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**The untended garden: How adoptees navigate relationships with first
family members**

By

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THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work,

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Master of Social Work,

Wilfrid Laurier University

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how people who were adopted over the age of 6 years old in open adoption arrangements navigate ongoing relationships with first family members. It explores perceptions of how a connection with both adoptive and first family members impacts self-concept. Using an interpretivist-constructivist lens, the narratives of four women are presented and analyzed. In addition to qualitative interviews, each participant was invited to create images that represented relationships with significant family members. The narratives are re-presented in detail adhering closely to the teller's organization and emphases. In the analysis, themes related to relationships with first family members and self-concept were developed. Participants described complex, often painful, family dynamics with adoptive and first family members, particularly mothers. Furthermore, participants were not assured that having a relationship with their first family would translate into having accurate and truthful information about their family history. Despite challenges, all participants recommended that children should maintain contact with first family members while living with adoptive family. They agreed that all family members would benefit from ongoing support to address the issues of divided loyalty, grief and the fear of rejection. Implications for social work practice are discussed.

Keywords: adoption, openness, adoptee self-concept, narrative, secrecy in adoption

*Can I ever love who I want? Or do I have to settle for what is here?
Can I ever keep what is mine?
I feel like I gave it all away.
It was taken from me.
I had no power or choice.
I had no choice but to let her leave. I had no choice but to love another
I wanted to keep her for me.
I wish she never had any more children. I resent them because they had her and I did not.
She took my will with her, my desire for anything to be mine.
It hurts too much if it (or they) leaves.
I don't believe I will ever feel better. (Tracz, 2006)*

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The experience of researching and writing this thesis was a much bigger undertaking than I had anticipated at the beginning of this research journey. I am proud of my accomplishment and realized that this could not have been completed without the support of many people in my life. The topic is deeply personal. my desire to know my first parents is what inspired this whole idea. My closest friend and mentor, Dianne Mathes, is the executive director of the Adoption Council of Ontario. She provided me with endless amounts of emotional support and a space to reflect on my work. Her support provided me with the courage and motivation to take on this project. She is my trusted expert on being adopted and working with adoptive families.

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I offer sincere gratitude for my participants bravery and honesty. They provided me with insight into an experience that I wish was mine. I was excited to have an older participant agree to speak of her life experiences. I am appreciative to have the benefit of her experience and to share that with the world as child welfare learns more about how to navigate and support this complex family structure.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I am a social worker who works as a child and family therapist in private practice. I work primarily with people who are or have been connected to the child welfare system. Previously, I was employed by a children's aid society in southern Ontario. I held various roles while employed there but the most influential role I had was to locate permanent families for children who are placed in extended society care and support those families as they all adjusted to their new roles.

Traditional adoption processes were surrounded by secrecy; the original names of children and their first parents' names were sealed. Generally, families did not know each other. All parties were assured that their identities would not be revealed to the other. New birth certificates were issued with the names of adoptive parents inserted. By way of contrast, current adoption processes include the child's name at birth in their legal documents and often, children can readily name the members of their first families, although the practice of issuing new birth certificates continues. Even in circumstances where face to face contact has not been arranged formally, access to contact information is available on the internet, making it almost impossible to maintain anonymity between first and adoptive families (Faulkner & Madden, 2012; Greenhow, et al., 2017; Palacios & Brodzinsky 2010; del Pozo de Bolger, 2018).

Openness is a term that is applied to describe how information is shared between first and adoptive families and can include direct contact between adopted children and members of their first family. Direct contact adds considerable complexity to the experience of raising adopted children and to being adopted. Given recent legislative and policy changes, it will now be more common than not, that a child will have contact with someone from their first family.

At present we have a limited understanding of how children who are adopted at an older age and continue to maintain ties with their first families will fare (Faulkner & Madden, 2012; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). There is an emerging voice in the literature about this experience from the perspective of the adopted person (Boyle, 2017; Crea & Barth, 2009; Greenhow et al., 2017; del Pozo de Bolger, 2018; Gebyehu, 2008; Koskinen & Böök, 2019; Messing, 2006; Wojciak, 2017). The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of people who were subject to an older child adoption and who maintained some relationship with members of their first family. Specifically, this study will explore how children adopted at or after age six experience their relationships with their adoptive and first families and how these relationships influence the adopted person's self-concept.

By provisions set out in The Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA) (Province of Ontario, 2017) the term extended society care is a legal term referring to the ongoing care of children whose parents' guardianship rights have been terminated. Children for whom that applies were formally known as crown wards. Throughout this work, these terms will be used interchangeably as the legislation transitioned from the Child and Family Services Act 1990 (CFSA) (Province of Ontario, 1990) to the CYFSA 2017. The CYFSA states that a child can be placed in the extended care of the society under the conditions outlined in section [101, \(1\)](#) "where the court finds that a child is in need of protection and is satisfied that intervention through a court order is necessary to protect the child in the future..." (Province of Ontario, 2017). Under the CFYSA the child remains in the extended society care until that order is terminated by the courts; either by adoption, status review¹ or until the child is 18 years old.

¹ A status review may occur after 6 months' time if a child has not been placed for adoption. A status review refers to a legal process and may be applied to anyone who was party to the original order where the child is placed

There is a new emphasis on finding permanent homes for older children, those who would have traditionally grown up in foster care. In 2012 the Ontario government announced a specific funding subsidy to encourage families to consider adopting a child over the age of ten years old (Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2012). Previously, subsidies were provided to adoptive families at the discretion of individual CASs with the expectation that money would be drawn from funds allocated for administrative costs. The outcome was that subsidies were provided on an ad hoc basis and their availability varied from CAS to CAS. In addition to the subsidy announcement, amendments to the CFSA permitted children to be placed for adoption while maintaining relationships with significant first family members via contact orders and agreements. The change in law and practice continues under the CYFSA. Openness agreements and orders have now been expanded to include making them with their affiliated First Nation, Metis or Inuit community.

Currently, there is a trend across Children's Aid Societies (CASs) in Ontario that emphasizes the preservation of children's connection to their original family network. This can occur by having a relative to the first parents taking care of the child or by offering more community support. Overall, at this point in history, fewer children are being placed for adoption. Nonetheless, there were approximately 2600 children who were crown wards, according to the Ontario Looking After Children Report (2019). In 2016-2017, 32% of adoptions were subject to an openness order or agreement (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), 2018). In 2018 there were 696 adoptions finalized and, 40% of adoptions from the child welfare sector included openness provisions. (OACAS 2018). The number of openness orders and agreements is increasing.

in the extended care of the Society. The party can provide evidence to the court that demonstrates that there have been significant changes in circumstances and therefore, the child should be returned to the care of that party.

Throughout the field of adoption, there are different terms used when referring to the child's family of origin. The term *biological* family is sometimes used. Critics of that term argue that this term only describes the biological component of the relationship and tends to objectify biological parents, not acknowledging the unique relational connection that can be present between a parent and child, even if they do not see one another after the child is born. The term *natural* family has also been used. This term has been criticized by adoptive parents because it implies that they are not "natural". Often the term *birth* family is employed. This can be a useful term, especially for those who are quite young when they are adopted. But for those who have had many years of life experience being parented by their family of origin, it may minimize the degree of impact that relationship has had on the child. I have chosen to use the term *first* parents, or first family, even in situations where there was brief contact.

My Story

My experiences of adoption have led me to believe that it is essential for everyone to understand their roots and if they do not have that information then the exploration of their origins can provide valuable insights into their own identities and motivations. I have worked alongside children who benefit from having some contact with first family members, particularly when the first family can respect the role of the adoptive parents. My observations support the notion that if first, foster and adoptive families can support and respect one another, the child will benefit by having a circle of unique, loving relationships.

My decision to complete a master's degree and thesis grew out of my experiences of being raised in an adoptive family and now working in the adoption field. My professional and personal worlds are intricately connected and multi-layered. I have found it extremely valuable

to draw on my personal experiences when trying to understand how a child might experience life in their adoptive family.

I found it extremely difficult to write about my experiences, despite my lived and professional experiences of adoption. It seemed that every time I tried to write I would have writer's block, somehow my sentences did not flow together. After several attempts, I sought advice from my advisor. As we talked about it, I became aware that I was not progressing and I felt frustrated and panicked. I identified surface themes that seemed to contribute to my writer's block including my busy life as a full-time employee and a part-time student as well as having the personal responsibilities associated with being a wife and mother. It is generally in my nature to put others' needs first.

On a deeper level, I became conscious of a silencing norm surrounding my adoption experience. This surprised me because I have spoken to groups about my search for my first family and my experience of being adopted. However, committing these ideas to paper where they will sit on a library shelf in perpetuity intimidated me. I was reminded of the subtle silencing messages I received as a child such as "why can't you leave it alone" and "it will upset your father to talk about this" and "I never thought you would want to know anything about your first family". Even as an adult these messages continued. When I connected with my sisters (by birth), I was excited and one evening I was sharing my news with my cousin (by adoption), a woman I grew up with and considered to be close to me. As I started to share my story, she interrupted me and asked, "how did your mom react to this?" I was excited to finally have a real-life connection with my sisters. Her question insinuated to me that my mother's experience should take precedence over my excitement. After that exchange there was silence and the subject changed.

All my life I have been told that I should be grateful for the life that was provided to me and that there is no “good reason” to dredge up the past. Yet, having a connection to my first family is immensely important to me. Reflecting on my childhood, I recognize that there was a part of me that was often preoccupied with the identity of my first parents. Who are they? Where are they now? Do they ever wonder about me?

When I found my first parents, having the knowledge of them and knowing they were real people, helped me to feel grounded. It was living proof that I was born and not dropped off by a stork. I remember being on a Victoria Day weekend fishing trip with my cousins from my first father’s family. It is an annual tradition for them, they meet up at a campground to celebrate the unofficial start of summer. I was invited to join them, and I was very excited to be there. I was also feeling quite nervous and self-conscious, fearing they might reject me. The first evening as we sat in someone’s cabin at a dining table, I found myself staring across at a woman, who is my cousin, and she had the same nose as mine. This was the first time I ever saw that reflected at me. I was mesmerized. I finally had to say something to her because I thought I was acting odd. She smiled and replied, “my mom has this nose too, so does my brother” and she pointed him out among the many people there. That experience led to the realization that I had been missing the experience of having a physical mirror in the people around me. I finally had more than fantasies. I had answers to some of those instinctual questions about where I came from and new reality-based experiences of family and belonging.

But also, the reality of the losses hit me, especially as I met my first father and his extended family. As I got to know them, I felt that these were all people with whom I could have had ongoing, caring relationships. Each positive meeting was and, still to this day, is tinged with the sadness of what could have been. It is a great loss, for me and my first father, that I did not grow

up knowing him, or his mother (my grandmother) and his extended family. Meeting my sisters, who were raised by my first mother, helped me to learn about her. They each have said they felt like they never really knew her which, strangely, binds us together. I discovered she was adopted as a young child and she never spoke with them about her story.

The most essential truth that I learned in this process was that I was desperately waiting for my first mother to “find me” so that we could have a glorious reunion and I could be magically healed. I realized that this wish was a childhood fantasy about a reunion. It reflected a deeply held longing to be with my first mother. I also daydreamed about who my father might be. This longing did not mean that I wanted to erase the life I had with my adoptive family but I somehow longed to have both; I did not want to replace either parent.

When I was 23 years old, I received my non-identifying social history. I only learned I could apply for it as I was taking a social work course during my undergraduate training. I learned that when an adopted person turned 18, they could apply for the non-identifying social history information that was provided to the CAS when they were placed for adoption. So, I applied to the CAS that handled my adoption and was told my request would be placed on a waitlist which was about two years long. When my non-identifying social history finally arrived, about two years later, I had almost forgotten that I had applied for it.

From that social history, I learned my first father was a teacher. I reviewed all the male teachers I encountered at school and scrutinized their photos looking for a glimmer of resemblance. I wondered if he had been in my life without me knowing. Searching for and finding my first family helped me get connected to the truths about myself that were not acknowledged by those people who were most important to me. My parents subscribed to the notion that raising an adopted child was the same as giving birth to and raising one. Kirk referred

to this as denial of differences (Kirk, 1964). While I was quite young when I was adopted and I knew from a young age that there was another set of parents out there somewhere, there was no acknowledgement that my biological connection to other people or my knowing of how I came to be and live on this planet – the story of my origins - was important.

Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig (1992) suggest that adopted people have two selves, psychologically speaking, the “adopted self” and the “self that could have been”; they either construct themselves as having these two selves or they fail to integrate both families into their identity. I often daydreamed about who my parents might be and where they went after I was born. Was my mother an actress? Was my father Mick Jagger? When I was quite young, five or six years old, I would sometimes fantasize that they would come and rescue me when I felt angry or afraid. Verrier (1993) discusses the importance of adoptee connection to the first family so that these relationships can act as a mirror, allowing the adoptee to become aware of embodied personal characteristics and strengthening self-concept. I did often wonder who I looked like, who I thought like, and which parent gave me good math skills. In my experience, first family contact helped me to have a more solid sense of self-concept. It imbued me with confidence; having that mirror assisted me in accepting my traits and idiosyncrasies with joy and openness instead of them being a reminder of how I was different from my adoptive family.

I was adopted as an infant and was raised as an only child. My parents entered a traditional closed adoption and I was raised in a traditional, working-class family. I was offered the stability of parents who focused their attention on me. I excelled at school, attended dance lessons and piano lessons. I had family vacations and a myriad of friends and cousins. Despite these advantages, in my adolescence, I struggled with self-esteem and to find my place in the world. I suspect it was difficult for my parents to understand why their seemingly well-adjusted

and intelligent daughter had difficulty. I was in an abusive intimate relationship and hung out with the stereotypical “wrong crowd”. It was very confusing for me; I was aware of challenges in my adoptive family but never considered that being adopted was part of what made it difficult for me to feel I was deserving of love and value. I was always told, from as young as I can remember, that my first mother loved me and could not take care of me so she gave me to a family who could. I was told that I was given a good life and so I had no reason to feel sad and that the fact that I did not know my first mother should not matter because I had a mother, and for a long time I believed that too. As I matured, I started to wonder why I felt empty and why I cried when the radio played songs of longing and unrequited love. As I moved into my 20s the pattern of difficult relationships continued until I finally asked myself “is there something inside of me that is choosing these partners who will leave me?” as I asked myself the question a whisper answered, “maybe it is because your first mother left”.

I gave birth to my first child when I was 29 years old. I would often look at him and wonder how my first mother was ever able to leave me alone at the hospital. I could not bear to have him sleeping in the bassinet next to my bed which seemed too far away. He seemed to need that proximity to me too. My need to be close to him was a strong drive. My instincts instructed me to surrender to it and I co-slept with him for the first year of his life. I could not imagine how my first mother ever coped, or if she felt a quarter of what I felt. It was then that I decided I needed to meet the woman and man who helped create me. I needed to search for the people who created me to understand who I was and with this knowledge fill the empty spaces inside myself. I needed to know what happened to them and know that they were alright. I carefully read my non-identifying social history and interviewed my parents about their experiences with the Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Toronto. My adoptive mother told me that when the social

worker told her that my first mother had 21 days to change her mind regarding the consent, she decided she would not answer the phone for those three weeks. Other than that memory, it was difficult for my parents to recall details. They told me that they were not provided with any written materials about me or my first family. They did remember one detail that turned out to be significant and that detail along with my non-identifying social history enabled me to locate my first mother. My parents said that the social worker mentioned that my first mother was training to become a dietician and had been in Toronto to finish her degree but was from a different city in Ontario. My name on my adoption order was Rose Mary McCormick². I concluded her surname was the same as mine, not too common. Therefore, my task was to find a single woman with her last name who lived in a city that had a university that offered dietician programs. I narrowed it to Kingston, Ottawa, London, Hamilton, and Toronto; all the universities that had medical schools. Then I combed through city directories for each city looking for women whose last name was McCormick for the years around my birth 1966-1970. Once I located a suitable candidate, I tried to build her family tree and match it to what was provided in my non-identifying social history. My first mother disappeared from the directories after 1968 and it seemed likely that she married. Finally, I found her name mentioned in the obituaries for her parents. From the obituaries, I discovered her married name and the names of my half-sisters. I did this before documents were electronic and it took several months of work at the Toronto Reference Library before I pieced the puzzle together correctly.

In May of 2004, 36 years after my birth, I learned that I had four younger sisters; I was no longer an only child. I located a married name and address for my first mother. I sat with that information for a few weeks deliberating my next steps. I sent my first mother a registered letter

² This is a pseudonym used to protect her privacy and the privacy of her other children.

explaining who I was, and I included a picture of myself and my children. Sometimes at night, I would call her house just to hear her voice on the answering machine. Once, at two am, not long after I sent my registered letter, I received a call but when I answered there was no response. The caller on the other end lingered for a few moments and then hung up. I like to believe that it was my first mother trying to find the words to explain everything. I will never really know; she did not respond to my letter. When it seemed clear that my first mother would not respond to my outreach, I did make successful connections with my siblings. Through those relationships, I learned that my first mother became ill very soon after I reached out. My sisters had wanted to talk with their mother about me to reassure her they understood but they were not able to do this before she became too ill. She died in June 2005 from liver failure. I did attend the funeral home where my first mother was laid to rest. My husband and I marveled at the photographs of her, which looked remarkably like me. I met my sisters in person who were gracious and allowed me to have some private time with my first mother, to try to say goodbye.

I have had much time to reflect on my search and I realize that the process of searching provided me with valuable information about myself; it helped me practice being “out” about being adopted. For the first time, my lived experience and my inner experience felt congruent. I wondered “Is this what it is like for people who grow up with their first families?” As a result of my reunion experiences, I have a much clearer understanding of why it was so difficult for me to create my own identity when I was a teen. For me, my self-concept was not fully developed. Meeting relatives provided me with a mirror – those who look like me, think like me and laugh at the same things. When I dove into the research on the topic, I realized that my experience was a mixture of genetic bewilderment and grief (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Brodzinsky, Schecter, & Henig, 1992; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019). There was an unacknowledged truth about

my life – namely that I was being raised by people who were not my biological parents. We were different in temperament and interests; it affected me deeply to lose my first parents through adoption. I suspect that my parents too, felt the pangs of loss when they looked at me and realized how different I was from a child they might have created together. And despite all those losses, we loved one another.

