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Beyond Blood: Examining the Communicative Challenges of Adoptive Families

Mackensie C. Minniear
University of Montana, Missoula

BEYOND BLOOD:

EXAMINING THE COMMUNICATIVE CHALLENGES OF ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

By

MACKENSIE COLLEEN MINNEAR

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Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Alan Sillars
Communication Studies

Stephen Yoshimura
Communication Studies

Kimber McKay
Anthropology

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Chairperson: Alan Sillars

This study examined how adoptive families discursively create family identity through their communication. Building on theories of discourse dependence and family communication patterns, this research examined how families whose identity does not meet a bio-genetic view of family must re-define family using communication. Often times, families that are created outside biological means must renegotiate family identity both within the family, and outside the family, from those who feel comfortable commenting and questioning their family composition. Communication becomes a tool that adoptees must use to understand their family identity, as well as their own adoptive identity. Furthermore, this study looked to see how adoptees recall intrusive interactions and memorable messages about adoption, and whether this differed based on transracial or monoracial adoptees.

Adult adoptees were asked to fill out an online survey, asking about intrusive interactions, memorable messages, and overall family communication styles. The results indicated that there was small differences between transracial and monoracial adoptees. However, family communication style had an important impact on how adoptees processed their adoption and felt part of the family, regardless of race. Open communication, and positive messages about adoption were associated with lower levels of preoccupation among adoptees as well as higher feeling of inclusiveness within their families. In addition, adoptees who were satisfied with how intrusive interactions were handled, either by themselves or by family members, felt lower preoccupation about their adoption. These results indicate that communication serves as a powerful tool for adoptive families to discursively redefine what family means beyond biological ties.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Family communication serves as a sense-making tool that helps family members understand how to act both within and outside the family. Communication that occurs among family members creates family identity, as well as showcases larger societal trends, such as how family is defined and how families should act. Through family, individuals learn their role in the family, as well as understand their own individual identity. However, increasing diversity of family forms has highlighted how non-biogenetic families must use communication differently than previously examined. The way that families communicate constitute relationships, but this can be more difficult in diversified family forms, such as adoptive families.

In recent years, communication scholars have begun to look at families beyond a biogenetic view of family. A biogenetic view of family defines family primarily on their reproductive and biological capabilities (Galvin 2006; Suter, 2008). Adoptive families provide a case study in what Galvin (2006) conceptualizes as discourse dependent families that function beyond a biogenetic definition. Although current literature on adoption has increased through the years (Colaner, Halliwill, & Guignon, 2011; Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011; Powell & Afifi, 2005), including research specifically on transracial and international adoption (e.g., Docan-Morgan, 2010; Suter & Ballard, 2009; Suter, Reyes & Ballard, 2010), the overall research on communication in diversified family forms is still lacking. All families use communication to constitute their roles and relationships, but since adoptive families are not grounded in biology, they must actively and explicitly negotiate family identity.

Communicative practices become crucial in adoptive families as they are created outside of traditional or biogenetic lenses.

These communicative practices are important in terms of family and adoptive identity. Communication literature on adoption has shown that the way in which families communicate hold major implications for adoptive families as they negotiate both types of identity (Colaner & Soliz, 2015). Family identity is seen as the togetherness and inclusion within the family. In adoptive families, the lack of biological ties force these families to communicatively construct these relationships in ways that biogenetic families do not have to. In addition to making sure that every family member feels a strong sense of family identity, adoptive families must also address how the adoptee understands the role of adoption in their family. All children struggle with some sort of identity work, but adoption carries larger implications for how adoptees see themselves. Adoptive identity refers to how the adoptee understands their own adoption, which is constructed through family communication. Friedlander (1999) found that adoptees who did not have a clear understanding of why they were adopted reported higher rates of identity confusion and depression. Therefore, making sure the adoptee feels part of the family as well as understands the role of adoption is a unique communicative challenge in adoptive families.

Beyond communication within families, adoptive families also face challenges from strangers through intrusive interactions. Several scholars have found that adoptive parents report high rates of strangers, or even extended family members, questioning the legitimacy of their family (e.g., Jacobson, 2009; Suter, 2008). Therefore, adoptive families must find ways to draw the lines of what is private family information

communicatively through boundary management. Boundary management, in this thesis, focuses on Galvin's (2006) theory of discourse dependence, in which families engage in two types of boundary management; internal and external. Internal boundary management refers to how families construct togetherness through discourse among family members. External boundary management looks at how family members must justify their family functioning and behavior to those outside of the families. While all families engage in these practices to a degree, diversified family forms and especially adoptive families must engage in these practices more explicitly. The frequency of these external boundary violations makes the internal boundary management techniques families use more valuable in creating family identity because the way that families explicitly discuss adoption works to overcome a dominant discourse that may delegitimize the adoptive family form.

Overall, managing family identity, adoptive identity, and boundary management provides distinctive communicative challenges for adoptive families. Specific communicative techniques can assist families through these challenges. One way to understand how families discuss what adoption means is through memorable messages. Asking adoptees about memorable messages they recall about adoption helps to illustrate how diversified family forms communicate. Memorable messages about adoption provide a way to understand how internal boundary management techniques can help the adoptee understand their membership of a family as well as the meaning of their adoption. Another way to understand how families manage these challenges is through overall family communication patterns. Specifically, conversation orientation, or how often adoptive parents encourage openness in general communication, can help us

understand how overall open communication, not just about adoption, can encourage adoptees to healthily explore their shared family identity, as well as process the meaning of their adoption. Creating distinctive memorable messages about adoption, as well as encouraging openness between adoptees and adoptive parents may increase shared family identity and decrease rumination about adoption.

This thesis aims to see how overall family communication patterns, along with specific memorable messages, help adoptees understand their adoption , as well as help adoptees handle intrusive interactions. Beyond intrusive interactions and adoptive identity, this thesis also seeks to understand how these communicative strategies can help to ground adoptees as full members of their adoptive family and create a shared family identity. A small part of this thesis also aims to understand if major communicative differences exist between monoracial and transracial adoptees. To do this, I used survey methods focusing on quantitative and qualitative data directly from adoptees. However, a full review of the literature regarding adoption, the social construction of the family, and identity are presented, in order to ground this thesis within the larger family communication scholarship.

Literature Review

Adoptive Families

The rate at which families choose to adopt has steadily increased over the past several years, including a drastic increase between 2000 and 2008, when adoption rates increased by 6.25% (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Choosing to adopt, in of itself, is a major decision within families. However, the choice to adopt does not simply end with the adoption decision. After the choice to adopt, families face a litany of

other choices. These include whether to have an open or closed adoption, to adopt internationally or domestically, and to adopt through a public or private system, to name a few. Creating a family is always fraught with tough decisions, and these choices all must be made before adopters even know whether or not they will receive a child. Once a child is adopted, parents must decide how to frame the adoption process, as well as create family identity. Thus, adoption involves a constant conversation among adoptees and adopters.

Adoptees struggle at times to establish both a birth identity and an adoptive identity (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014). Identity gaps occur for adoptees when they feel trapped between these two identities, but open discussion of the adoptive process with their adoptive parents can allow for adoptees to reconcile both identities. One participant in research by Colaner et al. (2014) stated that accepting both identities, "simultaneously allowed her to be proud of her adoption and view it as an important and meaningful aspect of herself" (p. 480). Open discussion of the family identity as well as personal identity is an important part of being an adoptive family. Furthermore, the way that adoptees see their entrance into a family impacts the adoptees' self-concept. Creating a cohesive narrative about how the family came together is an important step not only in shared family identity but also adoptees' self esteem (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Adoptees who report positive narratives of being chosen to be part of the family have higher self-esteem (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). These findings suggest that identity is created through the stories that are shared among family members. Families who create stories help communicate a positive family identity to members.

The way in which parents communicate about adoption and family has major impacts on how adoptees see themselves and how the family functions as a whole. When parents normalize adoption, create rituals out of significant adoption moments, and encourage children to search for their birth families, adoptees report lower levels of uncertainty (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2011). These adoptees manage their identity by regulating the information they receive. A significant part of their self-concept relies on how their adoptive families create identity.

Adoption is fraught with complications, and the difficulties outlined above are only part of the issue. In the next section, I discuss transracial and international adoptive families, and the unique challenges these families face.

Transracial and international adoption. Transracial adoptive families are families in which parents and children differ in race. International adoptive families may also differ in race, but transracial families are visibly different races, whereas international families are created internationally, but may not differ visibly in race. Galvin (2009) called for communication scholars to focus on international and transracial adoption more often, as they face several difficulties that are deeply communication based. These families often have more difficulty creating family identity, especially in regards to family decision making, developing creation narratives, and addressing physical differences. International adoptions are fraught with uncertainty, as sometime there is no record of birth families or information is lost between agencies and parents.

