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**Adult Adoptees Reflections on their Identity
Formation and Sense of Coherence
Development Process**

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies on adoption and adopted populations; however most of these studies deal with young adoptees rather than adopted adults (Zafran, 2007; Garr, 2008). This qualitative study deals with the challenges of identity formation and the sense of coherence in the eyes of adopted adults. We examine how these challenges influence the shaping of the identity of the adoptees as individuals and as a larger population with unique characteristics. The research on the matter and the examination of these challenges was conducted by examining the perception of adoption in the eyes of adopted adults and in relation to the psychological consequences that accompany the challenges in the life of an adoptee.

The aim of this study was to describe the challenges, which, according to adopted adults, have had an influence over the course of their lives in shaping their identity and their sense of coherence, both as individuals and as a population. Adoptees are a population that faces unique challenges during their lives due to the unique experiences that they have undergone and emotional gaps accumulated during and after adoption (Pronchenko-Jain & Fernando, 2013). Accordingly, the study contributes to the understanding of those challenges faced by adoptees throughout their lives, as well as understanding the various coping methods that characterize the process of shaping the identity of an adopted adult.

This study attempts to answer two main questions: (1) How adopted adults evaluate the significance and contribution of the unique challenges and experiences of the adoption issue in formulating their self-identity; (2) What are the factors that emerge from the story of the adoptee's life, which are related to shaping his sense of coherence? The theoretical framework that guided the examination of the research question regarding identity formation is Erikson's developmental theory (Erikson, 1968) and Marcia's identity status theory (Marcia, 1980); and in the design of a sense of coherence, the Salutogenic model of Antonovsky (1987). These theories, the reference to the issue of adoption, and the connection between them, will be discussed at length in the theoretical background section.

In this study, 15 participants (nine women and six men) were interviewed, who were adopted adults over the age of 18. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 56 (average age is 33.6). The adoption age of the interviewees also varies from infancy to the age of 4. Of the adoptees interviewed, 10 are native Israeli-born and five are born in South and Central America (Brazil and Guatemala), all of whom are adopted by Israeli parents and all have opened their adoption file at one point or another during their lives.

In order to examine the research questions presented above, the research method chosen for this study was the “Mixed Method”, which includes qualitative as well as quantitative analysis. This method was chosen because it was found to be most appropriate to examine the experience of the adoptees as a subjective experience combined with empirical measures across different life cycles. In fact, it is a method that allows the researcher to describe at length a subjective and complex phenomenon within a given context, and through it to reach broader generalizations (Shkedi, 2003). In other words, it is an inductive study that draws conclusions from the individual to the population in question. Accordingly, in order to more accurately trace the world of the participants, qualitative methods (semi-structured in-depth interviews, narrative analysis) and quantitative methods (processing questionnaires) were used.

The interviews in this study were carried out in accordance with Patton's interview approach (Patton, 1990), in which semi-structured interviews were based on a questionnaire prepared by the interviewer in advance. During the interviews, the participants were interviewed and recorded by the research editor only. In other words, the interviews were fully recorded and then transcribed accurately by the researcher. After answering the questions in the interview, the participants received Antonovsky's “sense of coherence” questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1987). The questionnaire was sent separately to maintain an "open mind" on the part of the participants. Correspondingly, the results of the questionnaires were analyzed independently of the interviews.

The interviews were summoned separately and sequentially, in order to obtain a broad and comprehensive picture of the recurring characteristics among the adopted adult population. In the next stage, the interviews were re-read in order to identify key

issues and categories in the study (coding). Finally, each interview was analyzed separately, each of which served as a basis for the previous interview, in order to strengthen the issues and categories found in the previous interviews, and to add additional significant issues and categories that emerged from a specific interview, which supported Shkedi's proposal (2003). Finally, we derived from the interviews seven categories that answer the first research question: (1) the need to belong and be "like everyone else"; (2) the need of the adoptee to prove himself; (3) the difficulty of relying on people for fear of harm; (4) family genetics; (5) the feeling of missing out on the sense of completeness; (6) the need for limits; (7) the perception of parenting. Likewise, three additional categories were derived from the interviews, which answer the second research question and are congruent with Antonovsky's Salutogenic model (Antonovsky, 1987): (1) the level of comprehensibility; (2) the level of manageability; (3) the level of meaningfulness.