These personal experiences help me to appreciate why it might be important for placed children to have a relationship with their first family. But the big difference between myself and many children in care is that I was never raised by my first family. I was not abused or neglected by my first family and I was an adult when I started to process these emotions. I started to wonder about, and notice, how my experience was similar and how it was different from the children that I worked with. I was interested in learning about this so I could better support the families and children that I work alongside. I am a supporter of adoption openness. My hope for openness is that adopted children can work through their grief and bewilderment, and perhaps avoid its accumulation with the support of attuned and caring parents (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharme, 2019; Hughes, 2009; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019).

Part of my role as a social worker includes a teaching component; I am a trainer for prospective foster and adoptive applicants. There is a prescribed curriculum that I am expected to deliver with the help of an experienced adoptive or foster parent. As someone who was raised in an adoptive family, I can provide potential families with a perspective on adoption that may not be easily accessible for them. There are many myths and misnomers about what it is like for children to be adopted or “rescued” and placed in foster care. It has been very therapeutic to be able to share my impressions and experiences of loss, attachment and family with applicants and I believe they have found it helpful to ask me questions so they can begin to look at these

subjects through the eyes of the child. Through that work, I have come to realize that it can be difficult for people who have not experienced separation from their family of origin to genuinely appreciate the depth of emotion associated with first family connections that may be experienced by adoptees or foster children. I have come to believe that I should use any tools available to help illustrate what it is like to be “in care” or to be “adopted”. I share my own experiences so that I can help others and help myself in the process.

Furthermore, it is my opinion that the field must be aware of the impact of adoption upon older children who are placed for adoption to appropriately support them throughout their lifetime. As I consider the research and the current policy direction of the provincial government and Children’s Aid Societies, I have several questions: How does a child adjust to and accept love and support from a new family when they have active memories about, and perhaps ongoing contact with, members of their first family? Is the relationship to the adoptive family enhanced or hindered by having ongoing contact with first family members? How does a child make sense of their connections to two families? Lastly, what adoption placement decisions and practices make sense for fostering open connections amongst two families?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Legal Context

Historical Legal Context

The world of adoption has changed dramatically since the inception of the Orphans Act of 1799. Under that legislation, orphans were supported through legally binding apprenticeships until they were adults. The Adoption Act of 1921 made adoption easier and more accessible for families. Before 1921, adoptions could only become legal by the passage of a bill in the legislature (Ministry for Community and Social Services, 1985). Also in 1921, the Child of Unmarried Parents Act was passed to address the large numbers of illegitimate children being born who “needed protection”. It was this Act that identified unmarried parents (a proxy for mothers) as being neglectful. Children were viewed as requiring protection from the poverty of unmarried mothers and their immoral lifestyles. In 1927 the birth records of the adopted child in Ontario were ordered sealed to preserve the confidentiality of all parties (Pettit, Ontario GenWeb, 2013) and to protect the adopted child from the shame and stigma of being illegitimate or born into a poor family of low social status (Chambers, 2016; Lifton 2009; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). In the case of infant adoption anonymity also protected the adoptive parents from the shame of infertility. For the first mother, anonymity protected her from the stigma of having a pregnancy outside of marriage.

At the onset of adoption legislation, children could only be adopted with parents’ consent or if the child was declared to have no parents. As the child welfare system became more robust more children were remaining in foster care or institutional care without the benefit of permanency. In 1937 legislation was amended to allow for children to be placed for adoption without their parents’ consent. This would change adoption practices significantly so now

children, who had knowledge of their parents and perhaps a relationship, could be placed for adoption with a new family.

Throughout the post-WWII era, social services expanded as society values shifted to include a desire to help those less fortunate. This was the time when social security, welfare and a national healthcare program were created. As part of that expansion, the child welfare legislation changed to allow for the provincial government to create their institutions for childcare like mental health facilities and juvenile detention centers. It seemed to be an attempt to professionalize childcare and provide some standards around the care of vulnerable children. In adoption, the focus on the professionalization of social work became more medical. Parents were turning to experts to advise them as to how to raise their children and in adoption, this tendency meant that there was more emphasis on “nurture” and the belief that it was a child’s experiences that were most important to their well-being and that nature (or biology) had nothing to do with it. Kirk’s book on adoption, *Shared Fate* was published (Kirk, 1964). The title of the book was introduced to adoptive parents as a term to use to start to describe the experience of infertile adoptive parents and their children; that their experiences of loss have brought them together and because of that they have a shared fate, a destiny together. This perspective challenged the notion of denial of differences, which was the norm.

Larger social movements in the 1960s and 70s influenced adoption. As the rhetoric connected to feminism and the Civil Rights movement became popular, an Adoptees movement began, where those who grew up in the closed adoption system began to share their experiences and dissatisfaction. Over the years, scholars such as Joyce Maguire Pavao, Erik Erikson and Betty Jean Lifton bravely identified themselves as “being adopted”; they investigated to understand the experience of adoptees (and themselves) more deeply (Lifton, 2009, Brodzinsky,

et al. 1993, Pavao, 2005). These researchers, and others, drew attention to the issue of personal identity and, particularly, the challenge of developing a cohesive self-concept without knowledge of first parents and circumstances. In response to this important challenge, the child welfare field began to slowly modify adoption practices to better accommodate the needs of children who were being placed.

In this modern era, most legislative changes can be seen as moving to address the needs of adopted people. Legislation and practices have started to recognize that adoption is a complex experience that involves biology and connection to family. The creation of the adoption disclosure registry and its evolution to the current adoption disclosure system is an attempt to address adoptee concerns that they had no access to their biological information. Openness is another way child welfare is attempting to address a person's desire to know about their origins. Both ventures were created in response to adopted people and first families' expressions of sadness and regret that they were going kept apart. See Appendix A for a timeline of significant changes to adoption procedures over the past century.

Current Legislation

In 2011 the Ontario Provincial government announced Bill 179 “the Building and Supporting Youth to be Successful Act”. Under Bill 179, amendments to the CFSA were made to allow older children in foster care to be adopted by emphasizing that the onus is on the Children's Aid Society (CAS) to seek a permanent home for all children who are crown wards either with or without access. The amendment instructed CASs to consider converting the existing access order to a contact order or agreement (Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2011). An access order is a legal order created to ensure that specific people have “legal access” to a child. As in divorce proceedings, a parent or someone acting as a parent can request to have an access

order to protect their ability to see the child. Under the legislation, any access orders that were part of the crown ward order would be converted to either a contact order or a contact agreement. A contact order or agreement is created to protect the child's connection to that significant person but does not hold the same legal entitlement that an access order does. The person who has a contact order cannot go to court to revisit who has guardianship of a child, as might occur in family law proceedings. These orders and agreements are to be negotiated between a prospective adoptive family, the supervising CAS, the child or their legal counsel and a significant first family member where the aim is to maintain contact after the child or children have been placed for adoption. Legislative amendments placed more emphasis on finding caregivers for foster and adoptive children among family and friends, referred to as kin placements. Other legislative changes included more emphasis on alternative dispute resolution to avoid drawn-out court battles. In June 2011 the province of Ontario announced that it would provide subsidies to eligible parents who adopt or take permanent custody of a crown ward ten years of age or older or to those who adopt or take permanent custody of a sibling group. The stated goal of this subsidy program and legislation change was to encourage permanency for children who may have otherwise been raised in foster care (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Children and Community Social Services, 2016). That program began in 2012; families were able to apply for an income-tested subsidy and if eligible, they could receive \$950/child each month. (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Children and Community Social Services, 2016)

Societal Context

Discourses about adoption are reflected in ideas about who can be adoptive parents and how adopted people will fare in these arrangements. The profile of the once "typical" applicant who wishes to adopt a child (i.e., the infertile married couple) has given way to an array of

possibilities. Single parents of all genders- and same-sex couples have joined the traditional infertile couple as suitable candidates for adoption. Some applicants are seeking adoption after having the experience of giving birth. As well, the racial and ethnic background of adopters has shifted to reflect changing demographics of Ontario. The increasing diversity among applicants has been seen throughout Canada and the United States and is reflected in current recruitment processes (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). See Appendix B for a summary of recruitment strategies currently used in Ontario, Canada.

The profile of the typical child available for adoption has also become more diverse. The age of children eligible for adoption has shifted from infant/toddler (> 2 years old) to include older children (< 10 years old). Many older children have experienced multiple temporary out-of-home placements before adoption. Research supports a direct positive relationship between the degree of adverse behaviours that a child displays and the number of placement changes experienced (Leathers, et al., 2012; Crea & Barth, 2009; Paniagua et al., 2019). Furthermore, all the children who are in foster care are there because of child protection concerns; they may have had adverse experiences before their placement in care such as having multiple caregivers, exposure to drugs, alcohol and domestic violence (Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharme, 2019; DeJong, Hughes, 1999; Hodges, & Malik, 2016; van der Kolk, 200X; Moyer & Goldberg, 2017; Ornelas, et al., 2007). Because these experiences can have an impact on a child's neurological, emotional and physical development, the willingness and capacity of potential adopters to make a permanent commitment to the child may be impacted, particularly if there are behavioural difficulties (Clark et al., 2006; Grotevant & Lo 2017; Leathers et al. 2012; LeMare et al 2007; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Riggs, 2010).

According to Marilyn Miller, who compiled the results of the Ontario Looking After Children (ONLAC) for 2018, 2601 of 3752 children in foster care were in Extended Society Care (Miller, 2019). When looking at the age ranges of children in extended Society care the breakdown is as follows: 820 (31.5%) are over 16 years old; 1140 (43% children are between the ages of 10-15 years old; 316 (12%) are between 6-9 years old and there were 325 (12.5%) children between 0-5 years of age. As you can see, 1960 children, over three quarters (75%) were in Extended Society Care across the province in 2018 are aged 10 or older.

The concept of permanence is a practice approach used to help guide child welfare workers when making decisions about the future of a child and his or her relationship with their family. Permanence is defined in the PRIDE³ training manual as “a child or youth’s connection to stable and nurturing family relationships intended to last a lifetime” (Child Welfare League of America, 2010). This manual is provided to prospective adoptive and foster parents in conjunction with training that is meant to prepare them to provide care to children. Permanency is a multi-dimensional construct that includes: the experience of having at least one positive, trusting and nurturing relationship with a significant person that is intended to last indefinitely; having a safe and stable living arrangement; having a legal arrangement to ensure stability; and having a sense of belonging (Jacob & Freundlich, 2006, Samuels, 2009). Many people assume that foster care can provide a permanent care plan for children. Research has shown that foster care experiences may not provide children with a sense of permanence. For example, children who live in foster care frequently miss out on “typical” childhood experiences like school trips and sleepovers with friends because of agency policies and bureaucracies (Pickin et al., 2011). Moreover, children in

³ PRIDE is the acronym for the Training Curriculum used in Ontario to prepare adoptive and foster parents, prior to their approval. It is a mandatory training program. PRIDE stands for Parenting Resource for Information, Development and Education.

foster care generally have less academic success than their counterparts who are adopted (Selwyn & Quinton, 2004). Tragically it has been shown that foster care does not usually provide a permanent placement for children (Leathers et al., 2012, Quinton & Selwyn, 2009; Samuels, 2009). In Ontario, according to the Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) provincial report for 2018, it was reported that children in foster care have experienced 3.25 changes in caregivers, on average. Meaning that on average foster children have had at least three changes in caregiver (parent to foster caregiver – foster parent 2, foster parent 2-foster parent (Miller, 2019). Therefore, permanency is more than placement; it recognizes that children need consistent, predictable, and loving relationships, a sense of connectedness and belonging to families/communities, and a stable place which they call ‘home’ (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006). Older child adoptions are meant to provide permanency to those children who are in the extended society care who, in the past, would have grown up in foster care.

Research regarding permanency for those in extended society care is overwhelmingly supportive of implementing the most recent legislative changes (Boyle, 2017; Crea & Barth, 2009; Grotevant, Dunbar et al., 2000; Grotevant & Lo, 2017; McSherry & MacDonald, 2013; Neil, 2012; Office of the Provincial Advocate for Child and Youth, 2009; Pavao, 2005; del Pozo de Bolger et al., 2018; Selwyn & Quinton, 2004; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019; Wisso et al., 2019). Much of that research is based on the experiences of people who were removed from their family of origin when they were younger and not approaching adolescence (Crea & Barth, 2009; Neil, 2012; Wisso et al., 2019) or it is based on the negative experiences of those who grew up “in care” and did not have the benefits of a strong family support system because of this experience (O'Brien, 2008; Office of the Provincial Advocate for Child and Youth, 2009). Since placing children who are over 6 years old, for adoption is a newer area of practice we must

understand the ways that these children and youth conceptualize their relationships with their first and adoptive families, especially if we believe that adoption or permanent custody will address some of the negative impacts that historically has occurred for those who grew up as wards of the crown.

There is considerable research evidence indicating that children who are adopted generally experience greater success in their adult lives than their counterparts who remain in foster care (Gleitman & Savaya, 2011; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Palacios J., et al., 2019; Quinton & Selwyn, 2009; Selwyn & Quinton, 2004). This leads many to the conclusion that children do best when they belong to a permanent family (i.e., adoptive family) and the state is no longer their guardian. This is a central notion that is guiding how permanency should be achieved by child welfare services in Ontario (Ontario, Ministry of Children and Community Social Services, 2016). It may be that adoption leads to better outcomes than remaining in foster care, however, many times adoption is the beginning of a challenging new chapter for children, first families and adoptive families and the respective extended family members (DeJong et al., 2016; LeMare et al., 2007; Macdonald & McSherry, 2011; Moyer & Goldberg, 2017). Children who are adopted, and their families, face challenges that are unique to the experience of adoption.

Adoptive Parents

Adoptive parents must learn to be a parent to their newly acquired family member. All members of the adoptive family will need to adjust and accommodate the new child(ren)'s personality and idiosyncrasies. (Clark et al., 2006; Greenhow et al., 2017; McKay & Ross, 2010; Wisso et al. 2019). Some adoptive parents will be parenting for the first time, which means they are making the role transition into parenthood. They will need to learn about the child's habits and behaviours, including the ways they have learned to cope with living in the foster care

system and the effects of the abuse and neglect they may have experienced. Then the adoptive parent will also need to accommodate ongoing contact with some first family members.

Sometimes that contact will include visits with multiple family members and that itself can be difficult to incorporate into family life just from the logistical perspective (Boyle, 2017; Crea & Barth, 2009; Faulkner & Madden, 2012; Greenhow et al., 2017; Grotevant & Lo, 2017).

Sometimes contact is expected, while other times it is unplanned (Greenhow et al. 2017; McSherry & MacDonald, 2013).

Adoptive family members must adjust for the family to function appropriately (Barth & Miller, 2000; Boyle, 2017; Clark et al., 2006; Leathers et al., 2012; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). One challenge that is commonly experienced is that many adoptive parents choose adoption due to infertility so their experience of parenting before the adoption is often limited. Consequently, parents are managing challenging behaviours in children while still adjusting to their new role as parents. It is very common for parents to experience what has been termed “post-adoption blues” (Mott et al., 2011). Adoptive families must learn to address their child’s attachment patterns and behavioural challenges (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993; Gleitman & Savaya, 2011; Leathers et al., 2012; Riggs, 2010). It is not an easy task for parents to support their child who is trying to make sense of how they are part of two families and, perhaps, why they were mistreated.

Since several challenges have been identified in the research it is an interesting phenomenon that many times adoptive families do not seek out support services for themselves (Dhami et al., 2007; McKay & Ross, 2011). Many researchers have started to look at potential barriers to service for adoptive families (Barth & Miller, 2000; McKay & Ross, 2011; Moyer & Goldberg, 2017; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Palacios, & Jiménez-Morago, 2019; del Pozo de Bolger,

2018; Ryan et al., 2009). It seems that there is a mixture of causes related to this apparent under-use of services. Some reasons identified are lack of knowledge that such help exists; parents cannot afford services; parents fear of intervention from child welfare services or that the services are not adequate to address the needs of the family.

First Families

First family members must adjust as now a member of their family has become part of another family. Grief is a central experience in the life of first families, often referred to as disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief is a term used to describe the experience of grief when it is difficult, and perhaps shameful, to discuss the situation (Faulkner & Madden, 2012; Grotevant & McCoy, 2019; Harris, et al., 2019; O'Neill, et al., 2016). Traditionally first parents were advised to get on with their lives and eventually they will forget. Research has shown that this is often impossible for first family members to do and even when the experience has left consciousness, subconsciously there are often ongoing difficulties with loss, grief, identity, guilt & shame, intimacy, and mastery/control. If the loss and grief are not addressed, it can make ongoing contact with the child and their new family extremely troublesome. It has been shown that openness and contact can assist first parents in a more productive resolution of their grief (Wiley & Baden, 2005). For families that lose children involuntarily, there can be ongoing difficulties with shame and stigma that make the grieving process incredibly difficult (Jones, 2004). Often, parents reenact the loss repeatedly, losing several children to the child welfare system.

Children

Children who are adopted must learn to cope with the changes to their home and family (Brodzinsky et al. 1993; Gleitman & Savaya, 2011; Grotevant, Dunbar et al., 2000; Quinton &

Selwyn, 2009). The adoption placement of older children presents many challenges; presumably older children have had more negative life experiences that could impact their brain development, their internal working model and their ability to trust adults and form new attachments (Brodzinsky et al. 1993; Clark, et al. 2006; Gleitman & Savaya, 2011; Greenhow et al., 2017; Hughes, 1999; Pavao, 2005). Children and youth who have experienced foster care and adoption experience significant grief responses that require supportive and attuned caregivers (Hughes, 2009; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019).

A challenging transition can occur for adopted children during adolescence. Developmentally we have learned that the adolescent's task is to separate from his or her parents and forge a unique identity. It is often a time when adopted people have difficulty understanding where they fit in the world and it can become extremely complicated when there is very little information available about the child's first family (Grotevant, Dunbar, et al., 2000; Pavao, 2005; Shuker, et al., 2019).

Lastly, with older children, there is more burden on the child to willingly participate in the bonding process that will lead to the creation of a new family. A sense of divided loyalty can emerge, where the child feels they cannot love all parents (Samuels, 2009). This can create an inner conflict in the child that can be the source of behavioural difficulties. It can also create an identity crisis for the child. (Lifton, 1994; Paniagua et al. 2019; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019). Older child adoption is an area of new practice in the field of child welfare in Ontario and it is important to understand how this shift may affect adoptive families and the children who join these families (McKay & Ross, 2011; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Wilson, 2004).