Parents of transracial children must also address race relations in the United States. When families are racially diverse, they "struggle with 'privacy regulation' or how to manage psychological and physical boundaries between themselves and others,

because the nature of their family is on visual display to be challenged by any outsider" (Galvin, 2009, p. 244). Not only do these families face internal identity challenges in reconciling birth family and adoptive family identity, outsiders often challenge them on what it means to be a family.

Jacobson (2009) found that parents who adopted from China felt that they were under constant surveillance when in public, whereas parents who adopted from Russia were rarely if ever approached about their family. Parents who adopted from China faced constant questions about their child's adoption, as well as private questions about their child's health and personal details. Even "positive" attention about their children bothered parents. Parents with daughters felt they were constantly bombarded with comments about how pretty their child was, "which they believed relied on Asian fetishization…They didn't want their daughters to understand their value or worthiness only in their ability to be attractive" (Jacobson, 2009, p. 81). Parents aimed to create a set of ideals or standards for how they would like their family to be identified, but were constantly challenged by outsiders who subtly undermined family identity.

Often times, adoptees face challenges to their ethnic identity. While many parents strive to promote bi-culturalism through their child's upbringing, "adoptive parents were more likely to deny and deemphasize race and have ambivalent feelings about cultural socialization when their children reached adolescence" (Lee, 2003, p. 720). This finding is largely dependent on where the family resides as children grow up. Diversity of the population in a geographic location impacts how adoptees feel accepted in their ethnic identity. Families living in less diverse areas must attempt to reconcile ethnic and family identity more explicitly.

Parent reconciliation of ethnic and family identity takes place in several different ways. Suter (2012) found that when naming adoptive Chinese children, parents tried to appeal to ethic identity, family identity, and pragmatism. It was shown that "…appeals to family identity sought to ground children in a sense that they are legitimate and full members of their adoptive U.S. families" (p. 219). For parents, naming children is often seen as a way to connect the children to their birth culture while also incorporating them into U.S. families. Naming is also seen as an important step in creating a family. In this way, parents aim to establish internal boundary management practices to promote family identity. Internal boundary management strategies seek to create identity within the family, so that adoptees feel fully immersed in their adoptive families upon arrival.

Despite best efforts, adoptees still face external boundary management challenges. Adoptees still report racial derogation attacks, which are classified in three ways; appearance attacks, perceived ethnicity attacks, and physical attacks (Docan-Morgan, 2011). Whether or not these adoptees reported attacks to their parents largely depended on how responsive their parents had been in the past. Participants reported a desire to blend in with the dominant culture, and believed that bringing these attacks up with their parents would make them stand out more. However, participants who did disclose these instances to parents reported supportive, affectionate and open communication climates. These participants were able to effectively handle the negative comments they encountered without letting these comments determine their identity.

Docan-Morgan (2010) also found that Korean adoptees remembered how their parents handled intrusive interactions, and how this influenced their boundary management. Often, parental messages that particularly stood out reaffirmed their family

identity. These messages largely fell into the domain of labeling, explaining, defending or joking. Participants also stated that the way their parents responded to comments helped them to reaffirm their membership in the family. However, the ways in which parents used external boundary management also served as internal boundary management, and solidified family identity.

Parents often report wanting to respond to outsiders in ways that let challengers know it is not ok to ask (an external boundary management practice), while also signaling to their child that they are part of the family (an internal boundary management practice). Suter's (2008) research has shown that that many people only understand families through a biological lens. Thus, when families do not conform to what it is seen as a "typical" family, people feel it is okay to ask questions. Parents face an abundance of questions and challenges that place them in a difficult position. The way in which parents respond to outsider comments shapes how the child will see family. In addition, the way parents saw how they chose to respond represented how they aimed to present themselves to the child (Suter & Ballard, 2009). One participant reported that, "None of this is as important as insuring my daughters know I will treat them with dignity and respect" (p. 119). Overall, parents often see themselves as both protectors and educators in regards to their adoptive children (Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011). When parents see themselves as educators, they focus on creating identity through preparatory discourse, modeling discourse, or debriefing discourse. When parents see themselves as protectors, their job is to protect their children's identity, as well as their family identity (Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011).

The research on adoption, transracial and monoracial, leads to the following research question:

RQ_1: Do experiences with challenges to family identity differ between monoracial and transracial adoptees?

Adoptive parents face questions and challenges largely due the notion of what family is in Western culture. In the last few decades, the diversity of family types has increased, but this is largely understood through the social construction of what it means to be a family. The current understanding of what a family "is" remains deeply rooted in a biogenetic view of family, meaning that families are seen as more legitimate if created biologically. This view can be traced back to the how families and familial expectations have been socially constructed historically and culturally.

The Social Construction of the Family

The ideology of the "nuclear" family is not ingrained in human biology. Rather, how people come to understand family is created through cultural and societal expectations. Berger and Kellner (1964) saw marriage as a social construction created through organization of symbols. The concept of marriage is regulated both by the individual and societal expectations of the individual. This work first hinted at the communicative nature of families. What it means to be a family, and operate as a family is largely dictated through norms and expectations. However, Berger and Kellner (1964) also noted that the aspects of private conversation could insulate families from the effects of societal regulation. The "biological" aspect of families does not dictate how members of the family act. Instead, the way that families communicate creates what it means to be a member of the family, and how the family members interact. Even though

communication can create family identity, families must still negotiate how they define family within a larger societal context.

The typical "nuclear" family, which is often seen as the idealized form of family, is also critiqued as a myth. In fact, prior to the Industrial era, the "nuclear" family itself (a family with heterosexual parents and biological children that co-reside in the same home) occurred far less frequently. After the Industrial era, the nuclear family became prominent, partially due to changing structure of the Industrial revolution, but also due to changing societal beliefs (Baxter, 2014). This is not due to a biological shift. Rather, the way that society framed the concept of family changed, especially in contemporary Western culture. The "nuclear" family became normalized through political and cultural shifts. For example, the U.S Census uses language that can be seen as privileging heterosexual, married couples with biological children living in the same home, for example, by defining one person as a "householder," rather than acknowledging that many people make up a home in many different ways (Baxter, 2014). "In short, heterosexual husband-wife pair automatically qualifies for a family status, but other social arrangements are eligible for family status only if a third party related by law or birth resides with the primary householder" (Baxter, 2014, p. 6). Government and legal documents posit what is societally acceptable. Often, they provide definition that both shapes and reflects how the populace sees the country or world. By providing these sorts of definitions, family integrity is seen as a given unless that family does not meet biological standards.

The social construction of the meaning of family has led to communication and psychology scholars studying the "nuclear" family due to the prevalence of the

"structural" view of family, which looks at which family members or roles are missing from the family (Baxter, 2014). In this approach, single parent families are seen as "missing" a parent. Further, when using the structural approach, the family is studied to see how the family compensates or changes its functioning in terms of that role. This view favors the nuclear family, and thus privileges a strong biological perspective on family. As Jacobson (2009) has shown, when adoptive families break this view, others feel that they are allowed to ask questions about the family. Several scholars have found that the ways families function are social constructed (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Galvin, 2006;Jacobson, 2009). Even nuclear families that fit every definition of societal definitions still vary widely in how they operate and handle every day stressors.

Families operate through "shared constructs," or their shared view of how the family views the world (Reiss, 1981). These constructs are representational and mutually understood by all members of the family, creating a shared paradigm. However, these processes are often implicit, in that they are not stated and discussed explicitly or at length (Reiss, 1981). Often, when stress is introduced into the family, the way that family members see themselves dramatically changes. These perspectives lend to a transactional view of family, which looks at family as, "a sense of family identity with emotional ties and a shared experience of history and future" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2014, p. 129). This view is uniquely communication based and allows for a more inclusive perspective on families, including adoptive families. By removing the nuclear privilege conveyed by the structural view of family, we can begin to see how communication dictates what family is. In a transactional view of family, how individual members see themselves is more important than societal expectations of family.

Shared family constructs of how families are maintained, while not typically explicit, may become more explicit in adoptive families. Since adoptive families are created outside blood ties, adoptive families often face legal and social constructs that guide what people expect. Decisions, such as whether to adopt internationally or domestically, may spark discussions about family itself, such as what values the family expects to hold, and how they make decisions. The discussion about whether or not to adopt can itself lead to a new understanding about how family is formed beyond the traditional nuclear family.

