewed their adoption mostly **positively** - a fortunate event in their lives - two others viewed their adoption **negatively**. Six of the participants viewed their adoption **both positively and negatively**. The ability to view adoption both positively and negatively enables most of the participants of this study to live with self-acceptance and reconciliation, regardless of the newfound information gained upon accessing their adoption records. This finding is especially seminal in comprehending **adoptive identity**.

Adoptive identity is the significance a person applies to his/her adoption from the following perspectives: self-definition as an adoptee, the sense of coherence of various aspects of identity, and the sense of consistency of the adoptive identity over the course of time (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Lash Esau, 2000). Drawing from the narratives, accessing adoption records confronts the participants with a new reality, provides them with new information, adds an additional dimension to their life and

undermines the coherent sense of their identity. This new reality is not experienced as peripheral – on the contrary – it becomes complex on a psychological level and requires adoptees to cope with an **identity** conflict. This conflict is the upshot of transitioning from reflective thought about adoption to enabling exploration of the adoption on different levels, after accessing adoption records.

Within the framework of the present study identity processes that adoptees experience were examined as well, concurrent with modern and post-modern approaches of identity, which will be expounded on in the introduction. The study found that the participant's life reality is that which vacillates between two narratives. Analysis of the interviews gives rise to the fact that most of the participants can come to terms with both narratives, without the need to set apart one over the other, yet exist in self-acceptance and resolution.

On the other hand, two interviewees of this study find difficulty in adhering to both narratives. In their story, they express painful feelings of abandonment, lack of belonging, and deep disappointment after accessing their adoption records. The newly found information has deepened the conflict and exacerbated these feelings. These participants' narratives were found to correspond with the image of the "**modern self**".

The present study constitutes a theoretical contribution in understanding adoption in that it sheds new light on the characteristics of adoptive identity in adulthood, its origins and ramifications. The findings of this study hold applicable implications as well. The understanding of adoptive identity characteristics can facilitate therapists in helping their patients to process their adoptive identity, hence bring forth a higher level of reconciliation.