Children who are subject to an access order may be placed for adoption while still maintaining contact with significant first family members (McKay & Ross, 2011). This field of

practice is still developing, and it is not clearly understood how this will impact the child or on the family dynamics, particularly for children who are older (Clark, et al., 2006; Kim & Tucker, 2020). Most adoption practices are based on research that has been collected from adoptions where the child was younger, often before two years of age, or the research has not made distinctions between the age at which subjects were placed for adoption (Clark, et al., 2006; McKay & Ross, 2011; Greenhow, et al., 2017; Wilson, 2004). Practices are being modified to address the unique challenges of older child adoptions however there is relatively little information available to indicate that these practices are helpful or effective for the children whose lives are being impacted upon.

Openness

The literature does include research that has focused on the impact of openness between first and adoptive families (Boyle, 2017; Greenhow, et al., 2017; Macdonald & McSherry, 2011; Siegel, 2012). While open adoption is not an entirely new concept, it is only in the last 15 years that the child welfare field has begun to examine the role of first family contact in the context of adoptions from foster care (Clark, et al., 2006; Faulkner & Madden, 2012; McKay & Ross, 2011; Wisso, et al., 2019). Research indicates that openness arrangements often are fluid; the frequency and type of contact that occurs can vary depending on the needs of the child, adoptive family and first parents (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; del Pozo de Bolger, 2018; Siegel, 2003). There appears to be a growing consensus that openness can be a positive experience for the child to assist the child in formatting a healthy self-concept and to ease a child's sense of loss (Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharme, 2019; Faulkner & Madden, 2012; Pavao, 2005; Waggenspack, 1998). It has been identified that more research is required to examine the role of first family contact in

the context of foster care adoptions (Clark, et al., 2006; Faulkner & Madden, 2012; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010).

Motherhood and parenthood are social identities that are called into question when a person takes on a parenting role in a non-traditional way. Veronica Strong-Boag contends that ideas of the ideal family and good parents are the basis that justifies adoption (Solinger, 1992; Strong-Boag, 2006a). The focus on mothering has been a primary focus of child welfare from its inception (Chambers, 2016; Freeark et al., 2005). When an ideal family or parent is established as the “norm” then there is a standard by which other families and parents can be judged. Mother is depicted as someone who has a boundless ability to love, who unselfishly puts her child’s needs ahead of her own (Strong-Boag, 2006b). What are the archetypal mothers we can draw upon when we look at adoption? A friend of mine, who happens to be a first mother, once said to me, “I couldn’t even see my baby after she was born because she was going to live with the “perfect people”. First parents were deemed unacceptable, adoptive parents were the heroes who would rescue a child. Thomas Graham (2012) echoed these sentiments during his address to the University of the Third Age, Hughes Community Centre, 17 July 2012 when he said

Babies were taken away and they were told to forget about their experience, forget their child and get on with their lives. The fathers, in the majority of cases, disappeared, became invisible. The babies were given new identities, new families, and absorbed into society, without a second thought given to losing their mother, their identity or their heritage.

Wiley and Baden conclude that when a child is placed for adoption the experience is traumatic for the first parents (2005) and suggest that research should pay greater attention to how adoption impacts first mothers.

Self-concept and the Adopted Person

Intimate family relationships have a significant impact on the self-concept and self-image of the adoptee (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Brodzinsky et al. 1992; Erikson, 1968; Grotevant, Dunbar, et al. 2000; Silverstein & Kaplan, 1988). Anecdotally, I have observed in my practice that there seems to be subtle differences in adoption when a child has a conscious memory of a first parent and a significant connection to them. Adoptees without conscious memories of a first parent tend to create fantasies about their first parents, more so than those who have memories (Wilson, 2004; Pavao, 2005). Even with access to memories, children may harbour fantasies that their first parents will be well enough to resume caring for them. Identity studies have generally focused on those adopted when they were very young and have no conscious memory of their first family or their early life experience (Gebyehu, 2008; Gleitman & Savaya, 2011; Grotevant, Dunbar, et al., 2000; Koskinen & Böök, 2019). There is scant information about the child's own experience of joining a new family by adoption at an age when they have conscious memories (Macdonald & McSherry, 2011; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Wilson, 2004). This research will attempt to address this gap.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The Research Question

The goal of this study is to learn about the experience of navigating relationships with first family members and adoptive family members for individuals who were adopted at age six years or older. I am trying to understand how the adoptees experience relationships with first family members and adoptive family members and how that experience contributes to self-concept clarity. This study occurs at a moment in history when Ontario's policies have begun to explore the importance of openness in adoption practices. This study also occurs amid my personal journey to bring openness to my adoption experience.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm which posits that reality is constructed intersubjectively, through meanings assigned to experiences by the individual experience and are influenced by a broader cultural context (Cresswell, 2007; Kraus 2019). The interpretivist paradigm presupposes that knowledge is context-based and time-dependent; it recognizes that for everyone an experience and the way we view it evolves and changes over time (van der Walt, 2020). Interpretivist-constructivist research relies on deep investigation into the hidden meanings of experiences. While the researcher analyzes the data, readers are also invited to draw their conclusions, since the interpretation of the data will depend on the individual's perception (van der Walt 2020).

There is a range of societal constructions about adoption in Western culture. One of the most well-known and earliest adoption stories is from the Old Testament of the Bible where the infant Moses, an Israelite, is hidden in a basket in the bullrushes. He is discovered and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter who must keep the child's identity and ethnicity a secret to protect him.

Sometimes, as Gupta and Featherstone (2019) highlight, the adoption story focuses on the idea that in adoption there is a “new hope” for a child to start again; as in *Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope*. Adopted children are often told they are the lucky ones who were chosen. In other instances, there is a sinister nature associated with adoption, for instance, the idea that adopted children will grow into violent or anti-social humans.

In western culture, the nuclear family remains a cherished constellation, replete with a spouse, a house and two children (Chambers, 2016; Strong-Boag, 2006a). According to the Canadian census for 2016, 16.3% of families with children were lone-parent families and 17.7% were common-law (Statistics Canada, 2016). While the family structure is changing in Canada, the nuclear family continues to present as the ideal structure, and it provides a template for assessing and understanding adoption. The interpretivist-constructivist paradigm directs us to focus on these conceptualizations and their implications.

This paradigm helps us to recognize how problems are often viewed and presented through the lens of privilege belonging to those who hold the most influence in society. Kraus, (2019) reminds us that this is not a neutral lens. Since children have not held much power, their stories about adoption are likely to be laden with dominant narratives from more privileged adults. Therefore, information, or misinformation, about adoption is often derived from stories and through media coverage. (Connell, 2012; Graham, 2012; Gupta & Featherstone, 2019; Miall & March, 2005; Waggenspack, 1998). Everyone who experiences adoption is impacted by these stories; the social workers who plan for children, the adoptive parents who take on the care for them, the first parents who lose custody and even the young people who live the experience. A constructivist-interpretivist lens can help us develop a new, more inclusive understanding of adoption. It was my intention to focus on the voice of the adopted person, representing their

recollections of adoption as children and their relationships with first family members and thus shine a light on their voices and experiences as well as reflect on the ways in which they coincide with dominant constructions (or not). Everyone who experiences adoption is impacted by these stories; the social workers who plan for children, the adoptive parents who take on the care for them, the first parents who lose custody and even the young people who live the experience. These archetypal stories of adoption have implications for how we understand adoptive families and adoptive parenthood. A constructivist-interpretivist lens can help us develop a new, more inclusive understanding of adoption and the impact of having contact with both sides of the child's connections.

This study is a narrative inquiry of participants' relational experiences with adoptive and first family members and their self-concept. A narrative inquiry uses methods designed to capture the nuanced thoughts and feelings about relationships experienced by the participant, including the relationship with the researcher (Etherington 2013). With that perspective in mind, firstly we understand that each research participant is influenced by and understands themselves in accordance with their relationship experiences; in this case their first and adoptive family relationships. Secondly, this study is shaped by my values and beliefs that stem from my adoption experiences. Thirdly, the interplay between myself and the participant influences every phase of this research. Narrative enquiries are designed to generate rich details of personal lived experiences and provide us with constructions of self-concept from people whose voices are often unheard (Etherington 2013; Larsson, 2019). This study will examine openness to articulate information about this experience grounded in the perspective of those that openness is meant to benefit, the adoptee (Larsson 2019). Little is known about the experience of open adoption for children who were older when adopted.

The reality is that adoption directly impacts a small number of people. Information, or misinformation, about adoption is often derived from stories and through media coverage (Connell, 2005; Graham, 2012; Gupta & Featherstone, 2019; Miall & March 2005; Waggenspack, 1998). Many depictions of adoption are one-dimensional rendering adoptees either grateful for their fresh start, angry or potentially anti-social because of being rescued from their tenuous circumstances. These depictions do not reflect the complex experience of having membership in more than one family, the losses and gains that come with this membership and the internal conflicts that may arise and complicate self-concept formation (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Brodzinsky, Koskinen & Böök, 2019; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019; Schachter & Ventura, 2008; Wojciak, 2017; Schechter, & Henig, 1992).

Self-concept and self-concept clarity are important constructs for this study. I define self-concept broadly to describe the representations we hold about ourselves regarding our unique traits, relationships and social group memberships (Sim et al., 2014). Kranstuber et al. (2012) suggest that we create self-concept through social interactions and it is dependent on how others perceive us and their reflections back to us. Reflections from our caregivers are of primary importance in developing self-concept as are broader societal narratives (i.e. about adoptees) and cultural values (Etherington 2013; Wells, 2011). Self-concept shapes the nature of our interactions and how we assign meaning to them (Grotevant, 1997, Sim et al. 2014). Self-concept clarity is a term used to describe the degree to which a person has a consistent sense of their strengths, abilities and characteristics and the value they place on them in relation to the larger society (Na et al., 2018).

Larsson (2019) suggests that narrative analysis can convey meaning about the teller and their self-concept and about the social context of which the teller is part. In narrative analysis, we can

find complex patterns and descriptions of self-concept construction to create new knowledge about an experience or dynamic that is occurring at a certain point in time (Etherington 2013). A narrative method for this study will guide us toward a detailed and nuanced understanding of how adoptees make sense of their relationships with first and adoptive family members and how this contributes to their self-concept clarity (Etherington 2013).

This narrative inquiry relies on image-elicitation. The decision to have participants use words and images arose from the desire to find a way to move into a deeper understanding of participant relationships and their constructions of adoption, family and self-concept (Harrison, 2002; Prins, 2010). In the research process, images were used as a tool to assist participants to express their thoughts and feelings about their relationships and their identities (Barman-Adhikari, et al., 2019; Findholt, et al., 2010; Leung et al., 2015). Additionally, participants of this study are vulnerable; their childhood experiences may include maltreatment, as well as a significant loss. Brunsden & Goatcher (2007) suggest that the use of images is well-suited for populations that are vulnerable and/or when discussing sensitive topics. Combining narrative inquiry with image-elicitation also created more options for participants to represent their stories in ways meaningful to them.

Narrative inquiry combined with image-elicitation is a method designed to empower the participant to represent their story in a way that is meaningful to them, describe that meaning and deepen their reflections. Participants of this study are vulnerable; their childhood experiences may include maltreatment, as well as a significant loss. Brunsden & Goatcher (2007) suggest that the use of images is well-suited for populations that are vulnerable and/or when discussing sensitive topics. Combining narrative with images is a method that provides participants with a great amount of control over the information that is gathered and the way it is being presented

(Wang & Burris, 1997). While attitudes are changing, the legacy of the older discourses surrounding adoption are powerful and remain as an influence regarding how people talk about and view adoption (Gupta & Featherstone, 2019). This study explored retrospective perspectives of openness using a combination of images and narrative inquiry. Study participants created images that reflect the question “*what it is like to be in the relationship with ... (insert the first or adoptive family relationship)?*” Through the emotional power of telling their story, narrative analysis generated new knowledge beyond the typical adoption discourses which are fraught with myths (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993; Connell, 2012, Etherington 2013; Graham 2012; Lifton 2009; Waggenspack 1998).

In addition to the misinformation that circulates about adoption in broader society, historically, adoption has been shrouded in silence. Silence combined with misconception can produce situations where adoptees may not necessarily have the language to express their circumstances. It was considered taboo to discuss the loss and grief that is associated with adoption, it contradicts the discourse of the grateful adoptee. Images can stand in the place of words when words seem impossible to find or say. Images can be comforting. Additionally, images may appeal to the creative tendencies of participants. I hope that the adage “a picture tells a thousand words” will ring true in this study.

Participants used images to guide the discussion of family relationships. Participants identified who they defined as being part of their family. Then, they created or located images that reminded them of each relationship. Harrison (2002) cautions that the meaning behind the image may not be universally understood and for that reason, participants will be asked to provide their explanations of the images they choose to capture and share. I re-presented the

images and accompanying descriptions in the thesis, as they were presented to me as much as possible.

Sample Recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy for this methodology is recommended in the literature (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Engel & Schutt, 2013; Starks & Trinidad, 2007) and was implemented in this study. Trust-building is an essential component of the narrative interview process (Engel & Schutt, 2013). Brunsden & Goatcher (2007) contend that when using narrative inquiry, building trust is implicit in the process and will aid in empowering participants and providing opportunities for them to communicate their experiences. For this study, I relied on an established network of relationships among professionals within the adoption community based on my 20 years of working as an adoption worker and family therapist. Through my professional network, I requested assistance to find participants. I provided flyers to several colleagues that they could distribute (Appendix E). I also advertised my study at my counselling office by leaving flyers in the waiting area. Thirdly, I posted my research interest on a Facebook page and I created an advertisement on Facebook, to reach out to as many participants as possible. Participants were selected based on the age they were when they were adopted and their willingness to share their experiences in relationships with their adoptive family and first family in an interview setting. I met with participants in settings that were mutually comfortable and private. Minimally, interviews were completed in two meetings, however, some participants preferred to meet on more than one occasion in accordance with the depth of discussion.

It was much more difficult finding people willing to participate than I had anticipated although my colleagues were supportive of this endeavour. Some people who experienced foster

care and adoption were reluctant to discuss this topic. In speaking with one young adult who met my initial criteria she said, “I try not to dwell on those negative experiences and thinking about my first family often brings up those feelings”. Another surprising aspect of finding participants was that I had not expected that adoptive parents would be enthusiastic about the study. Many adoptive parents contacted me to learn more about my research and were more enthusiastic about the study than their adopted child. Although the legislation and practices of CASs have expanded to include the pursuit of older child placements and adoptions, the actual number of adoptions of children over the age of six at the time of placement remains, I believe, quite small. In 2016-17 in Ontario there was a total of only 767 adoptions finalized (OACAS, 2018). I was not able to locate age-specific data.

Eventually, I did find four women who agreed to participate in this study. All four women were born in Ontario and were placed for adoption when they were over the age of six years. Three of the four women are under 30 at the time of their interview. One woman was 65 years old. Three of four of the women identify as white, one identifies as black. Growing up, they had ongoing contact with some siblings; two had secret contact with their first mother. One had ongoing contact with their maternal grandparents and extended family members. Of the participants, two lived with their adoptive parents at the time of the interview, one lived with her first mother and the other lived independently.

Procedures

I screened seven individuals who were at least 16 years old and had been adopted after the age of 6 years old. Four of the seven screened people chose to participate in the study. The study procedures were as follows:

1. I met with each individual to discuss the aims of the study and to answer questions.
Participants were assured that their identity would remain confidential.
2. During the first meeting, we discussed ethics about the use of images, as per recommendations found in the literature (see Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001; Brunsden & Goatcher, 2007; Pickin, et al., 2011; Wilson, et al., 2007). For example, participants were advised to gain the consent of any individual whom they wished to photograph. Other photography guidelines about the privacy of individuals and the safety of participants. (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001) were reviewed. It was made clear to prospective participants that images would only be included in the final output of the study if there was explicit consent to publish the image by the participant. The interview followed the outline found in Appendix D.
3. After these cautions, if the prospective participant wanted to participate, we reviewed the contents of the consent form. They were invited to ask more questions and once satisfied, to sign the consent form (see Appendix C). All participants consented to the audio recording of the individual interviews.
4. Participants were offered a digital camera. One person accepted a digital camera, while the others decided to use their own devices. Participants were instructed to capture images that describe “*what it is like for them to be in a relationship with _____ (Adoptive parent, first parent, adoptive sibling, cousin or any other significant family member)?*” Two people provided original digital images while one person chose to use memes to represent her relationships. The final participant chose to review relationships by going through personal photo albums.

5. Open-ended questions were used to elicit participant experiences and the meanings they attribute to having relationships with members of their first family and their adoptive family (Creswell, 2013). Interviews followed a general outline and were free-flowing to allow participants to provide the information that appears to be relevant to most relevant to them (Engel & Schutt, 2013). As an interviewer it was important to pay close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues, using the outline to ensure that my areas of interest were explored. As the interviewer, I made notes during the interview. Additionally, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Ethical Considerations

People were invited to share their deeply personal stories as is consistent with narrative research. They were provided with a written statement outlining the intentions of the study. Interviews were recorded via a digital recording device and then transcribed. Once the interviews were transcribed each interview was analyzed to capture the story arc and dominant themes. All data, recordings and transcriptions, are in a locked filing cabinet or stored on a password-protected hard drive.

Participants were provided ongoing check-ins about their comfort with participating in the study as there is considerable power and authority attached to the role of a child welfare employee, or a former employee (McKay & Ross, 2011). Reassurances about the voluntary nature of the study were included in the check-in process. To minimize the risk of perceived reprisal for refusing to participate, it was important that participants' adoptions were already finalized and their official relationship with the child welfare agency had ended.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed each interview was analyzed to capture the overall story presented in the interview, the story arc. The story and explanation of the images reveal how the participant views themselves and how they want others to see them. Relevant portions of participant stories are re-presented alongside the images that have been shared. The story plot that is presented is a representation of who the person is at a particular point in time (Etherington, 2013). I then reviewed each interview to highlight the portions that described relationships and self-concept. Emphasis was placed on how each participant sees themselves and how they tell the story for their audience (i.e. a white, middle-aged, social work student seeking insight into their experience, who is also an adoptee with her own experiences and reactions to their story which might be similar, or different, from theirs (Etherington 2013; Wells 2011). As well as discerning the story arc, I identified portions of each interview that shed light on sub-plots or themes relevant to relationships and self-concept (Wells 2011). Following the analysis of each individual interview, I reviewed the four together to draw on salient themes and presented them in a separate chapter.