An increasing number of scholars have noted that family is not inherent. "Identity hinges on actual relationships more than on pedigree and genes" (Lieberman, 1998, p.3) and thus becomes a constructive process that families must enact. Just as people "do gender," people "do family." Carrington (1999) stated that family "is a social construction or set of relationships, recognized, edified, and sustained through human initiative. People 'do' family" (p. 5-6). If we accept the statement that people "do family," families then must create family identity, or how individual members see both their roles in the family and the family as a whole. How people "do" family is uniquely communicative however. Galvin (2006) proposed that the way in which people do family is directly related to how they create their family through the use of language. This is what she calls "discourse dependence," a lens that more and more scholars have been using to study families.

Discourse dependence

Galvin (2006) noted that as more and more families break from traditional nuclear, biologically privileged views of family, a family's "definitional processes

expand exponentially, rendering their identity highly discourse dependent" (Galvin, 2006, p. 3). Discourse is seen as a major part of the family definition. Discourse both occurs within families to create and maintain identity, and to distinguish the family from outsiders. Adoptive families exist in this category of discourse dependence, because even though all families use discourse to create identity, families who do not meet traditional biological views of family tend to rely on discourse to a greater extent (Galvin, 2006). Families use specific discourse strategies to enact external boundary management; that is, to draw boundaries between what is private family information and what information is available to the public (Galvin, 2006). These strategies include labeling, explaining, legitimizing, or defending. Families also use internal boundary management discourse, such as naming, discussing, narrating and ritualizing, to create a family identity between members. Traditionally, internal and external boundary management techniques are studied in diversified family forms, such as adoptive families and lesbian and/or gay relationships. However, everyday discourse is an important factor in the way all families create and manage identity (Galvin, 2014).

An example of how families discursively manage identity is seen through stepfamilies. Stepfamilies are often granted full legal ties, but Schrodt (2014) has found that stepfamilies make sense of their new families through discourse. Although stepfamilies often try to reenact traditional first marriage families, this quickly fails and families are forced to address difficulties. However, as stepfamilies encounter a host of unexpected difficulties, they often turn to the discourse strategies discussed earlier to recreate a new family identity (Schrodt, 2014). These strategies are also seen in commuter families (Bergen, 2014) and especially adoptive families (Galvin, 2009; Suter

2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009). Discourse is used simultaneously to create and dismantle family identity. For example, Docan-Morgan (2010) found that open communication led adoptees to feel accepted and enhanced family identity, whereas topic avoidance and negative responses led adoptees to feel isolated.

Transracial adoptive parents are often researched in regards to how they respond to external boundary violations, or times when they must respond to outside members of their family commenting on their family make up. In addition, transracial adoptee research has relied heavily on semi-structured interviews focusing on boundary violations. Given the prevalence of this research, the following hypothesis is presented:

> H_1: Transracial adoptees more often report instances of external boundary violations instead of internal boundary violations than monoracial adoptees families.

The ways in which families construct the meaning of family through discourse impacts the identity of the family. Discourse also helps the adoptee to understand the meaning of their status as an adopted individual. Specific types of discourse may also impact how adoptees understand their adoption, especially memorable messages.

Memorable Messages

While high levels of communication often indicate discourse dependent family, families may also rely on specific types of communication. Memorable messages, or short personal messages that individuals recall for an extended period of time, often advise future behavior, especially within families (Knapp, Reardon, and Stohl, 1981). These messages often operate as advice or prescriptive behavior for an individual, and tend to have a major impact on individuals' worldviews. They are often short and

simple, between one and two sentences, and are transcontextual, meaning that these messages can operate under multiple circumstances (Stohl, 1986).

Memorable messages are socializing agents for individuals. People often recall memorable messages as moral guidelines, such as the golden rule, being patient, and respecting authority (Waldron et al., 2004). When behaviors from others violate expectations, people will often rely on memorable messages to understand why this behavior violated his or her expectation (Smith and Ellis, 2001). Beyond evaluating behavior, memorable messages also show individuals how to act. People understand the world through memorable messages, which serve as a sense-making tool (Stohl, 1986). In organizational settings, members often recall memorable messages early in their socialization process (Barge and Scheleuter, 2004). Barge and Scheleuter's work (2004) showed that memorable messages guided workers to either focus on individual growth, or to succumb to company expectations.

While a wealth of literature has focused on memorable messages in the organization socialization process, interpersonal scholars have also examined the impact of memorable messages within families. Family is one of the main socializing agents for individuals. Individuals often recall memorable messages from parents as a guide to moral behavior and these messages often become identity shaping (Waldron et al., 2014). Family members learn how to act both within the family and outside of the family through memorable messages. For examples, mothers are a significant influence on how daughters conceptualize relationship schema, and daughters reported intention to pass on the memorable messages they received from their mother if the message was positive

(Kellas, 2010). Memorable messages shape not only how individuals see themselves, but guide how they should interact in interpersonal encounters.

Since adoptive families rely heavily on language to create their identity and meaning, memorable messages about the meaning of adoption may serve an important function in these families. Previous work has indicated that adoptees remember how their parents handle intrusive interactions, which can serve as prescriptive behavior on how to handle future interactions and see their role in the family (Docan-Morgan, 2010). This also shows that parents try to exemplify how to handle these interactions. While most memorable messages are reported as spontaneous (Waldron et al., 2014), adoptive families may be more deliberate in their attempt to pass on memorable messages. Adoptees may recall memorable messages in a different way than other children, leading to the following question:

RQ_2: What themes are salient for adoptees when recalling memorable messages about adoption?

The discourse dependence framework, as well as memorable messages, provides an outlook on how family communication can impact a sense of self. Communication is inherently tied to identity, which leads to next sections focusing on current studies of family identity and adoption identity, through a social constructionist and communicative lens.

Family Identity

Identity functions both as an individual's' self-concept and as a guide for an individuals' behavior. A person's identity, or understanding of who they are, is shaped by multiple factors. A large part of a person's identity stems from their family identity,

or how families jointly see themselves as a unit. Throughout their lives, families must negotiate what it means to be a family, how family works, and what it means to have a shared family identity. Family functioning can have major impacts on how individuals function within, as well as outside, the family. Abrupt changes in family functioning are associated with increases in individual identity confusion, and are associated with problems such as increased drug use by adolescents (Szapocznik, Pantin, Mason, & Schwartz, 2008). Soliz (2007) found that, regardless of whether or not grandparents were blood related, relationship satisfaction was positively related to shared family identity. In multi-ethnic families, supportive communication and self-disclosure are positively related to family identity. This shared family identity decreases group salience, or the awareness that you are different from others around you (Soliz, Thompson & Rittenour, 2009). However, Soliz and colleagues (2009) noted that more research must examine multi-racial families because these families use unique communication patterns.

Family identity is created in several different ways. Although it is often not a conscious process, family identity is highlighted through communication. Jointly told family stories show how families view themselves, and utilize identity statements, or statements that describe or evaluate what makes the family unique and what shared values they hold (Kellas, 2005). When families highlighted each other's accomplishments, they had higher levels of satisfaction, cohesion, adaptability and general functionality than families who chose stressful stories.

RQ_3: What themes are salient for adoptees when recalling challenges to family identity?

Beyond stories being representative of family identity, the way in which family members engage in everyday talk is extremely important in forming family identity. Breashears (2010) found that the everyday experiences and conversations family members had with each other created a strong sense of family identity. While adoptive families must strive to create a coherent family identity, they must also address how to construct the adoptees' own sense of self.

Adoptive Identity

While shared family identity is said to be associated with several benefits, also important is an adoptees' sense of his or her identity. Family identity also influences how individuals see their own identity. Understanding the meaning of adoption is important to an adoptee's sense of self. Grotevant (1997) studied how adoptees created an identity in order to understand the meaning of their adoption, stating that identity work is an "iterative and integrative process" (Grotevant et al., 2000, p. 382). In other words, what an adoption means to each individual changes over the course of their lifetime. Colaner (2014) established the Adoptive Identity Work Scale as a way to understand two parts of adoptive identity. *Exploration* described the degree to which adoptees had healthily reflected on their adoption, and was positively associated with self-esteem and positive affect toward the adoption. *Preoccupation* indicated that adoptees could not stop thinking about the adoption and was negatively associated with self-esteem and positive affect. These findings suggest that there is as level of healthy exploration and understanding of an individual's adoptive status. However, adoptees can also ruminate over the meaning of their adoption.