In the final stage, a comprehensive answer was given to the research questions. For each of the two research questions, the findings of each of the subjects were examined and by triangulation the question of which conclusions could be drawn for each question, was asked. To better substantiate and illustrate the explanations and conclusions, quotations from the subjects' statements, which best exemplify each of the questions, were included.

The findings of the study show that in terms of the challenges of the adoption issue experienced during the formation of self-identity, it is an issue that allows the recognition of the unique challenges that characterize the world of adopted adults. The findings of this study also show that when we discuss the factors involved in shaping the sense of coherence, we are dealing with an issue that allows us to better understand the participants' narrative, with a broad reference to the three components of coherence: level of comprehensibility, level of manageability and level of meaningfulness.

The study shows that an adoptive family, which communicates on the subject of adoption and inclusion, contributes to the adopted child in coping with the conflict of identity formation and helps him to successfully achieve a formulated "Ego identity"; while a conflicted relationship with the adoptive parents bring about a sense of non-

belonging and unsolved conflicts as it pertains to adoption issues, all of which causes the adoptee to exhibit what is known as "identity diffusion". When the adoptee does not successfully resolve his identity conflict, he does not feel a sense of belonging and cannot sense acceptance of the adoption and all that this implies, between himself and himself and between him and his surroundings. Moreover, the concept of the adoptive family as a family in every respect also helps in forming a positive coping mechanism with the issue of adoption, and even makes the adoption issue be perceived as a minor and marginal issue in the life of the adult adoptee.

On the other hand, adopted adults who tend to see their biological family as their "real" family tend to view themselves as an alien in the adoptive family, and they will often preoccupy themselves with their differences and separateness from the adoptive family along with a general sense of not belonging. These adoptees thus view adoption as a central issue in their lives and tend to devote a lot of time and resources to it on a daily basis throughout their lives. In addition, these participants tend to do "explorations" (Marcia, 1980), related to their differences in the biological family and tend to focus on the importance of family genetics and the negatives of adoption as they perceive it.

The study also shows that respondents who perceive their adoption matters in a positive light make it easier to formulate a coherent identity. These participants recognize their roots and perceive them as part of their "I" or "me" on one hand, but they also attach great importance to their adoptive family and the sense of belonging they experience in this family. They see their adoptive family as their family for all intents and purposes, and are characterized by a higher sense of coherence.

Moreover, the literature claims that the outcome of an event is directly influenced by the way a person copes with the situation (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). The study reinforces this claim, since it shows that there is a connection between acceptance and making peace with the subject of adoption, which is to be considered as a central event in life, and a higher sense of coherence. This finding, which emerged from the interviews conducted, was reinforced by the questionnaires that were distributed directly after the interviews. An analysis of the interview questionnaires showed that there was a correlation between the participants whose sense of coherence was

perceived as high during the interview and the score they received on the sense of coherence questionnaire that was distributed after the interview, and vice versa.

Finally, it seems that at least from the point of view described by the participants, the process of identity formation and shaping the sense of coherence among adopted adults depends heavily on the adoptive environment and on the treatment of that environment on the adoptee. An adoptive family that does not allow room for adoption and does not include the adoptee's desire to "return home" to the biological family makes the matter more meaningful as perceived by the adoptee and as a result intensifies the challenges facing him in life as it pertains to the issue of adoption and may, in the end, be characterized by identity diffusion and a low sense of coherence.

On the other hand, a supportive, accepting and enabling environment, which is headed by adoptive parents who embrace adoption and give it a place in the life of the adoptee, enables acceptance of the matter at an early age, thereby facilitating an ego identity and a high sense of coherence.