When conducting narrative analysis, the researcher themselves becomes a subject of inquiry. The emphasis [in narrative research] is on co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants. While being involved in/ listening to/reading the conversations, researchers take in what is being said and compare it with their personal understandings, without filling in any gaps in understanding with 'grand narratives, but rather inquiring about how pieces of the stories make sense together. (Etherington 2013). It was important for me to continue to be aware of how my personal beliefs and experiences were activated as I interviewed participants (Padgett, 2008; Larsson, 2019). My connection to adoption is personal and professional; therefore, I have my own experiences that will influence

my interpretation of the data. I kept a reflexive journal to name and incorporate my perspectives into this project. Throughout the research, I made my experiences and biases explicit, reflecting on the similarities and differences between my personal experiences and those of the participants (Tufford & Newman, 2010). In the following chapter, I provide descriptions of participants' experiences and my views, experiences, and interpretations. My hope in weaving these perspectives together is that the reader will have a richer understanding of the complexities of open adoption.

Chapter 4: Telling Their Stories

Cheryl, The Nightstand and the Quilt

The first interview with Cheryl occurred in my office. She contacted me after her adoptive mother heard about my study and urged her participation. Cheryl arrived at my office dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt. She wore a baseball cap. Cheryl thought it would be a good experience to participate in this research because she believed that CAS workers needed to understand what it was like to be adopted and to have lived in foster care. She said she found the whole experience confusing and hoped that if she talked about her story, it could help other kids who got adopted after her. Cheryl said her adoptive mother thought it would be a good idea too. Cheryl declined to use the disposable digital camera I had available for her and chose to use her cell phone camera instead. Cheryl, now 19 years old, identified that she had been adopted by a single woman, when she was six years old and has lived with her as an only child since then, except for the months she spent living with her first mother. Cheryl maintained relationships with a couple of siblings and her first mother. Her brother is much older than her and her sister is a couple of years younger than her. The younger sister resides in foster care. Cheryl has never lived with any of her siblings and reported that she a few more whom she had never met. We arranged to meet again a few weeks later.

During her second visit, Cheryl arrived at my office in the company of another young woman who stayed in the reception area while we spoke privately in my office. Cheryl's mood was visibly low when she entered my office; she had a sad expression on her face, she spoke quietly; the optimistic attitude that I observed during our first visit was absent. Cheryl said that her friend was her girlfriend. She did not explain to her girlfriend what she was doing at my office and only told her that she was doing a "social work thing" and she "wasn't even too sure that she

had to do”. Cheryl said that when she agreed to participate in this study, she had not expected that it would be so difficult. Cheryl said it was difficult to think about which images she would attribute to each relationship. She added that before she agreed to participate in this study she hadn’t spent much time thinking about her family situation. Cheryl expressed concern that she did not create the images I had asked for. I reassured Cheryl she could share what she wanted to share and that if she just wanted to talk about her experiences and relationship, it was acceptable. I also advised her that she could decline the interview altogether if she wanted. Cheryl responded by saying she wanted to go ahead with the interview because she thought it was important to help other kids who might get adopted.

Cheryl showed me one digital photograph that was taken on her cell phone. The digital image was that of a night table that had a powdery substance on it. There was an alarm clock, a jar of honey and other objects in the background. Cheryl told me that she took it at her first mother’s home and it is the best representation of her first mother that she could think of. Cheryl explained that her first mother has a drug problem and it creates a lot of problems in her first mother’s life and their relationship. Cheryl said that even though her mother is actively misusing drugs she keeps in touch with her because she cares about her well-being and worries about her. Cheryl said she realizes it is probably not a healthy decision, to stay in contact, but she does it, nonetheless. She said she felt “powerless” to stop seeing her.

Cheryl sought out her first mother online when she was entering grade 9, in secret. She began having contact with her through messaging, and later, they visited in person. She did all this without the knowledge of her adoptive mom because she feared her adoptive mom would discourage contact. Cheryl said it was difficult to keep that secret and she desperately wanted to see if her mother was alright. She hoped her mother would “be better” and they could resume a

mother-daughter relationship. This secret relationship negatively impacted her school performance and her relationship with her adoptive mother. She eventually quit school. As their reunion intensified, Cheryl left her adoptive home to live with her first mother.

Cheryl enjoyed living with her first mother at the beginning. She said it was fun to party with her mother and she enjoyed getting to know her and her friends. But after a while, she wanted a “normal” life. She missed her adoptive home and her adoptive mother. She missed the predictability and stability that her adoptive home provided to her. Cheryl did stay in contact with her adoptive mother, even when she left. Eventually, Cheryl realized that her first mother was not ready to stop using drugs and alcohol. In retrospect, Cheryl recognizes that the secrecy harmed her because she went behind her adoptive mother’s back to reach out to her first mother. Cheryl felt guilty that she lied to her adoptive mother. Cheryl felt that her adoptive mother is quite loyal and she appreciated that her adoptive mother took her back even after Cheryl hurt her.

Cheryl said her experiences of living with a drug addict, being in foster care and getting adopted have made it difficult for her to trust people. She expects that people will disappoint her as her first mom and others did. She added that she doesn’t share much personal information with others to shield herself from being hurt, judged or abandoned. She remarked that she expects that her girlfriend, in reference to the young woman in the waiting room, will leave her soon. She said she cannot explain why she felt that way, only that “it just seems to happen” to her.

Cheryl stated that she had a relationship with one brother from her first family, who is now an adult. He is one of many siblings, however, Cheryl has never met the brother and sister that were born before him. She identified that he is her closest sibling relationship. He is about 10 years older than her, married and has a child. She speaks and texts with him regularly. She

indicated that he lives in Ontario, but in another city, not too far from her. Cheryl described her relationship with her younger sister as “not close”. Cheryl believes her sister is involved in drugs and alcohol and she added that she frequently runs away from her foster home. Cheryl said that her sister had been placed for adoption with a different adoptive family before Cheryl was adopted. Cheryl’s sister returned to foster care because the adoption didn’t work out. Cheryl is worried that if she had more contact with this sister, it might encourage her to return to the kind of lifestyle she is trying to stay away from. Cheryl said she truly wants to live a “positive” lifestyle and so she keeps her distance from her sister, for now, and hopes her sister will get better as she matures.

Cheryl indicated that when she was first adopted, she had close relationships with many in her adoptive family but that seemed to fall apart when she was 10 years old. Cheryl explained that there were a series of events, connected to the death of her favourite aunt in her adoptive family. Cheryl explained it was difficult for her when this aunt became terminally ill. She said she was distressed and wasn’t sure how to express her feelings of loss, fear and sadness. Cheryl said that she took some items belonging to her aunt and she meant to return them. Other family members became aware that she took these items and she was accused of stealing by her uncle (the aunt’s husband) and cousin (the aunt’s child). Cheryl said it was a terrible conflict and since then their relationship has never been the same. Cheryl felt quite hurt that they would accuse her of theft and she was confused that they could not understand why it might have been so difficult for her to cope. Cheryl was confused by her actions. Cheryl did not create an image to represent photos of her relationship with her cousin, aunt or uncle.

Cheryl said she has a strong connection to her adoptive mom and that the only person she trusts is her adoptive mom. Although she did not create an image to represent her adoptive

mother, a quilt would be a good choice. Cheryl believes that is a good representation of her adoptive mother because she gave her a home. Cheryl added that her adoptive mother was trustworthy because she stood by her, even when the other family members were angry with her. More recently, she supported her even when Cheryl ran away to live with her first mother.

Cheryl then returned to talking about her first mother. She said that she thought her mother with be “be better” if they lived together. I understood this to mean that she thought that her first mother would be able to stop using drugs if they lived together. Cheryl was quite sad and frustrated that she couldn’t help her mother. She believes her mother’s addictive behaviour interferes with their relationship. Cheryl said that her mother is unreliable and sometimes makes unsafe decisions. Cheryl felt powerless to change how the drugs overshadow their relationship. Cheryl wished they could have a close relationship and her first mother could behave more responsibly, like her adoptive mom.

Despite that difficulty she has experienced with her first mother, Cheryl believed that other kids should have the chance to have contact with their first family members, with professional support available, so everyone can sort out their feelings. She added it is important for children in foster care to remain in contact with their siblings. Cheryl said, “kids should stay in touch with their siblings no matter where they are”. I advised her that new laws now make that possible. Cheryl thought that was a positive approach and added that “families will need help with this (openness) and they will need support from CAS”. Cheryl reflected on her outreach to her first mother and said there were “too many emotions” to manage and she tried to do it on her own. Cheryl felt that she and her adoptive mom would have benefitted from support from a professional that could help her, and her adoptive mother have conversations about her worries about her first mother or other members of her original family. When Cheryl started feeling the

desire to see and talk with her first mom, she did it in secret because she couldn't talk about it, she feared that her adoptive mother would be hurt. Cheryl hopes that CAS will provide more support to kids and families to allow for more openness.

Cheryl told me she had just started a new job and she found it difficult to balance its demands with the emotional demands of creating the images for her significant family members. She apologized for not providing more images and agreed to send me a copy of her picture. I did reach out to her a week later to offer support and left her a message. Cheryl did not call me back.

Discussion

The narrative arc of Cheryl's account is 'the struggle to stay on the right path.' Her core narrative of trying to stay on the right path implies that she must maintain vigilance, it will not come easy for her because of her first family history. Cheryl's self-concept is shaped, in part, by the comparisons she makes between her adoptive and first mother and how she embodies their values.

Cheryl started positively and then veered off the path when she fell from grace, as she describes it, with her adoptive family at the time of her aunt's death. Cheryl expressed confusion over the whole incident "I accidentally took something that belonged to my aunt. I was going to return it. They accused me of stealing. There was a big fight about it and I haven't talked with them since." Incidentally, as a fellow adoptee, I can relate to how grief can trigger an overwhelming and confusing sense of loss. When I was 16 years old my favourite aunt died. I loved her very much and the sadness and guilt hit me hard. It hit the whole family hard, she left behind young adult children and a husband. As the family struggled with the dynamics of grief, I felt responsible for their feelings, even though there was no rational explanation for this. I

wondered about the confusion Cheryl added “my adoptive mom didn’t give up on me though”, despite the reactions of her adoptive extended family. Cheryl identified that her adoptive mother is the reason she is doing well, learning to be a “good” and keeping the “bad” parts of herself at bay.

At a later point, she has perhaps a more intense struggle to stay on the ‘right’ path, leaving her adoptive home to live with her first mother. The longing to protect and change her first mother cannot be realized, despite her willingness to veer from the ‘right’ path, in an attempt to fix her first mother. She remains in contact with her first mother, powerless to sever the connection, needing to know that she is alright and hoping she will commit to recovery.

Although I was not trying to fix my first mother, I spent many years in my teens and twenties, trying to change the people I thought I loved. When they did not change, those experiences reinforced my low self-worth and the belief that I was not deserving of love. Cheryl’s account of her longing to fix her mother reminded me of those experiences and feelings. Eventually, Cheryl returns to the ‘right’ path and the home of her adoptive mother who seems to love her unconditionally.

The unconditional love Cheryl has experienced with her adoptive mother is reinforced in the image of the quilt. Quilts conjure up images of warmth, comfort and sanctuary- perhaps suitable images for the ‘right’ path. This image is in deep contrast to the image of the drug-laden nightstand, which conjures up images of coldness, danger and isolation. Throughout her narrative, Cheryl grapples with a struggle between a positive and a negative self-concept or, put another way, between the “good adoptee” and the “bad adoptee”. Cheryl depicts her adoptive mother as the “good mother” who is unconditionally supportive and loyal. Perhaps when Cheryl decided to leave her adoptive mother’s home, she felt that she was undeserving of that “quilt” of

nurturing. In terms of self-concept, Cheryl reported that she believes people, once they know her, will leave her. I resonated with her expectation that her girlfriend would leave; for me, I held a fear that when people discovered how flawed I was, they would ultimately leave me.

This points to a belief about herself that she may be undeserving of dependable, ongoing love.

Cheryl assumed some of her first mother's lifestyle: "I started to message her at first. Then we had some secret meetings. I couldn't stop myself from seeing her. I stopped going to school. Eventually, I just quit school and moved in with her." Once she does that, she realizes that the fantasy she held in her heart was not the same in real life and she now has more complete information on which to base her self-concept.

For adopted children, they have more than one set of parents to separate from to establish their self-concept. For some adoptees, information about first parents that is available is often focused on their failings that led to the child protection case. In Cheryl's narrative, the experience of her first mother's lifestyle seemed to be a turning point:

"It was fun at first, living and partying with my mom. But eventually, I wanted a normal life. I didn't enjoy it anymore...My adoptive mom kept in touch with me all along. Thank God, she did. It was hard but I asked if I could come back and she said yes...I know my [first] mom isn't in a good place. I worry about her though, so I have to stay in touch. I can't help it."

In having this experience, Cheryl could challenge any fantasies she held about her first mother's lifestyle and she could rest in assurances of her adoptive mother's loyalty. Cheryl said, "I really want to stay on track now that I am back home. I am lucky my adoptive mom stuck by me and I don't want to let her down."

Perhaps this experience helped her have a clearer self-concept.

Some of this is speculative as Cheryl is private and protective of her information. Relative to other participants, she offered few details of her story; she does not provide names. She offers only one image to represent her relationship with her first mother and this image does not leave her phone. She explained she has difficulty trusting people and that she expects that people will misinterpret her intentions. Interestingly, beneath Cheryl's belief that people cannot be trusted lays hope. She is hopeful that her first mother will improve her life circumstances. It is hope that motivates her to spend time with her first mother and she is also hopeful that her sister will mature. Cheryl is also hopeful that sharing her story will help others.

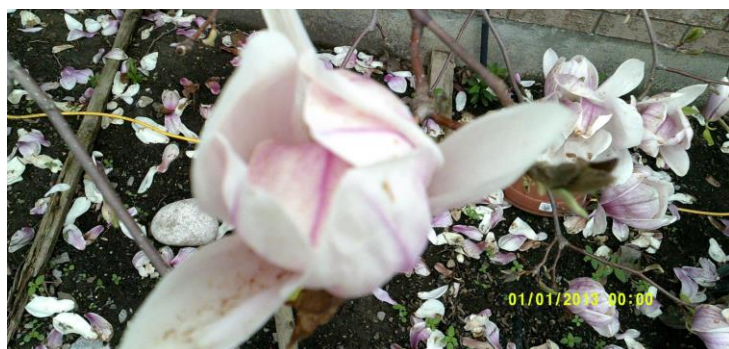
Kathy, The Untended Garden

Kathy was 17 years old when we met and was placed for adoption at six years old along with her brother who is two years her junior. In their first family, Kathy and her brother were part of a larger sibling group; other siblings were in their teens when she and her brother were born.

Kathy and her younger brother came into foster care when she was about three years old. They lived in one foster home before their adoption placement. Kathy added that her adoptive parents agreed to indirect contact with her first mother and older siblings by letter exchange that was to occur with the Children's Aid Society being the intermediary. Kathy's adoptive parents were particularly worried about her first father's criminal history. Kathy said she had some letters from her older sister that stated how important she (Kathy) was to them. Losing contact with her older siblings is a source of deep pain. Kathy created 8 images related to her first and adoptive family. She emailed them to me several months before our actual interview.

The first image Kathy provided was about her adoptive parents (Figure 1). Kathy described this flower as representative of how their relationship has been "opening up". Kathy stated that during her adolescence, the relationship between her and her adoptive parents had been "very difficult". Kathy was frustrated with her parents and there was a lot of arguing about limits and expectations, especially about school and social relationships. Kathy described a dynamic where

Figure 1 *"Opening up"*



they often argued about household rules and freedoms. Kathy wanted more freedom to socialize with her friends and to have a boyfriend. Her parents did not believe she was ready for that kind of freedom. In her view,

they were overly strict. Kathy also shared that her parents were making too big a deal over school attendance. Kathy would not skip classes if her parents would allow her to socialize with her friends outside of school. Kathy said that she was feeling frustrated with her parents' expectations of her although recently they had been talking more instead of arguing so life at home is calmer. Kathy went on to explain that if her parents are calmer, then she felt more prepared to ask them questions or for permission to go out with friends. Kathy said that now that they can communicate better, she felt happier and isn't so worried about what her parents might think of her or how they might react to her so she asks for permission instead of just taking off. Kathy said that if she is happier, then the family is happier too. She added that she doesn't do things to upset her parents as much because she can talk to them. Sometimes in the past, she would purposefully do things to upset her parents because she felt she couldn't directly tell them she was angry. Kathy is hopeful that this new way of relating to one another will continue.



Figure 2 *Best friend*

The second image Kathy shared was one of her dogs (Figure 2).

Kathy said this is her dog and she included him because he is her best friend. “Of all my family members I like him best. He is always

accepting of me and loves to play with me”. Kathy added that it was

good to have him around when she wasn’t getting along with her parents because during that time she was feeling alone. This dog helped her feel less alone. She noted that in this picture, the dog is looking up at her almost as if he is asking to be cuddled and loved. Kathy said that a dog makes her life happier and because of him it is full of more love.



Figure 3 “It can be easier to get love from an animal than a human”

Figure 4 Dog toys



The third image (Figure 3) is of the two dogs. Kathy said that one dog belongs to her and the other belongs to her mother. Kathy noticed that recently her mother’s dog has been more receptive to her. She said they now all play together in the backyard and she

enjoys this. Kathy wondered if her mother’s dog is responding to the fact that she has been home alone and she and her mother are getting along better. Kathy is home more and plays with both dogs more often. Kathy provided an additional picture related to the dogs (Figure 4).

Kathy believed that the family dogs have been important to her growing up. She liked having a companion and having someone to whom she could confide her thoughts and feelings. At times,

she has felt very alone in her adoptive family. Even though Kathy was placed for adoption with her younger brother and she felt very close to him, there were many times that she could not confide in him. Kathy thought that potential adoptive parents should consider having a family pet because “it can be easier to get love from an animal than a human”.

Kathy offered this image and said she felt like she and her brother were “rescued” just like the dogs in this commercial (Figure 5). She said this felt true when she remembered how badly she and her brother were treated in foster care. Kathy remembered that she and her brother were frequently disciplined by being sent to their room. Kathy recalled that she spent more time alone in her room than playing outside.

She was about 5 years old. She added that her brother was spanked for wetting the bed, even though he was 3 years old. She was not certain that this was an appropriate picture but to her, it seemed relevant, even



Figure 5 Kathy and her brother were rescued

though it wasn't about a relationship more about what she sometimes thinks about.