Rumination is tied to a number of negative health effects (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000), but the way in which families communicate can mediate certain effects. Family plays a large role in helping children understand their adoption, especially as children come to understand the meaning of race and culture as well. Although there is little difference in adoptive identity between white adoptees and transracial adoptees, transracial adoptees mention talking about race and culture with their parents far more than white adoptees (Hamilton et al., 2015). Visibly divergent families may experience greater challenges to their family identity, which may lead adoptees to think more about their adoptive status. This can lead to rumination, or as Colaner (2014) conceptualizes, preoccupation. High levels of preoccupation indicate that adoptees have not fully integrated the meaning of adoption into their identity (Colaner & Soliz, 2015). However, high levels of parental communication about adoption are associated with lower levels of preoccupation, and increased levels of personal affect about the adoption (Colaner & Soliz, 2015). Therefore, it is important to understand how transracial families utilize open communication, which can be approached through research on family communication patterns.

Family Communication Patterns

Family communication patterns (FCP) rely on two dimensions to understand family types; *conformity orientation* and *conversation orientation*. Conformity orientation refers to how much the family stresses a "climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004, p. 184), whereas conversation orientation focuses on how much a family stresses a "climate where all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide array of topics" (p.

71). Conversation orientation is a particularly useful concept when examining adoption, as well as discourse dependence. Colaner and Soliz (2015) assert that open communication styles can moderate preoccupation in adoptees. As transracial adoptees may be forced to think about their adoptive status more often, conversation orientation can help curb their rumination on the topic. This is inherently tied with the framework of discourse dependence, which asserts that discourse and the use of language are more prevalent in families that do not adhere to a "normalized" biogenetic lens.

FCP divides families into four different categories based on their levels of conversation orientation and conformity orientation (Koerner, 2013). Families who are high in conversation orientation and conformity orientation are labeled *consensual*. These families are often described by a tension between conforming to expectations, while still being open with their communication. Families who are high in conversation orientation and low in conformity orientation are labeled *pluralistic*, and are often characterized by their openness of communication between parents and children. Children in pluralistic families are encouraged to be independent, as well as open in their communication. Families that are high in conformity orientation but low in conversation orientation are labeled *protective*, and are characterized by an emphasis on obedience over open communication. Families low in both conformity and conversation orientation are labeled *laissez-faire*, which is usually indicative of larger personal space between children and parents.

FCP provides a way to examine how family types impact adoptive identity. Transracial adoptive families may rank lower on conformity orientation because of their visible differences. In addition, since transracial families are heavily discourse

dependent, they may tend to gravitate towards higher conversation orientations, indicating a pluralistic family style. Monoracial adoptive families may have more flexibility in family styles, since they are not visually constrained. Furthermore, adoptees may rank high on shared family identity, but still indicate that they are preoccupied by their adoption. Thus, FCP may be able to illuminate which communicative techniques are most important when moderating preoccupation and helping adoptees meaningfully reflect on their adoption. This leads to the following research questions and hypothesis:

R_4: Are FCPs associated with types of adoptive families?

H_2: Transracial adoptees report greater preoccupation with their adoption than monoracial adoptees.

H_3: Family conversation orientation is negatively associated with preoccupation for adoptees.

H_4: Conversation orientation moderates differences in preoccupation between transracial and monoracial adoptees.

High levels of conversation orientation may indicate a stronger sense of discourse dependence, or use of discourse in creating identity. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H_5: Reflective exploration and shared family identity are positively associated with conversation orientation.

In sum, communication creates family identity. Communication about adoption indicates, as well as impacts, how families function. Discourse influences families' ability to handle changes and adapt to stressful situations. Since adoptive families exist through legal ties, not necessarily blood ties, discourse plays an increasing role in how

identity is established. Thus, adoptive families provide an important avenue for examining how identity is created in families when it is not supported by genetic inheritance. Families must use a blend of internal and external boundary management strategies though discourse when creating a shared family identity. The differences in challenges that transracial adoptive families perceive rather than monoracial adoptive families can allow us to see how families handle challenging moments. Furthermore, the study of transracial adoptive families allows us to examine how experiences differ when families visibly differ from societal expectations of family versus invisibly differ from societal expectations. Aside from additional stressors posed by racial differences, all adoptive families must create identity and decide how to legitimize their family form. Given the lens of discourse dependence and social construction, adoptive families must openly discuss a variety of topics and issues as they come up, which also highlights the resilience of families in response to outsider comments.

Methods

Participants

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions and hypotheses, two distinct groups were recruited; mono-racial adoptees, and transracial adoptees over 18. In total, 174 individuals participated in the survey. The average age of participants was 43.83 (*SD*=12.36). Of the participants, 78.2% (*n*=136) indicated they were in a monoracial adoption, and 21.8% (*n*=38) indicated they were in a transracial adoption. Participants were recruited in several different steps, primarily using a convenience and snowball samples. Participants were recruited through online adoption groups on social media, including Facebook and Google Groups. Finally, a snowball technique will be

used to ask participants, as well as friends and families, to recruit those who would be interested in completing this survey. All announcements detailed the purpose of the study, as well as instructions for accessing the survey.

Procedures

Participants received links to the survey via the method through which they received the announcement of the study. After consenting to the survey, the participant filled out demographic information, including his or her ethnicity and the ethnicity of his or her parents. After addressing demographic information, participants were directed to a series of open-ended questions. These questions asked them to think about a memorable message about adoption their adoptive parents told them, and then describe a time their legitimacy as a family or as a member of their family was challenged. They were asked the relationship of the person who challenged their legitimacy (e.g., a stranger, a cousin, a friend, etc.), if the comment was responded to, who responded, and what was said. After completing open-ended questions, participants filled out measures of family conversation patterns, shared family identity, and adoptive identity.

Measures

A questionnaire was used to address the research questions and hypotheses. The online nature of surveys allowed for participants to participate without geographical restrictions. Open-ended questions were used to understand which challenges were salient to participants, as well as how these challenges were responded to, and memorable messages they received. In order to measure family identity, FCP, and adoptive identity, three pre-existing scales were used as well as one scale created for the purpose of this study.

Frustration. Frustration with intrusive comments was measured through 4 items; "These comments are very bothersome"; These types of comments frustrate me; I am not bothered by these comments; These types of comments are not big deal. The overall frustration scale yielded an alpha of .86 with an average score of 3.56 (*SD*=1.12).

Family communication patterns. The Revised Family Communication Pattern (RFCP) scale measured conversation orientation and conformity orientation. To keep the questionnaire brief, a modified version of the RFCP was used, utilizing 12 of the total 26 indicators. Conversation orientation was measured with 6 items (*M*=2.4, *SD*=1.2), including items such as "In our family we often talked about our feelings and emotions." Conformity orientation was also measured with 6 items (*M*=3.73, *SD*=.95), including items such as "My parents felt that it was important to be the boss." Participants were asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree. Reliabilities were strong for conversation orientation (α=.93), and conformity orientation (α=.87)

Shared family identity. The shared family identity scale is a 6-item scale created by Soliz and Hardwood (2006) and yielded an alpha of .91. The scale was originally created to analyze grandparent and grandchild relations. The scale was modified to fit parent and child relations. Participants indicated how strongly each statement represents their family, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." These included items such as "I am proud to be in the same family as my parents" and "Above all else, I think of myself as a member of this family." The Shared Family Identity scale had a mean of 3.05 (*SD*=1.22).

Adoptive identity work scale. The Adoptive Identity Work Scale consists of 10 items, distributed evenly between reflective exploration and preoccupation, (Colaner, 2014). Reflective exploration included items such as "I feel I have spent an appropriate amount of time thinking about my adoption" and "Reflecting on the events leading up to my adoption has helped me understand how I related to my adoptive parent(s)." Initial reliability scores for reflective exploration were low, so two items were removed to improve the alpha to .69 (M=3.4, SD=.93). Preoccupation included items such as "My adoption affects the way I see everything in the world" and "People cannot understand anything about me if they do not know I am adopted." Preoccupation yielded an alpha of .86 (M=3.4, SD=1.02).

Results

Intrusive Interactions

The first research question focused on differences in experiences between monoracial adoptees and transracial adoptees when recalling intrusive interactions. Independent t-tests were conducted in order to answer this question. There was a near significant difference between transracial adoptees (M=3.95, SD=1.18) and monoracial adoptees (M=3.45, SD=.88); $t(110)$=-1.83, p=.08, when reporting frustration with comments. Adoptees were also asked how frequently they heard intrusive comments, and there was a significant difference between transracial adoptees (M=3.22, SD=.85) and monoracial adoptees (M=2.77, SD=.95); $t(119)$=-2.09, p=.05. Overall, these results indicate that transracial adoptees may receive more comments that violate family boundaries, and that they find these types of comments more frustrating than their monoracial counterparts.