Figure 6 An untended garden

Kathy said this image (Figure 6) reminded her of her relationship with her older siblings. She said that she feels the relationship was neglected like this plant was. “It could have been beautiful but it’s barely alive because it hasn’t been paid attention to. The ground around the plant is hard and full of rocks. It is an untended garden”. Kathy had memories of her sisters and wondered what happened to them. Kathy said when she thinks about this, she feels sad and lonely. She did not include her younger brother in this group because he is with her. She wished she knew where they were and what they were doing. She thinks about them and has tried to find them on the internet without any luck. She wished the adults in her life had tended to that relationship and she thought it was up to her adoptive parents and the Children’s Aid Society to ensure that the plan for ongoing contact was one that would be successful. She characterized them as giving up too easily when her siblings and first mother stopped coming to pick up letters. So just like that plant in the image, she has managed to keep the connection alive, but it has not been able to grow into a healthy and thriving relationship. She asked CAS for more information but they do not have anything they can share with her. Kathy wished people had paid more attention and care in her relationship with her other siblings. She hoped in the future the adults would support these relationships better.



Figure 7 *"Is it a wildflower or a weed?"*

Kathy then turned her attention to her relationship with her first parents (Figure 7). She provided the image of a blurred wildflower because she doesn't know them. She heard only bad

things about them, especially her father. The picture she has of them in her mind is blurred.

Kathy shared that she sometimes has nightmares of her first father where he bursts into the room and smashes the furniture. She isn't sure if the nightmare is a memory or not; it frightens her.

She has this dream when she is feeling under stress, probably a few times a year. Kathy would like to know if this is a real memory. She wants to know more about them but is also worried about what she might learn as the image gets clearer.

This dynamic of wanting and not wanting to know the truth is a problem for Kathy because she finds that she thinks about her first parents a lot. Kathy believed this might be the reason she seems to daydream at school. Kathy thought it might make it harder for her to love her adoptive parents because she doesn't know the truth. Sometimes, she thinks they are keeping secrets from her. It made it hard for Kathy to trust that her adoptive parents will make the best decision for her since she wants to see and know her first parents and her adoptive parents are not supportive of any face-to-face contact.

Kathy thought her younger brother might be thinking about their first family a lot too. Kathy added that her brother is getting into lots of conflict with their adoptive parents and having trouble following rules at school. Kathy didn't know this for sure because they don't talk about their first family. The only thing they have discussed, about their first family, is that as soon as her brother turns 18, they will find their first family. She said that even if her adoptive parents do not help, she will look for them anyway. I noted to Kathy that she did not supply an image related to the brother that she was adopted with. She said she didn't even think about him because they are so close. She considers him to be part of her. She remarked "he has been with me through all of it. I don't really think of him as separate from me."

The last image Kathy provided was about her relationship with herself (Figure 8). She



Figure 8 *Broken inside*

described that inside herself she feels “empty and broken”. She added that this feeling gets more intense when she thinks about her first family. “It’s like I am broken inside because I don’t know them”. Kathy said that she participated in “lots of

counselling” and therapy throughout her childhood to help her with this feeling. Soon after she moved in with her adoptive family, she and her adoptive mother attended counselling and after a few visits together, she continued counselling on her own. She enjoyed her time with her therapist, and she loved doing the art projects. Kathy saw that therapist for a couple of years and then she returned to therapy when she was 13 years old. She and her mother were not getting along “at all”. Her parents found a therapist for her so that she would learn to follow her mother’s rules and so she would have an adult woman to talk with and confide in since she would not do this with her mother. Kathy said that she finds it hard to let her adoptive parents love her, this is especially true of her adoptive mother. Kathy said that the part of her that allows her to accept her mother’s love “is broken”.

Kathy believed that if she was allowed to know more about her first parents it would help her with those feelings of brokenness. Kathy has contacted the Children’s Aid Society that placed her for adoption and has received her non-identifying social history. This information was somewhat helpful. Unfortunately, it is brief. Kathy said it focused only on the problems they

encountered when she and her brother were removed from their care. Kathy wanted to know where they are now. She wanted to know if her first mother was still alive and if her sisters were happy. She added that “kids should know about their (first) family. They should know what happened to them and then they wouldn’t feel so empty”.

Discussion

Kathy’s story arc is ‘two children who were rescued from unknown circumstances and feel broken and empty’. Kathy portrayed her relationships and images in a hopeful light and yet I, and perhaps the reader, are left with the impression that things are not positive but quite sad, broken and desolate. Threaded among the ideas of hope and improvement is the loss of her relationships with her older siblings and first parents as well as the endless questions and fears that come with not knowing the whole story. I wondered if she was presenting an accurate reflection of her relationship with her adoptive parents or if it was something she wished to portray to me, to show me that her adoption was a success.

Kathy used magnolia flowers to describe growth in her current relationships with her adoptive parents. Kathy felt hopeful that their relationship was improving and will continue to grow. This reminded me of my teen years; it seemed like every attempt at independence was intermingled with fears of being rejected. I had a sense that Kathy was presenting a rose-coloured, optimistic version of her family, perhaps a version of the relationship with her adoptive family that she hopes will come to fruition. That sense remained with me as we spoke, especially as she revealed more information related to her connections to her first family

Kathy introduced the theme of being rescued when she compared herself and her brother to rescued dogs through the image of an SPCA commercial. “I don’t know why I chose this image. It just felt like me and my brother were like that dog.” The image suggests that she perceived that

she and her brother were in need of rescue, however, she does not know what she needed to be rescued from. This uncertainty connects to Kathy's unclear self-concept.

I think about my parents a lot. Sometimes at school I daydream about it and get in trouble.

I want to know the truth about my birth father and those nightmares I have. I don't know if they are true. I want to know if they are true. I am also afraid to find out because ... What if those nightmares are real?

Kathy explained that she is often preoccupied with wondering about her story and fearing the truth.

Kathy was confused by the disappearance of her older siblings. She has knowledge that her sisters wanted to stay in touch but has been told they did not follow through by picking up letters. She provided an intentionally blurry image, to illustrate this and wonders about who they truly are, questioning whether they are: "a wildflower or a weed". When describing that image, she said, "I think about them sometimes, and I miss them. Then I have that nightmare. I don't know which part is true." (i.e. questioning whether some components of her nightmare are rooted in actual events she experienced). Further, Kathy did not create an image for her brother with whom she is placed because she "doesn't think of him as separate" from her. As we compare ourselves with others, we get clearer about our unique traits. That Kathy does not perceive herself as separate from her brother, further supports the interpretation of an absence of self-concept clarity.

Sadly, Kathy believed that the adults in her life did not do enough to maintain the connection with her older siblings and provided the potent image of an "untended garden". Kathy identified that despite the positive things that have come into her life, it is the sadness of loss and the emptiness of having those connections untended to, as well as her lack of understanding about

them, that fuels an absence of self-concept clarity. It was easy for me to connect to Kathy's yearning to know more and the frustration of having parents who seem unaware of its importance. Kathy's image showed a state of neglect and her words point to bitterness, sadness and bewilderment particularly when her questions are met with seemingly few details and a fearful response from her adoptive parents. Learning that there is something dangerous about her first family, reinforces views of herself as a victim in need of rescue.

Kathy's narrative concludes with the image of the broken eggshell. The image led me to understand the depth of her struggle for self-concept clarity. Kathy's statement, "I took this picture because it's like I am broken inside because I don't know them." Later, she said "I can't accept my parent's love, especially from my mother." Kathy believed it was her fault that she could not connect with her adoptive parents, and particularly her adoptive mother, because she is "broken inside." She cannot establish self-concept clarity, in part, because of the missing pieces of information.

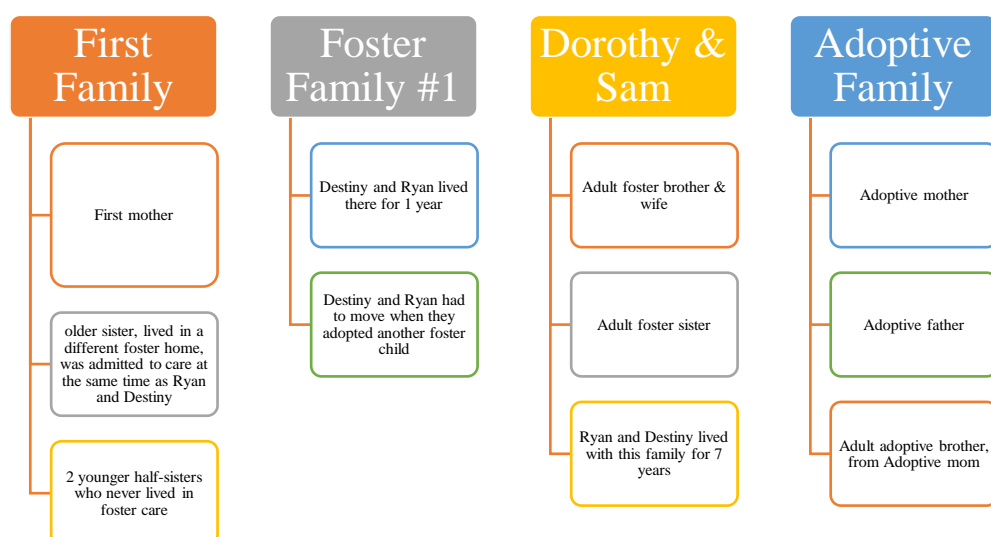
Destiny, Searching for Home

Destiny is an 18-year-old woman who was living with her first mother at the time we met. Destiny was adopted along with her younger brother who we will call Ryan. Ryan is about 2 years younger than her. Destiny and Ryan were placed for adoption when they were 10 and 8 years old. The pair had lived in foster care after being in foster care for more than 7 years and Ryan had only lived with their first mother for a few months before arriving in foster care. Destiny and her brother are black and their first family is of Caribbean ethnicity. Destiny indicated that they lived in two foster homes before being placed for adoption. She was in her first foster home for about a year and then in the second long-term foster home, with Dorothy and Sam for five or six years. Dorothy and Sam and their children are white. Destiny shared that when she was still having visits with her first mother, her first mother provided her with a secret cell phone that she used to keep in touch with her first mother after their contact with terminated by court order. The Children's Aid Society, her foster parents and her adoptive parents were unaware of this telephone contact.

Destiny's family connections are quite complicated and I have created a chart of relationships to illustrate these connections (Table 2). In Destiny's first family she has two younger sisters (half-sisters) and an older sister as well as her brother Ryan. In her adoptive family, she considers her adoptive parents and her adoptive father's extended family as family. Destiny's adoptive family is black and of the same ethnicity as her. Destiny has an older brother in her adoptive family, he is the biological son of her adoptive mother. Currently, Destiny is living with her first mother, her older sister and two younger sisters, who have a different father than she does. Destiny had been living with her first mother for several months when we spoke. Destiny recently discovered her first mother is pregnant. She was not excited to learn she would

have another sibling and believes her mother has been irresponsible, especially since she just broke up with her current partner, who is the father of her younger sisters. Destiny and I met at a local library so she would feel free to speak plainly. Destiny chose to use internet “memes” as images to depict her relationship.

Table 2 Destiny’s Family Connections



At the outset of our interview, Destiny and I spent time talking about her relationships and who she wanted to talk about. She found it difficult to define “family” because she has had many different experiences of living in families. Initially, she thought that I only wanted to hear about her experiences in her adoptive family. But as we spoke, I clarified that I wanted to know about the experience of having adoptive family relationships and first family relationships. I

indicated that I was interested in hearing about any relationships that, in her heart, felt like family members. Destiny decided to talk about relationships with her adoptive family, her long-term foster family and her first family. Destiny identified that the relationship she has had with her long-term foster family is probably the most significant and stable one that she experienced. She lived with them almost as long as she lived with her adoptive family. Destiny was forthcoming and open when speaking to me. She expressed some concern about being recorded and said she “sounded like a donkey” because she was getting over a cold and quite congested. Destiny mentioned in passing that she thought it was funny that her closest relationship was with her



Figure 9 *Two peas in a pod*

foster family, who are white. Her adoption worker felt it was important that she was adopted by a family that was similar, racially and ethnically, as her first family so it would be an easier adjustment for her and her brother. It was funny to her because her relationship with her adoptive family did not work well.

The first relationship that Destiny chose to focus on was with her brother Ryan. The image that she chose is of two children, walking hand in hand (Figure 9). Destiny described the image like this: “I see a big sister walking her little brother to school.

The reason I chose this picture is because when we were in middle school, we walked together all the time”. Destiny described she and her brother as “two peas in a pod” and said it felt like their bond is “unbreakable”. She added, “We have been through a lot and we are still close”. Destiny said that when they were younger, she would worry about their relationship because her brother “had anger management issues” and a “bad attitude” and they would get into conflict with one another. She added that he frequently got into conflict with everyone and described him

as being angry most of the time. She worried about his future as well as the future of their relationship. Destiny has come to realize that “at the end of the day, regardless of what happens, “he needs me, and I need him. We’re kind of stuck.” Destiny expanded this idea by saying,

The meaning is overcoming any obstacles that come along. There have been a lot of people who have tried to separate us. Because I remember when I was with my dad; the wife tried to turn my brother to hate me too. And it worked for a certain time. I could tell he was not liking me. I don’t think I said anything, I just left it alone. I don’t know what I did. ...It almost did work. I mean, a lot of people tried to ruin us or tried to come in between us but it just doesn’t work.

Destiny said that her adoptive mother was unsuccessful in separating them, just as other difficulties that have threatened their bond were unsuccessful. Their bond is a source of triumph for Destiny.

Destiny added a second image related to her brother (Figure 10). Destiny said this image is about where they are currently. It is an image with a caption that reads “*our paths may change as life goes along, but the bond between us remains ever strong. Miss you sister...*” Destiny stated that her brother misses her but doesn’t always admit that he relies on her. She described their relationship as “we talk about a lot of things. So, we have a very open and honest relationship.

And sometimes we talk about our future, like 20 years from now”.



Destiny said she is committed to continuing to visit with her brother regularly and she expects they will continue to visit regularly into adulthood. “We’ll take a plane, take a bus, whatever we need to see each other,” Destiny added that when they are

adults, they will be frequent visitors in each other's guest room and she imagines attending his wedding and him attending hers.

I observed that in the picture the two siblings are sitting on opposite sides of train tracks. I asked if this is how she sees her current relationship with her brother. Destiny responded saying "Ya, he's there and I'm here. So, no matter what journey there is we always find a path or find time to see each other." I understood this to mean that he is still living in the adoptive home while she is living with their first mother but they have stayed in touch with each other. Destiny expanded on this and added, "I see siblings having their own lives and reunited and talking about their lives. Because for a long time it was our life. Our life together. Now it's our lives individually, separately". Although Destiny expressed this idea as being about their future, it felt to me that she was talking about their current situation. With her living away from him, for the first time in their lives. Now that they are living in different homes and they appear to be on different paths there will be a distance between them. Destiny was confident she and her younger brother will always be connected "out of all of our siblings and family members we are the closest, literally."

Destiny said that when she spends time with her two younger sisters now, it reminds her of when she and her brother were that age.

I would try to play with his toys. Because we used to play together and he didn't want any interruptions from my barbie dolls. He always liked violence. So, we would play beside each other but not with each other. I look at my little sisters playing together, they bicker, and when my brother and I were younger, we bickered a lot. The older we got the less we bickered.

When thinking about her two younger sisters Destiny expressed concern about them and said “they are going through a lot” right now. Destiny added that her sisters were feeling angry and the two children get into a lot of conflict. Destiny said that her older sister, who also lives with them, “yells a lot, hits a lot and swears a lot. She is setting a poor, poor example for the little ones.”

The next set of images that Destiny provided were related to her adoptive mother (Figures 11, 12, 13). Destiny said that right from the beginning of her adoptive placement, she and her adoptive mother did not “click”. Figure 11 depicts their dynamic.

I see two people not agreeing to cooperate. I see an unhappy daughter and an unhappy mother. Just two people who can’t stand each other, don’t want to deal with each other and don’t want to be with each other. They don’t want to look at each other.

Destiny shared that she believes that when she and her brother were still in the visiting phase of their adoption – visiting with the adoptive family – that her adoptive mother wanted to back out of the adoption plan. Destiny remembered there was a big meeting that occurred between her adoptive parents and their adoption worker and then the adoption plan went ahead. Destiny believed that her adoptive mother only went ahead with the plan because Destiny’s adoptive dad wanted to be a father. Destiny reflected,



you’re not gonna get along with everybody, that’s understandable, but the fact that you are not getting along with someone who’s supposed to be your so-called family member is even worse. Because then you ask yourself ‘well if you can’t get along with a family member then how will I get along with so-and-so?’ So really you try to

overcome it yourself. You got to overcome it yourself or just hit reality yourself and learn about a poor relationship by yourself.

Destiny took on the task of trying to sort out the difficulties between herself and her adoptive mother on her own, without any support.

The second image (Figure 12) was a beaker of oil and water. She chose this image because oil and water cannot mix, and neither can they.

Anytime we try to negotiate or try to work something out we clash.

She is sitting, I'm floating. Anytime there is a problem or situation; she won't talk to me about it. She talks to my dad. She will complain to my dad and he'll complain to me. So, the combination doesn't work there, as well.

Figure 12 *Oil and*



Destiny believed both she and her adoptive mother are to blame for the conflict. They often communicated indirectly, going through other family members. Destiny described that their communication is like the oil and water mixture, one around the other “with no connection” she added that

Even when we want to, even when we feel like it does work, it just doesn't work. You can see the mixture separating again...the relationship with her is really disappointing, to be honest. It's really unfortunate... it's not what I expected. I can't say hope. I expected something, I just didn't expect it to be so much, or so challenging, or so unexpected. It's just a lot of things I would never think. When I look at her and my relationship, this relationship was unfortunately never able to work out.

Destiny added a third image of a conflict between a woman and a girl, where the woman is holding the girl by the collar, picking her up off the floor (Figure 13). Destiny said this image reminded her “of every single time she was angry at me and she would yell at me. Ya, every single time.” Destiny said as soon as she saw this image she laughed because it captured their dynamic accurately. Destiny said “I’m a heavy person so it’s not like that can literally happen but she tried to. It was like the full relationship of her and me, or when she had her angry side... her true colours would come out, that’s what it looked like. It’s her true nature.” Destiny supposed that her adoptive mother hid this angry side from many people successfully, “she’s really good at poker face.” Destiny reflected on her adoptive mother’s outward appearance and how it did not fit with the image she created. She said of her adoptive mother,

she is a businesswoman too! It’s just too funny. Every time, every problem, she would complain about was so little and there’s so much rage and anger. After a while ... I would laugh randomly but I couldn’t laugh in front of her so I would laugh afterward.

Destiny said this image reminded her of those times when her adoptive mother would be so angry, out of proportion to the problem. She shared that recently she had a visit at her adoptive home to see Ryan and her adoptive father. “My dad went downstairs and I could hear her complaining, asking him why I was at the house. My brother just started laughing and saying, *‘now I know why you’re not here.’*” Destiny continued to talk about her adoptive mother’s anger and said she felt like a younger girl when this

happened, just like in the image. The anger that was directed towards Destiny was intense. So intense it would make papers fly everywhere. Destiny depicted their physical conflict matter-of-factly. She



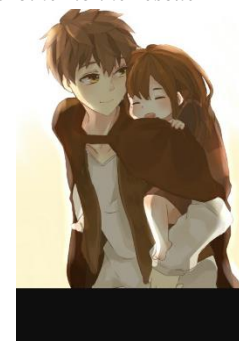
said that her adoptive mother acted like a child and she found that humorous, in an ironic way.

Destiny shared that reflecting on the experience of finding these images was more difficult than she anticipated. Destiny felt that the Children's Aid tried to "fix" the problems in their family but whenever the social workers came, her adoptive mother would say everything was fine so the issues and conflict were not addressed. Destiny believed that the CAS workers worked harder at making them a happy family than her adoptive mother did. Destiny was disappointed when she realized that she was not going to experience the connection she hoped for with her adoptive family. Destiny added that she didn't like "to go down memory lane". "I've got to move on, move forward and not really think about it." Destiny maintains a relationship with her adoptive father and her brother Ryan, but it's difficult because the conflict remains.

Destiny shared that she had not been feeling well lately and it was apparent that she had a cold. She explained that a day before our interview, she went to her boyfriends' house and he took care of her. "He made me soup and I was watching TV. I just laid down on the couch with a really comfy blanket." Destiny felt she got more comfort for herself on her boyfriends' couch than she received in the home of either of her mothers, first or adoptive. Destiny then turned her attention to her older brother whom she says is very comforting to her.

An image connected to Destiny's relationship with her eldest brother in her adoptive family was presented next (Figure 14). Destiny said he is much older than her, 36 years old. She described him as a "really good guy." Destiny wished he would have children and get married to his girlfriend. Destiny explained that this older brother is a good person to "vent to" because he knows what his mother's personality is like. Destiny liked that she could talk to him about their

Figure 14 *Big brother to the rescue*



difficulties and he would not pick sides. “Looking at the picture it’s like something happened. The big brother is there to rescue you.” For Destiny, it felt good to think about the times he listened to her and checked in to see how she was doing. Thinking of him reminded her of the older siblings she had come to know when she lived with Dorothy and Sam, her long-term foster family. Destiny shared she will attend a wedding with that family during the summer and she was looking forward to it. She is thinking about the type of dress she will wear to the wedding and she hoped her younger brother would attend also.



The last member of Destiny’s adoptive family that she wanted to address is her adoptive father. In the image the father and child are holding hands, carrying trophies (Figure 15). Destiny said this image reminded her of the times she and her adoptive father would go to soccer together. They had the love of this sport in common; he was an avid soccer player and when she joined the family, he encouraged her to participate in soccer herself. “I played all-star and rep. I kinda owe him a lot of kudos for that. He came to every game. Sometimes he’d coach.”

For Destiny, it was significant to have this man in her life because he was the first father figure she had in her life since the death of her foster father, Same. She hoped to have him in her



life throughout her life. She offered a second image to represent her gratitude and appreciation of him (Figure 16). Destiny admired her adoptive father’s character. “To be honest, he’s a very lovable man. And with him, people who have affected him in his life; he visits all the time.” She valued the commitment he made to people who are important to him. Destiny talked about

the plans she and her adoptive father made together. She wondered if he would be there for her since she isn't living in the house any longer. For now, they are staying in touch. Destiny felt that she and her adoptive dad are like the image (Figure 16), "My dad's the softie." Destiny worried that her brother and their adoptive father would not get along as well now that she is not in the home. "I try to speak with both of them, individually, on the phone" to facilitate communication between them. "Knowing that they're not okay makes me not okay."

Destiny paused to think about doing this reflection. Destiny felt that it helped her understand which relationships are the most valued by her. When she looked back on her adoption experience, Destiny said there were positive aspects because she felt so close to her adoptive father and adoptive brother, but overall, it has been quite painful for her. She said that having such a difficult time with her adoptive mother caused her to question if she was as "bad" as her adoptive mother portrayed. Destiny offered advice to adoption professionals:

I believe that my dad said yes and my mom said no. Whatever they say first, go with that. Go with your gut feelings. I know (my social worker) had to think realistically. In that sense, I wouldn't want any other kids going through so much. It doesn't lead to anywhere good; it just leads to bad.

I met with Destiny for a second interview to discuss pictures of her first family and foster family. Destiny thought a lot about her younger brother and her foster family. Destiny was in the middle of a big conflict with her first mother and deciding if she should leave her mother's house. As part of the conflict between Destiny and her mother, Destiny advised me that her brother had come to their mother's house for a weekend visit. Their adoptive family knew that he was visiting. Destiny explained that last night her brother decided to leave the house and go to a

party with his friends and their first mother would not pick him up from the party, as she said she would. Destiny explained the situation:

He went out last night to a party. He asked my mom if she would pick him up. She said yes. My cousins heard I heard. We were all there. We were downstairs. If he wasn't going to get a drive, he wouldn't have gone. It's all the way in Mississauga. Mom said yes. He went to the party. I asked her later in the night if she knew where to go because she had to pick up her son. She said, "I'm not getting him." I was like "You have to get your son when he's done" She's like, "no. whichever way he got there he can catch his ass on the bus to get home." I said, "I swear you told him you would pick him up." She said, "I never said that." ...So, I texted my brother and I said "I hope you're not staying out too late.

Mom's not gonna get you." I told him to come home when he could.

Destiny's brother ended up staying out all night at his friend's house because he had no money for the bus.

When Destiny woke up in the morning, her first mother was in a foul mood, quite angry that he used a lot of her hair products and he stayed out all night. Destiny was angry. She believed her mother should take responsibility for her children and be available to help them, which included doing pick-ups from parties. Destiny reflected on her brother's situation and felt that he didn't deserve the way their mother treated him. Destiny remembered other people in their life who were dependable. "The thing is, with my brother; he recognizes the people who have helped him. I remember there was a teacher when we first went to Mississauga and he, the teacher, connected with him (Ryan) ... And then he was his coach for a good chunk of years. We are close with him, his family, his kids. We, my brother and I call him a God Father." This former coach reminded Destiny of their adoptive father.

Destiny contemplated if she could return to her adoptive family. She was going to have a meeting with them and her social worker later in the week. She was nervous about that meeting and felt it will be uncomfortable. Destiny assumed they would not accept her and if they did; she expected that the difficulties between herself and her adoptive mother would continue. So, she considered if she could stay with her long-term foster mother, Dorothy⁴. Destiny shared her feelings toward her former caregiver,

we thank Dorothy for getting us involved in sports; for being patient, this and that.

Sometimes when I visit her, I babysit for Dorothy and she pays me. She says “I will stand here all night if you don’t take it.” She offers me money. I hate it...like...but...”

she needs the money. Destiny clarified that she did not get financial support from her first mother so she must fend for herself to get bus fare, school lunches and any other expenses that arose. Destiny was searching for a part-time job but it was difficult to find one. Destiny felt she didn’t deserve help from her foster mom, she said “it’s not like I did something really good. It’s like ‘Dorothy, you already took care of me, that’s enough money alone. You took care of me for how many years?’ I don’t need any more money from her.” We explored her feelings of being



Figure 17 *The dance competition*

cared for by her foster mom and speculated what her foster mom might say if she was sitting with us. Destiny shared the story that Dorothy has told from when she first saw Destiny and Ryan:

She would say how...I think she would cry, to be honest, because she is an emotional person. She would say how there

⁴ Pseudonym used to protect Destiny’s privacy.

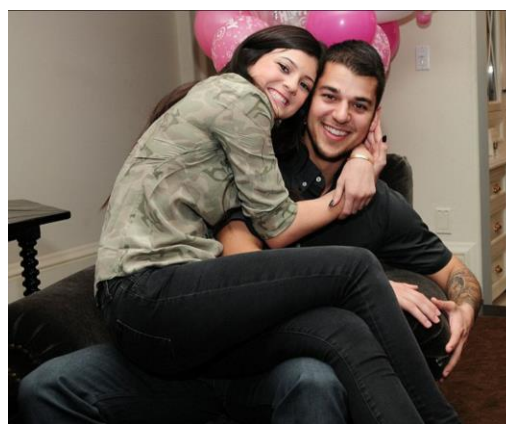
were these young kids. One who was throwing a tantrum and the other was crying and being attitude-y and Dorothy was just watching the mom (her first foster mom) and seeing them. But the foster parent, she was tired, hadn't slept in ages. And Dorothy just wanted to take them in. You know? She would probably say the whole story.

I had the impression that Destiny told this story many times. Destiny spoke a little about her first foster home. She explained that she and her brother lived there when they were quite young, before her brother's first birthday. The sibling pair lived with that family for almost a year until they were selected to adopt a different child. Destiny and her brother had to move to another foster home and that was when Destiny's long-time foster mom, Dorothy, "saw them" at the CAS office and she agreed to take them.

Destiny next shared images related to a foster sibling (Figure 18). The first image was about Destiny's foster sister. She often took Destiny to dance class and they cooked together. Destiny explained,

"there's a picture on my Facebook from my competition. She came! She was working and she surprised me! So, when I saw that picture, it reminded me of that time." Destiny remembered that they often did crafts together. She appreciated the time her foster sister took to spend with her and she enjoyed the creative activities they shared.

Destiny reflected on her relationship with her foster brother with an image of a young man and woman (Figure 18). She indicated that recently she and he disagreed with planning Dorothy's birthday party. It was a significant birthday and so all the kids, including her and Ryan, engaged in planning the party. Destiny was frustrated with him because she felt he should



be more involved in his mother's life. She went on to say he should visit his mother more often and Destiny blamed his wife, saying that his wife's family is their priority. Destiny felt it hurt Dorothy's feelings. Destiny added that his marriage reminded her of the marriage relationship of her adoptive parents, that the woman was the dominant one. Destiny said when they were younger, she felt close to him and they played together a lot. Destiny wished they could still be close.

Destiny was agitated by the conflict with her first mother and talked about it. She said that her mother expressed disapproval of her relationship with her adoptive father. Destiny overheard her mother talking about her relationship with her adoptive dad on the phone with her aunt (her mother's sister). Destiny was quite distressed and disappointed. She said, "(her first mother) twisted up my words to the point where it was just sick." Destiny went on to say "my [first] mother talked a lot of smack bout me, ... My [adoptive] father told me how my mom lies to get what she wants. She said something that could have gotten the police called." Destiny's first mother threatened Destiny's adoptive father and alleged they had a sexual relationship. Destiny's aunt talked with Destiny about these allegations last evening while her first mother was out of the house. Destiny's aunt told her that her first mother wanted to resume legal custody of her so she could get more funding through her Ontario Works. Destiny said her first mother acted worse than her adoptive mom. As Destiny told me this story, she referred to her aunt as "my mother's sister" and referred to her grandmother as "my aunt's mother". Destiny did not position the relationships as they pertain to her, as if she was not part of the family. She went on to say:

I found out the reason why she is pushing to have full custody of me is to receive money. I had a sense she didn't really want me in the house. She isn't easy to care for, for some reason. Before, she cared if I went back to live with them [her adoptive family] ... I don't

really need that. I don't want it. I don't want to deal with it, but I have to deal with it! So, when I am meeting with my social worker to meet with my [adoptive] parents I don't know how that conversation is going to go. I am a little nervous, I am skeptical. I don't know what's going to happen. So, whatever happens, I want to move out. But when I do move out, I don't want to have anything to do with them [her first mother and older sister]. I don't have the willpower for that. I don't need that, future-wise, for my life. I don't need liars. I don't want it.

Later she remarked "it's very confusing. It has turned my head upside down. My head is hurting."

Destiny compared the family experiences she had with her foster parents and her adoptive parents to the current dynamics with her first family. Her aunt told her that when she and her brother were adopted, she didn't like that she and her brother loved someone else and had a different family but now that this conflict has surfaced, she believed that Destiny and her brother had a better upbringing from the foster and adoptive families than she would have received with her first mother. Destiny reflected on the fact that financially, her aunt and her adoptive family had many of the same advantages; a nice house, money in the bank and artwork to decorate the walls. She saw that her adoptive parents provided better care than her first mother is capable of. Destiny agreed with her aunt. Destiny tried to talk with her first mother about the time they spent apart to understand what happened but whenever she raised the topic, her mother deflected and said she was "whining and complaining". Destiny believed that neither of them can listen to the other without intense emotions getting in the way. I felt Destiny's pain and frustration during our meeting.

Destiny provided this image to represent her first mother (Figure 19). She felt that this image didn't apply any longer. Destiny was quite hopeful when she went to live with her mother a few months earlier she said "my mother was a lot of things. She did a lot of stupid things (but) it didn't escalate to this point. Hearing this, made me think. 'I feel that all the things; the BS she talked about her husband; she talks about her friends... it's just pure BS. I don't believe a soul'. I need this straight up. The truth hurts don't get me wrong. The truth is the truth. I'd rather hear that truth than a lie. So, she's all lies. I just don't want that."

The next person Destiny chose to discuss the relationship she has with her older sister (Figure 20). Destiny's sister is one year older than her. Destiny has no memory of living with her



sister when they were younger. Destiny's sister spent most of her childhood living in foster care. She indicated that her sister had a tough time in foster care but did not elaborate.

When Destiny and her brother were removed from their mother's care they were not placed in the same foster home

as their sister. Therefore, they do not have a close relationship. Destiny chose the image, to describe her relationship with her sister. "She's pointing and telling me what to do and will just be standing there. I would want to get to the bottom line and be honest." Destiny saw herself as the woman in pink. Destiny learned from her long-time foster mom that they used to have visits as young children and her sister and brother fought a great deal. She assumed that is the reason they lived in separate foster homes. Destiny had some compassion for her sister, and she described her sister's anger like this. "When we were younger, she was by herself a lot. She was on her own. She wanted to reach out to us. She reached out to us a lot when we were younger. She was on her own. She told me some stuff, it's sad. She was mistreated, it was disgusting,

wrong and sad. That's why I let her be. At the end of the day what she told me reflects in my head, so I let her be." Destiny understood that a lot of her sister's emotional turmoil is connected



Figure 20 *Conflictual relationship with her sister*

to her experiences in foster care but her sister's behaviour doesn't always make sense to her. Destiny said, "the way my sister is carrying on, it cannot be from what she has been through" and later added, "she may have been mistreated, but it wasn't by us [Destiny and the younger siblings]." Destiny described that she and her sister have different temperaments and while she has coped with life by becoming someone who wants to help others, her sister has become defensive against people.

Destiny turned her focus onto her younger sisters, to talk about her connection to them. Destiny said this image reminded her of when she braids her middle sisters' hair and predictably, her youngest sister would want her hair braided too (Figure 21). So, they would sometimes sit in a row, doing braids. This was a time of closeness for the three of them and it would occur at bedtime. She was in the care-taking role, helping them get ready. Destiny talked about her younger sisters in a motherly way, she said "my brother and I have high hopes for the little one." Destiny always knew about the younger sisters and she looked forward to meeting them. Destiny recognized that since they have had vastly different lives, they have spent their whole life living with their mother and father, it will take time to

Figure 21 *Hair braiding chain*



truly understand one another. Destiny thinks about what the future may hold for them and she worries that their life has given them experiences that will negatively impact them. Destiny believed both girls are quite smart and that they “act out” a great deal.

At the conclusion of our interview Destiny chose a “family portrait” as a representation of her foster family (Figure 22). She chose this image with the



Figure 22 *A family portrait*

father being front and centre to memorialize her former foster father, Sam, who passed away several years ago. “I chose this picture because there’s a whole family here. He is the one, my foster mom told me, that it was his idea to do fostering. He had the idea to start fostering when their kids started to grow up.” Destiny spoke of him fondly. She is grateful that he, and Dorothy, offered them a stable and caring home even though it was a racially and culturally different family. Destiny recalled a memory. “I actually remember when he let me do his hair. I had all these clips in his hair.” Destiny chuckled and smiled at this memory. Destiny reflected on her life experience and said,

I learned that things happen for a reason. I learned that you can’t always believe what people tell you. Always trust your gut feelings but that’s something I’ve always believed in my life. Now I’m realizing I must do what’s best for me. My brother told me that when I was growing up, he was telling me how I needed to stop thinking of others and think about myself. He would say ‘you need to do what’s best for you’. But it never triggered until now... There’s so much to learn.

Discussion

Destiny tells us a story of “searching for a home.” Destiny had a lot to say about her relationships and in many instances, she provided more than one image to describe them. Instead of photographs, Destiny chose to search for memes on the internet and took screenshots of them. When I met her for the first interview, she appeared settled in her new living arrangements; then, a few weeks later, she was distressed, wondering where she would live. She was in a state of transition.

Destiny identified that to accurately reflect her experiences of family, she wanted to include her adoptive family, her first family and a long-term foster family. Destiny described her family like this,

I guess I will start with my adoptive family. I consider my dad’s whole side of the family as part of my family. Like every single one. I consider my (first) mom’s family as family. My little siblings as family... My brother, he’s down there. I consider my adoptive older brother like family. I consider my adoptive grandpa, so my dad’s dad. I consider my old foster family. Of course. I still have a lot of family members in my birth family but I haven’t seen them for so many years, so I don’t remember them. So, I think of the ones I know and am close with.

Destiny has lived in many families and has expanded her definition of family to encompass all the experiences and relationships that have been created.

Destiny began her narrative by discussing her relationship with her younger brother, Ryan. This is the central relationship for her. The image she provided of the two siblings sitting on the railroad tracks depicting a strong, inseparable relationship constitutes the story arc; she returns many times throughout her interview to reflect on the bond she has with her brother. Throughout

their life, the two of them have been together. Destiny said “we have been through so much together.” For the first time they were living separately. Destiny portrayed herself as looking out for her brother. She worries about him and made decisions in accordance with how they might impact him. During the interviews, Destiny worried about what will become of their relationship now that she is living elsewhere. By the end of the interviews, she was worried likewise about what will become of her. Siblings played a large role in Destiny’s discussion of family. While Ryan was the most important, she also spent time reflecting on her siblings that did not grow up with her. For her younger sisters in her first family, Destiny also took on a caregiving perspective. She was very concerned about their future.

We are just really concerned for the younger (sister). My brother worries the most because he doesn’t like it when she starts acting out. She just does things to attract attention that she shouldn’t be doing as a four-year-old.