Adoptees were asked to identify who made the comment that felt intrusive. Overall, adoptees identified strangers as the most common boundary violator (40.9%), followed by extended family members, such as cousins or aunts (18.9%). For a complete description of boundary violators, please see Table 1. In order to address the first hypothesis, a chi-square was conducted. The first hypothesis stated that transracial adoptees would report more external boundary violations than monoracial adoptees. To fully explore this, boundary violators were collapsed into "external" and "internal" violations, based on whether the violator was close to the adoptee (e.g., family member or friend), or did not personally know the adoptee well (e.g., stranger or acquaintance). There was no significant difference between monoracial and transracial adoptees, χ^2 (1)=.239, n=111, p=.63. Thus, hypothesis one was not supported.

The third research question asked what themes were salient when recalling challenges to family identity in intrusive interactions. Overall, six themes were identified in the messages that adoptees found intrusive. For a full list of themes, see Table 2.

Forced gratitude. Roughly 9% of intrusive interactions (8.8%, n=12) fell under the theme of forced gratitude. Adoptees often mentioned that people would insist that they should be grateful that they were adopted, or in extreme cases, grateful they were not aborted. These messages often insinuated that adoptees were ungrateful, and the sheer fact they were adopted should make them feel obligated to their parents. One adoptee stated the most intrusive comment they received was, "You should be grateful you were adopted. The alternative could have been so much worse." Another adoptee stated that one person told them, "How lucky you are to not be aborted." Adoptees felt

very hurt by this, especially since several mentioned that they had no choice in their adoption, and it was simply the life they were led to with very little control.

Abandonment. The second category of intrusive interactions focused on the theme of abandonment, which also made up roughly 9% of comments (8.8%, *n*=12). These messages centered on people asking how adoptees felt to be given up, or stated that they were unwanted. For example, one adoptee stated, "When my ex and I broke up he made sure that he hurt my feelings by saying how my parents didn't want me at all... that I was given up." Beyond simply stating that they were abandoned, these questions or comments also asked how adoptees felt about being unwanted, which adoptees found frustrating and demeaning.

Appearance. The third category of intrusive interactions focused on the differences in appearance between adoptees and their family, making up 23.5% of comments (*n*=32). People often asked adoptees why they did not look like their adoptive parents and focused on their differences. One adoptee stated:

> "What are you, is probably the most frequently asked question I receive. In regards to my ethnicity I have a distinctly non Caucasian appearance. Never having an absolute answer to the 2x weekly question and having to hear commentary and suggestions as to my ethnicity has been rather defining of my adult life."

Adoptees often felt that people, particularly strangers, overstepped boundaries by constantly focusing on appearances, and asking questions about visible dissimilarities between the adoptee and their adoptive parents.

Validity of Family. The most common theme in intrusive interactions focused on validity of family (47.8%, *n*=65). These comments centered around adoptees having their family membership challenged by a variety of people. Comments characterized adoptees as not being a "true" member of the family, or adoptive parents as not being "real" parents. Essentially, even though adoptees were raised by their adoptive parents, people often challenged the parents' role as caregivers. One adoptee stated:

> "The most consistent message that is both perplexing and offensive is the one about whether I want to find my "real" parents. Like somehow the people who raised me aren't real. This has been asked by almost everyone who finds out I was adopted."

Another adoptee stated:

> "In high school, a friend said "well, but you aren't his real daughter" when my dad and I were fighting about some adolescent-freedom thing… it was the first (and one of the few) times I ever thought about people not viewing my family as my family."

Hidden adoption. A small number of adoptees (1.5%, *n*=2) stated that they purposefully hid their adoption in order to avoid intrusive comments or negative reactions. They were often embarrassed by their status, and ashamed of being adopted. One adoptee stated:

> "I instinctively know this was a problem that adopted kids faced, so I hid the truth from all possible friends and acquaintances. No one ever knew…I was ashamed about being adopted because I knew it meant that something went desperately wrong for someone else. I lied and hid the truth, so I / we avoided this problem."

No recollection. Another subset of adoptees simply could not recall any intrusive interactions (9.6%, *n*=13). For example, one adoptee said, "I honestly never experienced this. Or at least a time that sticks out."

A chi-square was conducted to see if themes differed between monoracial and transracial adoptees. Forced gratitude and abandonment tended to overlap as themes. Forced gratitude messages often mentioned abandonment in some form. For example, adoptees were told they should be grateful they were adopted after being abandoned. Because of this overlap, in the chi-square, these categories were collapsed. In addition, hidden fact was not included because of the low numbers, and no recollection was omitted. Results indicated that transracial adoptees were more likely to report intrusive interactions that focused on the theme of appearance (CC% vs. CC% for monoracial adoptees), whereas monoracial adoptees reported intrusive interactions that focused on the theme of validity (XX% vs. XX% for transracial adoptees), χ^2 (2)=7.24, *n*=110, *p*=.027.

To further understand themes, adoptees were also asked whether they wished that the comment had been responded to differently, which was defined as response satisfaction. Of all adoptees, 45.6% were dissatisfied with the response, 39.8% were satisfied with the response and 14.8% were unsure. This did not vary significantly based on family type, $\chi^2(2)=2.057$, *n*=99, *p*=.36.

T-tests were conducted to determine if shared family identity, preoccupation, conversation orientation, and conformity orientation related to response satisfaction. Individuals who were "unsure" about the response were excluded from the analysis. Adoptees who were satisfied with the response, reported lower preoccupation (*M*=3.04,

SD=1.06) than those who were dissatisfied with the response (*M*=3.7, *SD*=.97); *t*(80)=2.93, *p*<.01, as well as higher levels of shared family identity (*M*=3.48, *SD*=1.2) than adoptees who were dissatisfied (*M*=2.94, *SD*=1.24); *t*(81)=-2, *p*=.05. Adoptees who were satisfied with the response reported higher levels of conversation orientation (*M*=3.13, *SD*=1.22) than dissatisfied adoptees *M*=2.07, *SD*=1.15); *t*(81)=-4.01, *p*<.01. Additionally, adoptees who were satisfied reported lower conformity orientation (*M*=3.33, *SD*=1) than those who were satisfied (*M*=3.93, *SD*=.95); *t*(81)=2.81, *p*<.01. Overall, this indicates that adoptees who were satisfied with the response to intrusive interactions had families who promoted open communication and did not pressure children to conform to family norms. In addition, adoptees who were satisfied with the response had a strong sense of family identity and did not feel that their adoption determined their self-concept.

The open-ended responses further elaborated on reasons for adoptees' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with response to intrusive interaction and how they felt the response should have been handled. Often, those who indicated that they were satisfied responded in two different ways. Certain adoptees stated they felt that they were open to discussing family and addressing inappropriate interactions. One adoptee stated that they had no problem responding to intrusive interactions because, "I am happy to challenge people's idea about what a family is ... what makes a family 'real.'" These types of statements indicated that adoptees were comfortable being open about their adoption, and comfortable in explaining what it meant to be a family, which could partially explain the higher levels of conversation orientation, and lower levels of preoccupation. Other adoptees described times when their families, especially their adoptive parents, stood up

for them, which also helped the adoptee understand how to respond. Another adoptee described being pleased when their adoptive mother responded to an intrusive interaction from a teacher. The adoptive mother "took the teacher off in a corner and explained the situation of family, race, disabilities and her expectations of anyone working with her children. She also suggested that they not judge families on stereotypes, that families have changed." The adoptee further went on to say that they were pleased with the way the mother responded because, "Mom knew how to handle these situations so well, they always came out better in the long run and we learned how to handle sticky situations on our own when it came up."

This was in stark contrast to adoptees who indicated that they wished these interactions had ben handled differently. Often, adoptees described being embarrassed or ashamed by these comments, and felt either they had no way to respond, or that their adoptive parents did not appropriately handle these remarks. Adoptees often indicated that they wanted a more expanded definition of family. One adoptee stated:

> "While we accept stepparents in families and would never presume to tell a stepchild her 'real' parent isn't her stepmother, people have no qualms about telling adult adoptees who their parents are and are not. Really, that's no one else's business to comment on."

These types of comments indicated that adoptees often languished over what it meant to be a family, and mentioned that their adoptive family did not spend enough time explicitly discussing what it meant to be a family or discussing adoption in general. One adoptee stated, "I wish my parents were more comfortable with adoption and they could have treated it as a matter of fact," while another adoptee stated, "I wish that people

would have more open and honest conversations about the difficult subjects like adoption. Making it okay to ask questions and really hear the responses." These types of responses also indicated why these adoptees were more preoccupied by their adoption, which reflected lower levels of conversation orientation.