She and Ryan have grown together and faced challenges together. Now, they worry together. Her self-concept is strongly connected to her brother. Destiny portrayed herself in a protective role in relation to her younger siblings. We can see that in her beliefs, the older sibling (she) must look out for the younger ones. In the discussions of her protective role, Destiny also included siblings from her adoptive and foster families. Each image of the sibling dyads showed the pair in close connection, hugging and protecting one another. Part of Destiny’s self-concept includes the role of being a big sister and protector.

While she does not feel as connected to her older sister, she can see their contrasting life experiences, between finding a permanency placement and remaining in foster care. “She had been through a lot in care. It’s really sad to hear. I think that is how she is now. Or that’s why she is the way she is. Which is why I let her be.” Destiny identified that her sister lashes out at

people to protect herself from further emotional pain and Destiny did not develop the same coping mechanism; instead, she became a helper.

Destiny: She [older sister] has a big ass shield covering her.

Interviewer: Do you have a shield?

Destiny: No

Interviewer: How come?

Destiny: (She pauses to reflect). I'm different, I don't know... I am a people person. I love people. I'm helpful.

Destiny demonstrates that by comparing herself to her sister she understands her self-concept more clearly.

At the time of the interviews, we find Destiny at a crossroads and we see in the following quotation what she has learned about herself and her tendency to put other people's needs ahead of her own.

Now I'm realizing I must do what's best for (me). My brother told me that when I was growing up, he was telling me how I needed to stop thinking of others and think about myself. He would say you need to do what's best for you. But it never triggered until now. There's so much to learn.

In this discussion about what she has learned from the experiences with her first mother, we can see that despite the pain she is in, spending time with her first mother has helped Destiny increase her clarity of self-concept. She declared:

So, whatever happens, we'll see. I want to move out. But when I do move out, I don't want to have to do anything with them [her first mother and older sister]. I don't have the

willpower for that. I don't need that future-wise, for my life. I don't need liars, I don't want it.

Destiny has realized that the fantasy she had for her reunion with her first family was not based on realistic expectations of what they could provide for her. She has concluded that she needs people in her life that she can depend on.

In reference to the mother figures in her life, Destiny provided images of conflict for her adoptive mother. For her first mother, she provided an image of a hopeful reunion (see figure 19) but as we discussed it, she told me that it no longer applied. The image reminded me of a fantasy I had when I was searching for my first mother. I had a dream where we were celebrating Thanksgiving; my first mother, my four sisters and me. We sat around the dining table and we looked identical. The wish that she and her first mother could repair their disconnection lays in contrast to what transpired. Destiny was shocked, heartbroken and frantic when the truth became known. When recounting a disagreement with her first mother, she said:

If you decided not to raise me what am I supposed to do? Everything I say to you goes in one ear and out the other. She doesn't listen. She tells me that I don't listen. And she complains to me I don't listen so I say well I guess I got it from you.

For the mother figures, she used words like "liar" and depicted them as 'two-faced. For Destiny, having the experience of living with her first mother and sisters has helped her realize the value that she assigns to honesty and she gained clarity about how relationships with her first family members will not support her in the future. I wondered if Destiny had yearned to be with her first mother, without admitting it, and if their secret telephone calls interfered with her ability to accept parental authority from Destiny's adoptive mother.

With exception of Dorothy, Destiny had few positive things to say about the women in her life. Destiny is critical of how her first mother is parenting her younger siblings. Destiny took on a tone that implied she knew better than those adults who mistreated or neglected children. Destiny shared an incident that occurred that morning between her youngest and older sister, while her first mother stood by.

Even this morning. In the bathroom, it sounded like that youngest was being beaten to death. She was yelling, mommy, mommy. My [first] mom was laughing saying “my poor baby”. I was like “why the heck are you laughing? Get in the bathroom and check what is going on in there. It’s not hard, you’re the parent, not your daughter, go in there. She was laughing. What the heck is up with this relationship? It’s so screwed up?

She is critical of her adoptive mother and how she approached their relationship. She compared her first and adoptive mother saying this,

Nobody has ever, ever, ever done anything like that. Even my mother, my dad’s wife. She talked a lot of smack about me, don’t get me wrong. She twisted up my words to the point where it was just sick.

She goes on later, while talking about her experience with her first mother and older sister,

I’ve met a lot of families but I mean, they’re abusive. That’s a solid character. Whether they are or they are not abusive, or they are nice or in between. My mom and sister are just like... their characteristics are not even a solid character. There are a whole bunch of different characters but you can’t tell which one they are. They’re so secretive. They are all characters. They can’t even tell which one they’re supposed to be. I don’t know what’s on underneath it all [she tears up and begins to cry}. It’s very confusing. It has turned my head upside down. My head is hurting.

Destiny was in crisis, needing to find a place to live. This crisis took up so much space in her mind, she was unable to fully engage in any conversation other than the events on hand.

Destiny conveys the belief that women should be held to account. Perhaps she was holding onto a fantasy mother, an idealized feminized caregiver who could be ever responsive, patient and available. Destiny acted on the fantasy she held about her first mother, that she was wanted and longed for, and that living with her would be a beautiful reunion (see figure 19). By doing this she learned that the reality of her mother's life and personality did not meet her ideals, she said "I learned that things happen for a reason. I learned that you can't always believe what people tell you." Once Destiny had a reality-based experience of living with her mother, the ideas she held about their relationship must be re-evaluated. In this moment, her self-concept is unclear, yet the relationship with her foster mother seems to provide some stability.

When Destiny started to talk about her former foster mother she reflected on how Dorothy rescued her and Ryan from their other foster home, where that foster parent was having a difficult time managing.

I was with my 9first) foster mother and Dorothy saw us. My first foster mother said 'I can't take anymore' then Dorothy was there and saw us with her. Dorothy said 'I will take them.' Dorothy was there. She took us in alright.

Despite how Dorothy has cared for Destiny over the years, Destiny finds it hard to receive support from her. Destiny sometimes visits Dorothy and helps her out by babysitting the foster children who are living in her home. Dorothy pays Destiny for her services but Destiny, who needs the money believes she doesn't deserve it. She declared,

I don't deserve it. I shouldn't receive it. It's not like I did something really good. It's like Dorothy; you already took care of me, that's enough money alone. You took care of me for how many years...I don't need any more money from her.

Destiny shows gratitude towards Dorothy and reveals that deep inside, she doesn't feel she deserves the ongoing support that Dorothy provides. Destiny holds a notion in her self-concept that she should be fully independent.

The men in her Destiny's life were portrayed as being lovable and dependable. The father figures in Destiny's life hold a place of honour. I wondered if Destiny was projecting her own beliefs about gender and parental figures into her relationships. Destiny remembered her foster father as she described the image she chose to represent her former foster family.

There's a whole family here. He is the one. Dorothy told me that he is the one.

Apparently, it was his idea to do fostering. He had the idea to start fostering when their kids started to grow up. It was so long ago and it's hard to remember but I actually remember when he let me do his hair. I had all these clips and everything in his hair; hairpins and beads. I was just looking back at what happened.

Similarly, Destiny describes her adoptive father as reliable and supportive. She stated that her first mother intimated that Destiny's connection to her adoptive father was improper and her first mother questioned the strong bond they shared.

Destiny did not explicitly discuss race except for her passing comment that her closest, most reliable relationship has been to her white foster family. On reflection, I recognize that my racial difference, being a white woman, likely impacted the absence of this discussion. If I was to go back in time and interview her again, I would ask her directly. In the moment, I theorized that race did not surface because of the similarities between her first and adoptive family. Again, my

experience, being an infant adoptee, may have impacted my ability to see, in the moment, that she did spend a large part of her childhood was spent in the care of a white family. As I reflect, I wonder if the significance of her white foster family was more than irony. I wonder if that somehow played into Destiny's perception of her black mothers. Destiny's foster mom did work closely with Destiny's first mother to facilitate contact and by all accounts, they had a pretty good relationship. It is possible that Destiny had internalized racist perceptions that could have been reinforced while living in that white home and perhaps it may have also been a class issue.

Perhaps Destiny didn't think it would be polite to talk about race or she may have thought I wouldn't have considered it important. This is an interesting omission. It would be important to further explore the impact of race and culture in future research.

Overall, Destiny's focus was on the character of those people in her life and observed that she is drawn to helping people. She valued the virtues of connection, dependability and acceptance and attributed these characteristics to people she admired and tries to emulate them herself. Having those positive interactions in her life has influenced her own self-concept, directing her on how to approach relationships.

Participating in this research stirred up positive and negative emotions for Destiny. She felt that it helped her get some clarity about which relationships were the most important to her. Destiny's narrative often focused on connections; how she felt close to someone in the past, hoping they will be close in the future. She longed to feel close and belong somewhere. I have reflected on her often since I last saw her and I hope she has found the security and connection that she longed for. I have only emailed Destiny a few times since our interviews. I did hear that she ended up renting a basement apartment at the home of her foster mother.

Aurora: This is the Life that I Built

Aurora is a woman in her sixties. She has been married twice and divorced once and is now widowed. She has three children and five grandchildren. Aurora was adopted when she was six years old through a private adoption. She was being cared for by her maternal grandparents at the time she was placed for adoption. Aurora reports that she lived with her first mother for a short period before going to live with her grandparents. She was unaware of that fact until a few years ago and only remembers being cared for by her grandparents and adoptive parents. While living on the farm with her grandparents she lived with another cousin, Sally. Sally was also born to a single mother; the sister of Aurora's first mother. Sally is a few years older than Aurora. They lived on a farm with two uncles who were young adults. Aurora's grandparents met her adoptive parents through a neighbour who lived up the road from their farm. As part of her grandparents' consent to adoption, they stipulated that Aurora would need to have ongoing contact with them at the farm and Aurora's adoptive parents agreed. Aurora was adopted, Sally was not. Eventually, Sally returned to her mother care when she married. Aurora's adoption occurred in 1955. I have known Aurora for many years and she graciously agreed to share her story with a view to helping some of her fellow adoptees. The process to created images was explained to Aurora at the time of her consent. Then, when I arrived at her home for our first interview, I was led to the dining room table that was covered with a treasure trove of photos. Aurora elected to tell her story to me through family photos that have accumulated throughout her life. The interviews occurred over two appointments, approximately four hours in total.

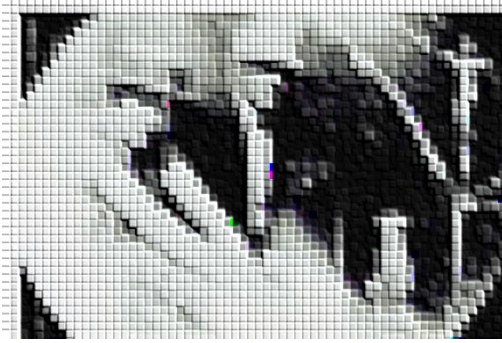


Figure 23 *Aurora's grandparents*

The first photo Aurora showed me was a framed portrait photo of her grandparents from her first family (Figure 23). Aurora described her grandmother as “the gentlest, the strongest and most loving” person she has

ever known in her life. Aurora sees her as a hard-working woman with a great sense of humour. In

Aurora’s view, she and her cousin, Sally, were favoured by her grandmother. Aurora says that her grandmother is her anchor (Figure 24). Aurora’s grandmother has been deceased for many years and this cherished photo hangs on the wall in Aurora’s bedroom. Aurora still talks to her grandmother and her cousin, Sally, does too. She said she reaches out to her grandmother for guidance when she felt she needs “strength or attitude”. Aurora sees her grandmother as the personification of love. She sees her insistence that they remain in contact with her as proof of their love and commitment to her. “It was my adoptive papers that I was to be in touch with my grandparents. I was not to lose connection, and I never did.”

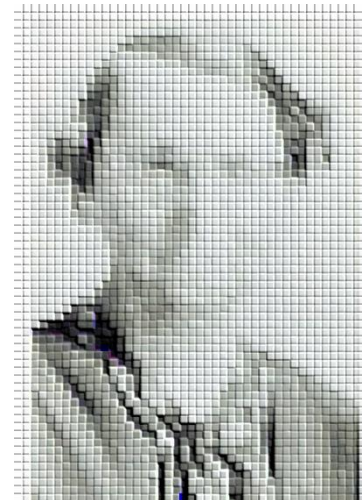


Figure 24 *Aurora's first*

grandmother

Aurora's adoption was a private arrangement between the two families and a lawyer drew up the agreement and transfer of guardianship. It became a family joke that she was a "bargain" to her adoptive father (Figure 27) and then he would tease back that she had cost him many more dollars than the original \$125 it took to consult with the lawyer. This good-



Figure 26 *Aurora's first grandfather*

natured teasing is a characteristic of Aurora's personality.

Aurora said her grandmother is her primary attachment figure (Figure 25). She acknowledged that she does sometimes turn to other parent figures who have also passed on, like her adoptive parents and her grandfather (Figure 26), but most of the time it is her grandmother that provides comfort and strength. Even now, many years after her death, she remains a big part of Aurora's inner life. "I am very grateful that I

was able to keep them in my life". Aurora exclaimed, "I'm grateful because they were mine."

Aurora has memories of living on the farm and has a vague recollection of her transition from her grandparents to her adoptive parents. "There were lots of times I did want to go back

though, especially when we were teenagers,"

Aurora recalled that at the time she moved to her adoptive home, she thought she was going for a visit and returning home. She went to stay with her adoptive family and "I just thought I was going on vacation". Her adoptive family had a boy, by birth,



Figure 25 *Aurora and her first grandmother*



Figure 27 *Aurora and her adoptive father*

who was less than two years older than Aurora. She doesn't recall much else about that time, nor does she recall a moment, or moments, when she realized the move was permanent.

Aurora returned to her memories of the farm. "I can remember grandpa was a fair bit older than grandma. And he's been gone, gosh, I don't know how many years he's been gone, a long time, of course. But with him, I can remember being on the farm with him and running around after him all the time." She had many memories of being in the fields with her grandfather and the troubles her young uncles got into, coming in late and having car accidents. Aurora pulled out an old photo of her grandmother and her children when they were very young (Figure 28).

Aurora had many more memories of that time than her cousin Sally. Aurora did not recall that she saw her first mother while she lived with her grandparents. If she did visit, Aurora had no memories of those times. "I can remember other aunts and uncles but nothing

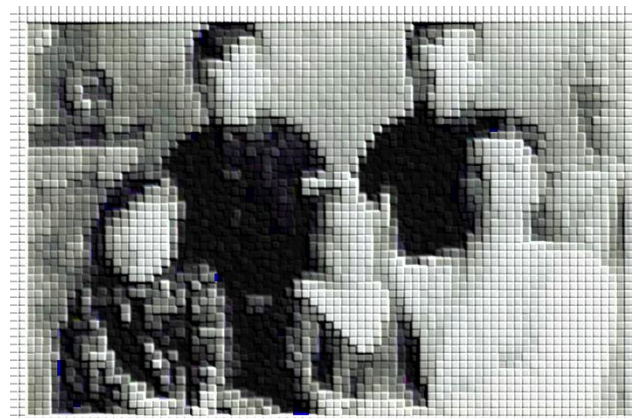


Figure 28 Aurora's first family, grandmother and children

of her. Like, nothing". Aurora found it puzzling, especially since her other family members were accepting of her. She assumes her first mother gave birth to her as a single person and married while Aurora was quite young. She had eight more children with her husband.

Aurora officially “met” her first mother again when she was a young adult. She was already a mother of two children and was visiting her grandparents with her children. When they arrived at the farm, some other relatives were present. Aurora’s uncle’s wife (Figure 30) offered to bring her to see her first

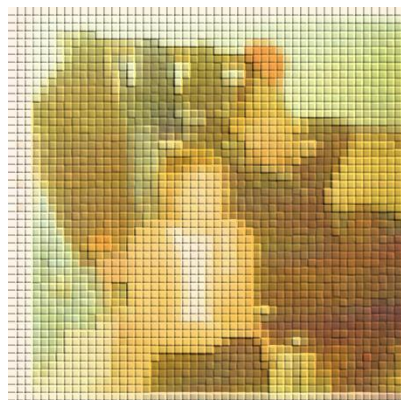


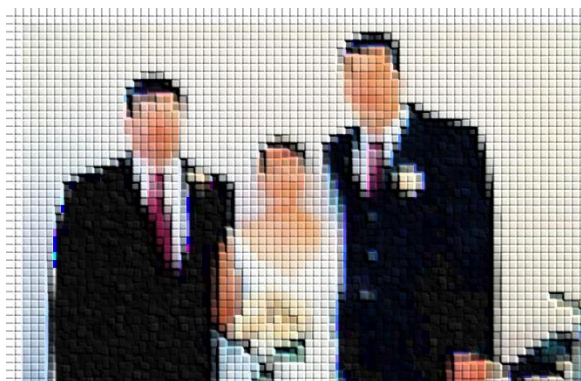
Figure 30 *Aurora's uncle and his wife, at the farm*

mother, who lived a few farms away. After a brief discussion about the etiquette of dropping in on her, they drove down the road for a visit. The group consisted of an aunt, Sally, another friend of Aurora’s and Aurora. When they arrived at the farm the aunt went to introduce Aurora and Aurora’s first mother said, ‘no need to introduce her, I know who she is.’ The five women visited together. Aurora said:

I don’t recall too much about it. So, it must not have made a big impression on me. It was okay. I think my girlfriend was more intrigued than I was. Ya, it was like “Oh, well, I guess we did that!”

Aurora said that whenever her path crossed with her first mother, they stayed on safe topics of conversation and didn’t discuss anything personal. She described that over the years there have

Figure 29 *Sally's daughter gets married*



been times when her first mother has been warmer and more receptive and other times when she has been cool and detached. It has been confusing because she could never predict what kind of reception she would get. The same pattern extended from her half-siblings, the ones who were raised by Aurora’s first mother. Sometimes

they would be welcoming and other times, not. Aurora reflected on this:

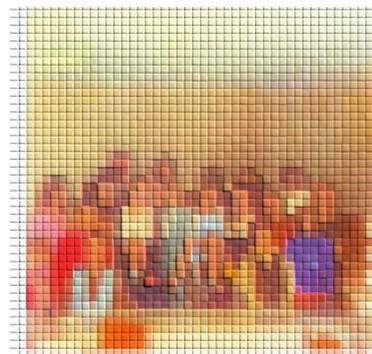
A couple of times when there have been situations, like when my uncle passed away, and she just became overwhelmingly affectionate. I don't know what that was all about, but she did. And one other time, I think I went to a wedding and she and I were at the same table, when Sally's daughter got married (Figure 29) We were at the family table. I DO get in these positions!