Memorable Messages

The third research question asked what themes were salient when adoptees recalled memorable messages about adoption. Adoptees were asked to reflect on the meaning of their adoption and provide the most memorable message they received about adoption from their adoptive parents. After evaluating messages, a preliminary set of themes was identified. The first author defined themes and wrote a codebook. After training an independent coder, the first author and the coder independently categorized 30% of memorable messages into themes to establish reliability (k=.81). Once reliability was established, the rest of the memorable messages were coded. Overall, seven themes were salient throughout the memorable messages. Complete breakdowns of each category can be found in Table 3.

Chosen. 31.5% (n=51) of memorable messages revolved around the theme of being chosen. These memorable messages centered on an intentional creation of family. In these messages there is a clear implication that parents tried to impress upon their child that they were chosen deliberately to become part of the family, or the adoptee chose to be with the family. One adoptee stated, "The most memorable message was that of being chosen…Adoption meant that they could have the family they always dreamed of." While not all adoptees felt positive about being chosen (one participant stated "She [my adoptive mother] always stressed to me how much I was wanted even though I never felt

that way"), they were reminded constantly that someone intentionally chose them to be part of the family, including the parents, or God. These messages focused on a deliberate departure from a biological family, in that the family form was legitimate because there was a forceful choice.

Sacrifice. Sacrifice messages made up 8% (*n*=13) of memorable messages for adoptees. These messages brought the birth parent into the meaning of adoption by focusing on the sacrifice birth parents made for their children in order to give them a better life. This was often explained as the birth parent's desire for the adopted child to have a "good" life, and that the birth parent's love was so great, they made the ultimate sacrifice. For example, one participant stated, "My parents made sure I knew that I had a mom who loved me but couldn't take care of me." Another adoptee said, "They told me that my birth mother loved me so much that she wanted me to have a better life than what she could give me." In this way, the loss that adoptees may have felt for not knowing their birth parents was still grounded in the ultimate act of love. The birth parent was incorporated into the meaning of family in a different way than that of a traditional nuclear family.

Openness. A number of messages (15.4%, *n*=25) focused on an open and honest discussion of what adoption meant. Often, adoptees could not focus on a singular message, but noted their entire childhood was characterized by openness about adoption. One adoptee demonstrated this by saying, "I cannot remember the day my parents told me I was adopted, but I have always known." Instead of recalling a specific message, many comments about openness focused on open communication overall, and a friendly atmosphere regarding adoption. Adoptive parents often encouraged adoptees to ask

questions about their birth parents, and always aimed to provide as much information about their adoption as they could. Parents created a positive atmosphere, and encouraged children to talk about adoption whenever they wanted. In addition to simply addressing adoption in the adopted family, these messages discussed birth parents in positive terms. Adoptees mentioned their adoptive parents encouraging meeting birth parents, and birth parents accepting the adoptee years later.

Secrecy. 13% (*n*=21) of memorable messages were characterized by secrecy. They diverged greatly from messages about openness. Instead, adoption was viewed as a taboo topic that should not be discussed. This was marked in a few different ways. In one set of messages, adoptive parents refused to discuss adoption. Adoptive parents avoided the subject, instilling the belief that adoption was a negative attribute of their family. One adoptee stated, "I knew that I was adopted, but the subject was taboo." In another set of messages about secrecy, adoptees were completely deceived by adoptive parents. For example, one adoptee stated, "My parents never intended to tell us we were adopted. My adoptive mother took the truth to her grave 17 years ago." These messages referred to finding out about the adoption either after their adoptive parents' death, or discovering the secret accidentally. In both cases, adoption was framed as a negative topic that should not be addressed. It was viewed as an aspect that made their family invalid.

Difference. Difference messages accounted for 9.3% (*n*=15) of messages. These messages were similar to secrecy in that they framed adoption negatively. However, rather than avoiding discussion of adoption, adoption was used as a way of making the adoptee feel isolated. Adoptees noted not feeling connected to the family. One adoptee

noted, "The most memorable message was that I was a failure as their child because I wasn't like them." The differences between the adopted child and the adoptive parents were often highlighted, and remained salient in the adoptees' self-concept. Other times, adoptees felt that adoption was simply brought up too much, or that the way in which their adoptive families spoke about adoption made them feel different from traditional families.

Possession. 9.9% (*n*=16) of messages fell under the theme of possession. These messages focused on adoptees feeling as if they were a material possession and their humanity was lowered as a member of the family. Unlike sacrifice messages, these messages tended to castigate birth parents as abandoning or giving up the child, and stressed that adoptees should be grateful for being saved. An adoptee characterized this best by saying, "I was supposed to mold myself into what she wanted in a child, love her unconditionally and be grateful at all times for what she saved me from." Adoptees were expected to behave in a manner that adoptive parents expected them to. At times, adoptees mentioned feeling like a less than worthy replacement for a "real" child. One adoptee described this feeling as follow:

> "The most memorable message I received as an adopted person, even though it probably was not intended, was I should be thankful someone wanted me, I should never question, I should forget about my past, I should accept my adoptive parent ancestral roots were my roots--even though they were not very similar at all. I should be a good adoptee and just move on, forget my medical history, my family, my heritage, the very essence of who I am."

Only option. A number (13%, *n*=21) of messages focused on being an "only option." These messages were not necessarily positive or negative. Instead, they simply framed adoption as the only way for their adoptive parents to have children. Their adoptive parents could not have children naturally, which was often due to biological complications, so adoption was simply the avenue through which they created a family. One adoptee stated, "I was told that my mother had a ruptured appendix that almost killed her, and that the scar tissue from the surgery rendered her sterile. She wanted children, so adoption was her only option."

One way ANOVAs were conducted to compare individuals reporting different types of memorable messages in terms of adoption preoccupation, shared family identity, conformity orientation, and conversation orientation. All ANOVAs, were significant (see Table 4). Table 5 provides a complete description of means. Individuals who reported memorable messages focusing on *openness* indicated the highest levels of conversation orientation (*M*=3.15, *SD*=1.6), whereas individuals whose memorable messages focused on *secrecy* reported the lowest conversation orientation (*M*=1.69, *SD*=1.02). Adoptees recalling *chosen* memorable messages indicated a moderate degree of conversation orientation (*M*=2.8, *SD*=1.29). For conformity orientation, individuals recalling *openness* messages had the lowest level of conformity orientation (*M*=3.07, *SD*=.88), followed by those recalling chosen messages (*M*=3.53, *SD*=1.02). Individuals reporting secrecy messages had the highest level of conformity orientation (*M*=4.15, *SD*=1.02). In addition, while those reporting memorable messages about secrecy also reported the highest conformity orientation, adoptees whose messages focused on *possession* reported the highest level of preoccupation (*M*=3.98, *SD*=.86). Adoptees with *difference* messages

reported the lowest level of shared family identity (M=2.4, SD=.92). These associations in message themes highlighted how memorable messages can serve to constitute family communication patterns, as well as influence adoptee identity.

Preoccupation in Transracial and Monoracial Adoptees

The second hypothesis predicted that transracial adoptees would report higher levels of preoccupation than monoracial adoptees. This hypothesis was suggested by previous research indicating that many transracial adoptees report racial derogation attacks; further, parents of transracial adoptees often say they face an onslaught of comments regarding their racial composition. However, this hypothesis was not supported. There was no statistical difference in levels of preoccupation between transracial adoptees (M=3.39, SD=.93) and monoracial adoptees (M=3.4, SD=1.05); $t(120)$=.021, p=.98. Even though transracial adoptees reported a higher frequency of intrusive comments, and reported more frustration with these comments, these trends did not seem to contribute to their overall level of preoccupation.

The fifth hypothesis predicted that conversation orientation would moderate differences in preoccupation between monoracial and transracial adoptees. An ANCOVA was used to test the hypothesis, with conversation orientation entered as a covariate. Conversation orientation did not moderate preoccupation, $F(1)$=.05, p=.83, and thus, this hypothesis also was not supported.

Adoptive Identity, Family Communication Patterns and Shared Family Identity

Bivariate correlations were computed to test hypotheses and research questions regarding family communication, adoptive identity and shared family identity. Table 6 reports these correlations.

The third hypothesis predicted that family conversation orientation relates negatively to preoccupation. This hypothesis was supported, with a significant negative correlation between conversation orientation and preoccupation, r=-.55, n=133, p<.01. Adoptees whose adoptive families encouraged a culture of open communication between parents and children had lower levels of preoccupation about their adoption. The fourth hypothesis predicted that conversation-orientation relates to both reflective exploration and shared family identity. Shared family identity was significantly, positively correlated with conversation orientation (r=.68, n=133, p<.01). However, there was no support for the relationship between reflective exploration and conversation orientation, (r=.09, n=131, p=.251). This indicates that families who cultivate strong and open communication had a stronger sense of identity, but this open communication has little effect on how the adoptee processed and reflected on the meaning of their adoption.

The third research question asked if family communication patterns related to types of adoptive families. To evaluate this question, independent t-tests were conducted comparing conversation orientation and conformity orientation by family type. There was no significant difference between transracial adoptees (M= 2.37, SD=2.09) and monoracial adoptees in regards to conversation orientation (M=2.44, SD=1.23); t(126)=.24, p=.21. There was also no significant difference between transracial adoptees (M= 3.74, SD=1.03) and monoracial adoptees (M=3.69, SD=.99) in regards to conformity orientation; t(126)=-.219, p=.78. These results indicate that types of adoptive families do not differ based on family communication patterns.

Additional Findings

There were several findings that were not predicted in the rationale. There was a small correlation between age and preoccupation, r=.21, n=174, p=.02. In addition, conformity orientation was negatively correlated to conversation orientation, r=-.72, n= 133 p<.01, and positively correlated with preoccupation r=.52, n= 133, p<.01. Conformity orientation and shared family identity were negatively correlated r=-.59, n= 133, p<.01, and shared family identity was negatively correlated with preoccupation, r=-.58, n= 133, p<.01.

Discussion

Several findings throughout this work are particularly pertinent for the study of family communication. Adoptees generally had strong memories of messages about adoption that they were able to clearly articulate. This was particularly true in regards to negative messages focused on secrecy and difference. These themes in messages were also tied to the conversation orientation adoptees describe in their family, which indicated how comfortable they were talking about a wide variety of topics with their family. People reporting memorable messages focusing on openness had particularly high conversation orientation in comparison to those reporting other messages. Knapp et al. (1981) noted how memorable messages have socializing power, and in this case, memorable messages served as a strong communicative agent in determining how individuals understood their adoption in relation to their family, and adoptive identity.

Open communication was also salient when adoptees encountered intrusive interactions. Adoptees reported major themes that showed a dedication to the biogenetic lens of family by strangers. Themes focusing on validity and appearance made up 71.3% of all intrusive interactions, which shows that people still primarily assume family must

share bloodlines and share physical features. Galvin's (2006) conceptualization of discourse dependence alludes to this trend. Although there is great diversity of family forms, people still adhere strongly to a biogenetic view of family and feel comfortable discrediting family forms that do not meet that definition. Given the high percentage of comments that seek to discredit adoption as "true" family, explicit discussions and openness among adoptees and adoptive parents about what family means becomes particularly important.

The way in which either adoptees or those around them handled intrusive interactions was important in determining how adoptees felt about the interaction as a whole. Most adoptees reported that they themselves handled the interactions, which was an unexpected finding. However, this also provided a way for us to see how adoptees felt communicating about their adoption. The majority of participants were dissatisfied with either the way they responded or how an adult or person around them responded. Often times when they were dissatisfied, they felt that they could not truly talk about adoption in an open and honest way, or they felt shame at the fact they were adopted. Furthermore, the way in which adults handled the interactions exemplified how adoptees should respond to intrusive comments. Often, adoptees mentioned adoptive parents or teachers not standing up for them or responding to negative comments. Such responses also demonstrated to adoptees that they themselves should tacitly accept intrusive comments about adoption.

Those who were satisfied with the response to intrusive interactions also mentioned that adults exemplified how to respond to intrusive comments, but in different way. They were more comfortable dismantling responses, which can also be explained

by their higher conversation orientation. Their greater comfort addressing intrusive comments might, in turn, explain their lower preoccupation. These results indicate that the way in which families communicatively constitute family is reflected in different ways, including memorable messages and handling of intrusive interactions. Overall communication styles, such as conversation orientation and conformity orientation, play an important role in whether the adoptee feels part of the family and how they understand their adoption.

One illuminating finding was the lack of significant differences between monoracial and transracial adoptees in several variables. The type of adoption had no effect on conversation orientation, conformity orientation or preoccupation. While it was hypothesized that transracial adoptees would report more preoccupation, this was not the case. Transracial adoption does ring up a set of challenges that are unique, and important to address in communication studies. However, simply the type of adoption does not immediately impact the adoptee's identity. Far more important is how the family communicated about adoption as a whole. This was more indicative of adoptee's identity than adoption type.

What the findings do show is that adoptive identity and culture has begun to shift. There was a wide range of ages in this data. Several of the older adoptees mentioned that times have changed in understanding adoption and the pressure to be parents. A subset of these adoptees felt that previously, the pressure to be a parent led some parents to adopt, even if they were unfit to be parents. A small correlation between age and preoccupation was found indicating that the older the adoptee, the more they were preoccupied by their adoption. This was not explored further, but it may be relevant in

showing that understanding of adoption has begun to change. Adoption has become less secretive, and more parents are beginning to adopt because they want to, not because they feel pressured to. This could also show that, while people still primarily adhere to a biogenetic view of family, there has been some shift toward an expanded definition of family.

Beyond specific instances of intrusive interactions and memorable messages, this study was also able to provide an examination of how general family communication styles can contribute to the adoptees' sense of family identity, as well as their preoccupation. Reflective exploration did not reveal in any significant findings. However, conversation orientation was negatively correlated with preoccupation, and positively correlated with shared family identity. Family identity and individual identity are tied together, and simultaneously influence each other. This was indicated through the finding that shared family identity was negatively correlated with preoccupation. This shows that having a strong connection with their adoptive family was connected with adoptees not obsessing with the meaning of their adoption. Low levels of preoccupation indicate that the adoptee does not see their adoption as the biggest part of their identity. Higher levels of preoccupation indicate that adoptees feel that being adopted is an integral part of their identity. Communication was shown to alleviate this preoccupation, or at leas that open communication is associated with lower levels of preoccupation.

Throughout this thesis, there have been several implications for understanding family communication. Understanding what it means to be a family has a major influence on how adoptees feel part of the family, as well as the adoptee identity. This is

developed communicatively, through open communication among family members. These findings are reflective of Galvin's (2006) conceptualization of discourse dependence, in that diversified family forms must explicitly use communication to create their family. This is developed through encouraging open communication, which is measured by conversation orientation, memorable messages, and response to intrusive interactions.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study provides a nuanced view of communication issues faced by adoptees, it is not without its limitations. First, adoptees were recruited through online forums. Although online forums provide a way to reach underserved populations, they also attract people who feel passionate about a topic, which may over represent extreme responses. Thus, the participants in this study may not represent the average adoptee, but rather adoptees who feel strongly enough about their adoption to join online groups. In addition, participant recruitment resulted in an uneven number of transracial and monoracial adoptees. There were more monoracial adoptees than transracial adoptees. Clearer comparisons could have been made if the number between the groups had been even. The overrepresentation of monoracial adoptees may have led to a dominance of monoracial voices. In addition, the age range varied significantly among adoptees, which also may have affected the results. While there was a small correlation with age and preoccupation, this study was no designed to investigate these differences. Therefore, I can only speculate about the meaning between these differences.

In addition, I have little information on the adoptees who answered these surveys. There were no questions about family environment, mental health backgrounds, or

adoption type, such as private or public systems. These are all possible influences on how individuals process their adoption. Adoptees also tend to have a higher rate of oppositional defiant disorder than non adopted individuals (Tully, Iancano and McGue, 2008), which can impact how adoptees answered these questions. Without further information on their health background, this could be a compounding influence on the results. That being said, future research may be able to find a link between severity of oppositional defiant disorder, and communication with these families.

In addition, this research does add adoptee voices to the communication literature on adoption, which focuses more on adoptive parents. This step can lead to several different future directions. First, recruiting a larger pool of transracial adoptees may allow a more nuanced view of issues facing transracial adoption. The comparisons between monoracial and transracial adoptees were muted. Studies that look at transracial adoption should begin focusing on involving adoptees directly, and focus on what they perceive to be communicative challenges.

Expanding the voice of adoptees in research is an important step in the communication literature, but it may also be helpful to bring adoptees and adoptive parents together to discuss the meaning of adoption and the types of communicative changes they would like to see. Adoptees often mentioned they wished that intrusive interactions had been handled differently. Several studies have noted how parents handled what they saw as intrusive interaction (e.g., Suter, 2008), but there is a lack of data on dyadic interactions between family members.

Conclusion

Overall, this thesis provides research on how memorable messages, responding to intrusive interactions, and overall levels of communication in families can impact adoptees' self concepts in terms of feeling included in their adoptive family, and their own identity. These findings coincide with Galvin's (2006) conceptualization of discourse dependent families, and showed that families that do not meet a biogenetic view of family must use communication to discursively create family. There were only small differences between transracial and monoracial adoptees, which indicates that communication in adoptive families is much more salient in creating a strong family identity than simply family type. Furthermore, family identity and communication can also impact how adoptees understand their own adoption. Communicating openly both about adoption and in general in families can help adoptees reflect on the meaning of adoption without ruminating. This research provides an important voice in the communication literature both for adoptive families, and families in general.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Frequency of Boundary Violators

Boundary Violator	N	%
Stranger	52	40.9%
Family Member	24	18.9%
Classmate	17	13.4%
Parent	10	7.9%
Community Member	8	6.3%
None	10	7.9%
Total	*127*	

Table 2

Themes in Intrusive Interactions

Theme	N	Percent
Validity	65	47.8%
Appearance	32	23.5%
None	13	9.6%
Abandonment	12	8.8%
Forced Gratitude	12	8.8%
Hid Fact	2	1.5%
Total	*136*	

Table 3

Themes in Memorable Messages About Adoption

Theme	N	Percent
Chosen	51	31.5%
Sacrifice	13	8%
Openness	25	15.4%
Secrecy	21	13%
Difference	15	9.3%
Possession	16	9.9%
Only Option	21	13%
Total	*162*	

Table 4

One-Way Analysis of Variance of Memorable Message Codes

Measure	Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Shared Family Identity	Between Groups	6	23.07	3.85	2.73	.016
	Within Groups	115	161.84	1.41		
	Total	121	184.9			
Preoccupation	Between Groups	6	18.32	3.05	3.26	.005
	Within Groups	112	104.83	.94		
	Total	118	123.15			
Conformity Orientation	Between Groups	6	18.12	3.05	3.35	.004
	Within Groups	114	102.7	.901		
	Total	120	120.81			
Conversation Orientation	Between Groups	6	29.89	4.98	3.528	.003
	Within Groups	114	1.41			
	Total	120	190.88			

Table 5

Mean Differences in Memorable Message Themes

Measure	Chosen	Sacrifice	Openness	Secrecy	Difference	Possession	Only option
Shared Family Identity	3.39	2.98	3.71	2.71	2.4	2.45	2.8
Preoccupation	3.08	2.86	3.06	3.85	3.88	3.98	3.53
Conversation Orientation	2.8[a]	2.45	3.15[a]	1.69[a]	1.83	2.3	2.45
Conformity Orientation	3.53	3.67	3.07[a]	4.15[a]	4.42[a]	4.12	3.66

Note: Figures with subscripts reflect items that were significant at the .05 level after conducting a Tukey post hoc analysis test.

Table 6

Bivariate Correlations Between Measures

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. Conversation Orientation	—			
2. Conformity Orientation	-.720*	—		
3. Preoccupation	-.536*	.522	—	
4. Reflective Exploration	.094	-.090	.058	—
5. Shared Family Identity	.679*	-.588*	-.584*	.108

*$p \leq .01$

Appendix B

Survey

Thank you so much for your interest in this research! The goal of this survey is to better understand the experiences of adopted individuals in order to better inform adoption practitioners, researchers, and the general public. Your input is valuable and will help us understand how adoptive families communicate about difficult topics.

This online survey should take about 10-20 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary, and responses will be kept anonymous.

The following information is required to be included by the University of Montana Institutional Review Board.

Risks

There is no anticipated discomfort for those contributing to this study, so risk is very minimal. You will be asked to recall a time when your family identity was challenged, which may cause you to recall times that were uncomfortable or possibly upsetting.

Benefits

Although you may not directly benefit from taking part in this study, you will be helping people understand how adoptive families communicate. Further, you will help researchers and practitioners understand how families can better respond to difficult situations.

Participation

In order to participate in this survey, you must be at least 18 years of age. You have the right to skip any questions that make you uncomfortable, and can withdraw from the study at any point.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about the research, please contact the Principal Investigator, Mackensie Minniear, via email at mackensie.minniear@umontana.edu or the faculty supervisor, Dr. Alan Sillars at alan.sillars@mso.umt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the UM Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (406) 243-6672. Please print or save a copy of this page for your records.

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this research project.

❍ Enter Survey

Thank you for your participation! The survey will begin with a few demographic questions.

First, please tell me a little about yourself.

Gender _____

Age_____

Ethnicity (Please choose all that apply)

- ❑ African-American
- ❑ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ❑ Caucasian
- ❑ Hispanic or Latino/a
- ❑ Native American or American Indian
- ❑ Other _____

Next, please tell me about your adoptive parents. If you only have one adoptive parent, only fill out the section for one parent.

What is your first parent's gender? _____

What is your second parent's gender? _____

What is your first parent's ethnicity? (Please choose all that apply)

- ❑ African-American
- ❑ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ❑ Caucasian
- ❑ Hispanic or Latino/a
- ❑ Native American or American Indian
- ❑ Other _____

What is your second parent's ethnicity? (Please choose all that apply)

- ❑ African-American
- ❑ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ❑ Caucasian
- ❑ Hispanic or Latino/a
- ❑ Native American or American Indian
- ❑ Other _____

Do you have siblings?

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No

Answer If Do you have siblings? Yes Is Selected

How many siblings do you have? _____

How many of your siblings were also adopted? _____

The goal of this research is to understand how adoptive families communicate. Families often create stories about adoption, and its importance in their family. Please take a moment to reflect on what your parent(s) told you about the meaning of your adoption. When thinking about the meaning of your adoption, think about stories your parents told you about adoption, such as why they chose to adopt, and what adoption meant to them. What was the most memorable message your adoptive parents told you about your adoption? Please be as complete as possible.

Adoptive families often face comments about their legitimacy as a family. People may ask questions about your family, or life as an adoptee, that feel inappropriate. These can be comments, such as "But who is your real mom/dad?", or even comments about looking physically different from other members of your family. These comments can come from friends, strangers, or even sometimes your own family members. While people may not mean to be offensive, these comments can feel intrusive, and sometimes upsetting.

Please think back to a time when someone made a comment about either you or your family that felt intrusive or inappropriate. Please detail what was said, and who said this comment.

Was this comment responded to? If so, who responded, and what was said?

Do you wish this comment had been responded to differently? If so, what do you wish was said?

How frequently did you hear these types of comments?

- ❍ Never
- ❍ Seldom
- ❍ Occasionally
- ❍ Frequently

Please indicate how accurate the following statements are in regards to receiving comments like this.

	Clearly does not describe my feelings	Mostly does not describe my feelings	Somewhat describes my feelings	Mostly describes my feelings	Clearly describes my feelings
These comments are quite bothersome.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
These types of comments frustrate me.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I am not bothered by these comments.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
These types of comments are not a big deal.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Thank you for responding to the previous questions! Now we have a few additional questions about the nature of your family.

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements, in regards to your adoptive family.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am proud to be in the same family as my parents.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My shared family membership with my family is not that important to be.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Above all else, I think of myself as a member of this family.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I feel as if we are members of one family.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I am an important member of my family.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I feel as if I am a member of a separate group.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Please think back to how you were raised by your adoptive parents. Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements, in regards to the way your adoptive parents raised you.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I could tell my parents almost anything.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My parents often said things like "There are some things that just shouldn't be talked about."	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
In our family we often talked about our feelings and emotions.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My parents felt that it was important to be the boss.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My parents liked to hear my opinions, even when they didn't agree with me.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My parents and I often had long, relaxed conversations about nothing in particular.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I really enjoyed talking with my parents, even when we disagreed.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
When anything really important was involved, my parents expect me to obey without question.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My parents often said things like "My ideas are right and you should not question them."	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My parents often said things like "A child should not argue with adults."	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
In our home, my parents usually had the last word.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My parents encouraged me to express my feelings.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Please take a moment to think about how you feel about your adoption. Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Reflecting on the events leading up to my adoption has been helpful to me.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I feel that I have spent an appropriate amount of time thinking about my adoption.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I have thought about how my life would have been different if I hadn't been adopted.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Reflecting on the events leading up to my adoption has helped me understand how I related to my adoptive parent(s).	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I am first and foremost an adopted individual.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
People cannot understand anything about me if they do not know I am adopted.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
I feel like nearly every aspect of who I am is the way that it is because of my adoption.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
It is difficult to have any part of my life detached from my adopted status.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
My adoption affects the way I see everything in the world.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Reflecting on the events leading up to my adoption has helped me understand how I relate to my birth parent(s).	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Thank you for participating in this survey! Your time is greatly appreciated. If you would like to receive a copy of the results of this study, or are interested in participating in future studies on this topic, please contact Mackensie Minniear, at mackensie.minniear@umontana.edu. Again, thank you for your participation!