Aurora chuckled and went on to say,

but then other times it's just idle conversation. Nothing.

Nothing about her kids, nothing about my kids. She never has once asked me about them. If she has just been, maybe somebody else is around and asked me about them and I'll answer. Like at my uncle's funeral, suddenly even the siblings, that never had anything to do with me and didn't even bother to talk to me when I was around for things, all of a sudden, they were all talking to me.

Figure 31 *First grandparents anniversary celebration*



Aurora showed me a family photo that was taken at her grandparents' anniversary party . In the photo were her grandparents, their children and their children's children and great-grandchildren. Aurora felt awkward about attending the party but her grandmother insisted. She also insisted that Aurora be in family photo (Figure 31). The eldest siblings knew about her because they were born before she was adopted but the others did not as Aurora's visits to the farm growing up did not occur when her siblings were present. So, it was at this family party that many family members met her for the first time or reconnected with her after many years of separation. Aurora recalled:

when they went up to take that picture...I did...I shied away and my grandmother was “Where’s Aurora?” So, it’s like, oh lord! Because this was the only time, a time when, a lot of them found out about me for the first time ... She wanted me there, and that was it. And that was all there was to it and nobody was going to cross her.

Aurora pointed out a younger sibling with whom she has recently connected on social media. It turns out the two of them have a lot in common and they have plans to deepen their relationship and attend a concert together. I could hear the excitement and caution mixed in Aurora’s voice as she welcomed this person into her life. “We have a lot of

similarities. Things that she does that I have [are] the same. Those that are favourite to her are favourites to me.”

Aurora recently discovered some family history. Up until a few months ago, she assumed her first family’s ethnic origin was Scottish but new family tree research has uncovered that they are of Dutch descent. The identity of Aurora’s father has been a long-held secret that has not

been openly discussed. Aurora and Sally have been curious to learn more about their paternity and they are cautiously exploring this side of their identity. Aurora remarked that she has come to see that she has repeated some of the relationship patterns of her first mother. For example,

both have been married to alcoholic, abusive men.

The next image Aurora shared was a series of images that were taken during a visit to the farm when Aurora’s children were quite young, about two and

Figure 32 *Aurora and her first grandparents at the farm*



Figure 33 *Aurora's first mother and aunt*

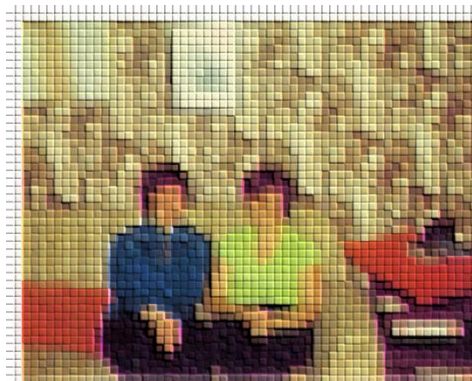


Figure 34 *Aurora and Sally*

five years old. The image that caught my eye was of her sitting on a sofa with her grandparents, grandparents on either side of her (Figure 32).

I am happy I took my kids out there and [that] they [got] to know them [and] hat it wasn't a hidden side of my life. To them, that was their grandparents. They didn't know I was adopted until much later. It was just

never said. They were their grandparents and that was all there is to it.

Aurora's brother decided to share her adoption story with her children (his niece and nephew).

Aurora's daughter experienced sadness with the realization that she was not biologically related to her grandparents. When I asked why she didn't tell her children about her adoption, she said that in her mind "it was no big deal' and it didn't change anything".

Now that Aurora's grandparents have passed on, she continues to visit with relatives with whom she feels close. She will drive out to their region, often with her cousin Sally, and they will spend the day seeing various people and checking in with them. She pulled out the photo of her uncle and his wife (Figure 30), the one who brought her to visit with her first mother. When thinking of that day again, she said "I think it's kind of cool. I give her credit... I give me credit for going!".

The next photo I was presented with is her cousin Sally (Figure 34) . It is an image of the two of them together, at the farm. Aurora indicates that once she was adopted, she didn't see Sally as often and their lives moved in different directions. Aurora became close to Sally's mom (Aurora's aunt) and her husband because they lived close by and Sally's mother and Aurora's adoptive parents had formed a connection. They often visited Sally's mother in her home with

Aurora. As Sally and Aurora became adults and got married, their family responsibilities took precedence. It was Sally's mom that would reach out to Aurora to keep her connected to the family.

When the two women moved into their senior years, they reconnected and found they had a lot in common. "I was glad that once and a while we got to see each other. We both ended up marrying an alcoholic husband. Oh, you wouldn't believe the similarities in our lives, without even knowing each other." Aurora took out a photo of her and her second husband (Figure 36) and explained:

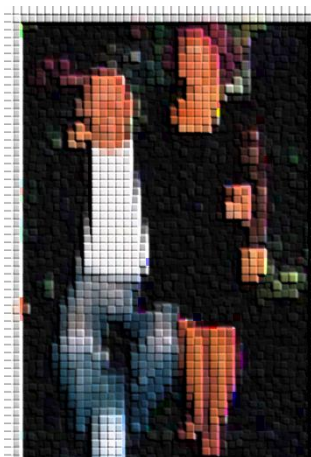


Figure 36 Aurora and her second husband

Both of us separated. Both of our husbands died, shortly afterwards. Very strange. I said to Sally, "don't tell me anything that is going on, because it's going to happen to me." Sally's daughter went and got married out of the country and then so did my son.

Aurora and Sally went on the trip to Europe together about 15 years ago (Figure 35) and during that trip, Aurora realized that they do have

significant differences but they also found a kinship together.

Ironically, Sally has become close to Aurora's first mother and Aurora said she often jokes that they each belong to the other's first mother.

They learned that Sally's first mother did have another child who was placed for adoption. She showed me a photo of Sally's first mother and another woman. At the time of this interview, they are starting to investigate it more, gathering information



Figure 35 Aurora and Sally at the Coliseum

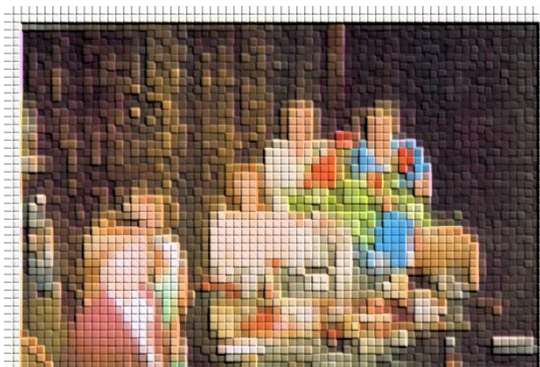


Figure 37 *Sitting at the family table*

from the aunts and uncles before the secret is buried forever. Aurora said, “even my mother, my biological mother, didn’t know.” This secret came to light at Sally’s mother’s funeral. One of the uncles told them about it. The older siblings from Aurora’s first mother’s family knew about it but the younger ones did not. One of the uncles, who told them about

the other child also told them the names of their biological fathers. They have not decided if they are going to pursue a relationship with these men.

The next person Aurora chose to talk about was her first mother. She showed me a photo that was taken at a wedding reception where she and her first mother were seated at the family table (Figure 37). Aurora recalled the experience:

It was awkward at first because when Sally told me that her daughter wanted me to sit with her at the [family] table. And she said ‘your mother is going to sit there too, are you going to be okay with that?’ I said, ‘I don’t care; it doesn’t bother me.’ It was fine and she was very friendly that night. Very friendly. It was an experience. (pause) I don’t understand her. I don’t get it...she’s hot and cold. Ya, a complicated woman. I tried for a long time and tried and tired and tired and went to all the functions. After I gave into my grandmother and stuff like that. I would show up for this and I would show up for that. When Sally had a shower or things for her daughter or special things for my grandmother or her mom at her house; I was included in those functions. I said ‘Sally, you don’t have to [invite me] if it’s going to interfere with somebody else saying I’m not coming.’ She said ‘no, if they don’t want to come because you’re there, it’s too bad!’ So, there were lots of times when it was really awkward. And then I got to the point, after a while I thought, ‘you know what? I don’t get it!’ Because I was trying for the

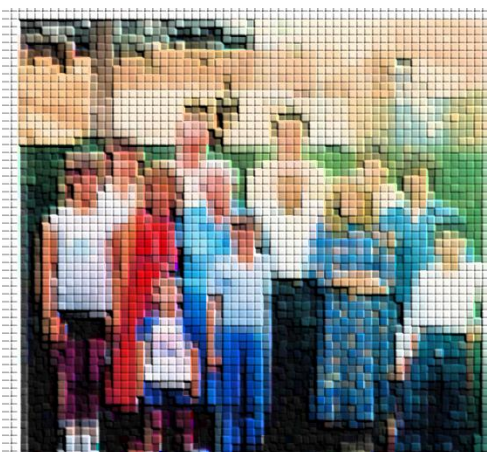


Figure 39 *The cousins
have grown apart*

longest time to get her to talk [referring to the circumstances of her birth]. I would suggest going out to lunch together or for tea, just us. I wanted to ask her some questions, but it just didn't happen. Even now. I just had to let it go because it was eating at me. So, I just left it alone. Aurora decided that for her sense of well-being, she had to stop wondering about her first mother and what was motivating her behaviour.

The next relationships that Aurora chose to focus on were in her adoptive family. She pulled out a photo of her oldest daughter and her adoptive mother sitting together. The image of her daughter and adoptive mother was captured during a family wedding and Aurora's daughter is an adult in the picture, probably around 30 years old. The two women were deeply focused on each other and appeared to be in deep conversation, not aware of what might be going on around them. Aurora commented that this was "one of the more enjoyable times, one of the times her focus was concentrated on my kids. So, I like the picture." Aurora shared a photo of her children and her brother's children sitting together. (Figure 38) and said she was sad the kids were not closer.

Figure 38 *Adoptive family BBQ*



She explained that within her adoptive family her brother was favoured. He is two years older than her. Aurora explained "(we) had a good relationship. We knew that mom favoured him. For (us) we would tease each other about it. I would say, 'you ask, it will be fine'". As children the favouritism did not come between them but it became more of an issue as they had families

of their own and Aurora noticed that it extended to the grandchildren. Aurora believed that her brother would manipulate their mother to get financial assistance.

Aurora met her first husband (her brother's friend) when she was 16 years old. In Aurora's words, he was "probably the worst I could have connected up with out of all of my brothers' friends." Aurora went on to say that dating her first husband was a form of rebellion aimed at her parents' strict control of her. She recognized he was dangerous and that seemed to make him more enticing to her.

She became pregnant at 18 years old and they married. Aurora pulled out a photo of her daughter (Figure 40).

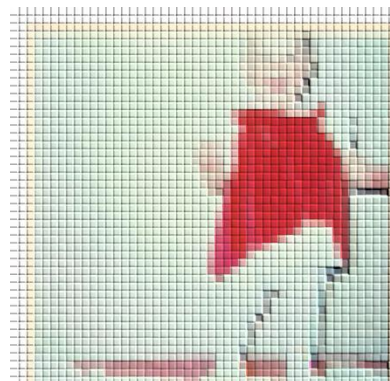


Figure 40 *Aurora's daughter*

Aurora contended that it was her adoptive parents who pressured her to marry her first husband because it was scandalous, in the 1960s, to have a child as a single woman.

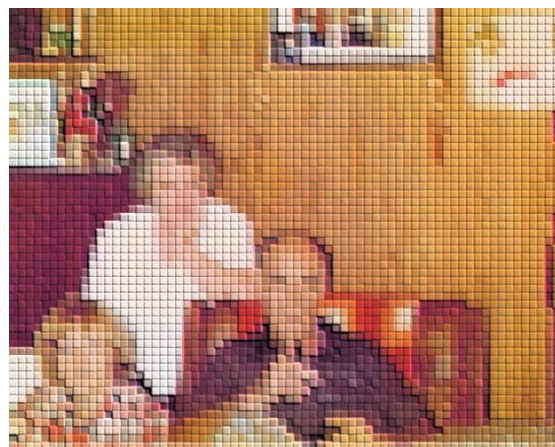


Figure 41 *Aurora with her adoptive parents*



Figure 42 *Aurora's adoptive mother*

I was always trying to please mom (Figure 42). I would go out of my way to please her. To do something, some special thing for her, to please her. I used to take mom away for weekends. I used to take her to visit relatives that dad didn't want to see. And do all that and still, it wasn't enough. I was never enough. I remember for their 25th anniversary. And I wrote a poem to them; I wrote all the words and a friend of mine put it into a poem. Let's be honest. It was really, really neat. And the woman, the Salvation Army Officer who was one of mom's best friends and she read it at the party...It was really good, everybody liked it and laughed at it. It was funny...and afterwards I said 'mom, did you like that?' Mom said, 'how come you didn't have (your brother) put



Figure 44 Aurora attended her first grandchild's birth

stuff in too?' It's like nothing was good enough.

Aurora shared a school photo of her at about age ten. She is wearing a tunic dress over a blouse.

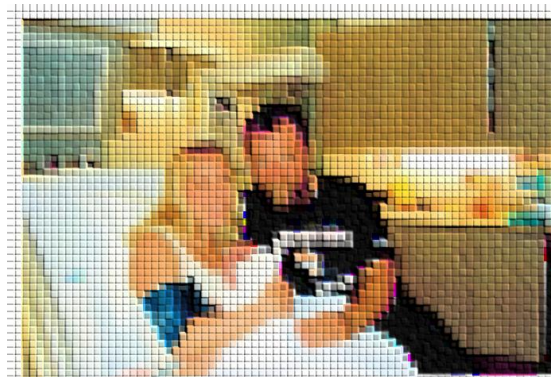
Her mother insisted on it. I remarked that it looked like a uniform-style outfit. Aurora commented it

was, even though Aurora attended public school and did not require a uniform. She said her mother

was "mature, conservative and quiet" while Aurora preferred flashier, more colourful outfits. Aurora wanted to be involved in sports however her parents felt it was not ladylike.

Aurora shared photos of her grandchildren's births. She was pleased to witness the birth of all her grandchildren (Figures 43 and 44). She said she

Figure 43 The birth of Aurora's son's child



somewhat expected she would be there when her daughter had her children but she did not expect it when her daughter-in-law gave birth. She is grateful to have a close connection with her children's spouses. Aurora shared photos of her daughter's engagement and wedding. Having her family close brings her great joy.

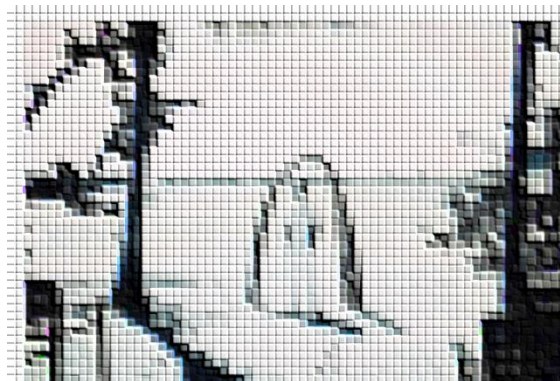


Figure 45 *Beach Wedding*

Figure 46 *The whole family*



Aurora shared a photo from her son's wedding (Figure 46) and remarked how her son looks like her first husband, his father. Aurora said that her adoptive mother and her son were not too close because he was so much like his father. Aurora said her mother didn't approve of him (her first husband) and that seemed

to extend to his son. That disapproval did not go to her daughter though, she was quite close with her grandparents. It is important to Aurora that she is surrounded by her children and grandchildren. Being connected to them is important. The next photo she picked up was that of her children and grandchildren, it includes her son-in-law's daughter (Figure 47)

This daughter was from an adolescent relationship he had while he was in high school and she was placed for adoption. Aurora's son-in-law reconnected with her several years earlier and she has become a member of the family. She has a daughter. Aurora remarked that she is "a very strong young lady who has had a lot of turmoil and what she has turned out to be, with all this

turmoil, is excellent”. Aurora’s daughter acts as a mother figure to this woman and a grandmother figure to her daughter. Aurora is called great-grandma by her daughter and she feels protective of them as she does towards the children and grandchildren she is biologically connected to. Aurora affirmed that she probably had a better understanding of her son-in-law’s daughter because they have the adoption experience in common.

I asked Aurora what she thought about, looking at these photos. She sat back and looked at the photos spread across her dining table. She picked up a photo from a grandchild’s birth (Figure 47) and she said, “I like it that it’s my family. I’m building a family. I’m building a family. That’s what I see when I look at these and when they are grouped like that. This is the family I created.”

Discussion

In Aurora’s narrative, we are gifted with a long-term perspective on open adoption replete with inter-generational themes. The story arc of Aurora’s narrative is “I had an open adoption. We didn’t talk about it then, but I do now.” Until she began to talk she coped with the silence by denying its importance and she reported using humour to soften the pain.

Aurora took great pride in her family and her love for them was palpable as she discussed events and relationships. Motherhood is a role that Aurora welcomed and discussed as a central feature of her self-concept. She became a mother in an unplanned way and embraced it. She had three children and tried to communicate her love, care and approval of her children clearly. She is an involved grandmother who has spent a lot of time with her “huggy boys” as she called her grandsons. It seems this action is a result of her own experience of feeling a lack of acceptance from the mothers in her life. Her mothering is



deeply impacted by this experience; she does everything she can to demonstrate a commitment to her family and to ensure they do not question her love of them. Aurora displayed a practical and optimistic attitude, trying to make the best of her circumstances. This attitude has been instrumental in helping her form and build relationships in her life which reflect the values she learned from her grandmother.

Aurora's tale begins at the farm, the home of her first grandparents. When describing her grandmother she said, "this woman here, is the strongest person we ever met. The gentlest, the strongest and most loving. She favoured us; we love her for it!" Aurora giggled. She felt loved and cared for in her grandparents' home and she had no understanding of the adoption plan that was made for her when it occurred. She said "I didn't know enough. I was too young." Aurora stated she did not have a good recall of that time in her life, it suggested to me that the confusion she felt may be a contributor to her foggy recollection of events. Aurora said later in life, when she understood her situation more clearly "lots of times I did want to go back though. Especially when we were teenagers. But at the time I just thought it was going on vacation." Aurora interjected that she joked with her adoptive father that "she was a bargain" because the legal documents cost a little over \$100. Aurora's adoptive parents and first grandparents were innovators of open adoption, they agreed to keep relationships with Aurora's grandparents and that extended to an aunt. Contact occurred throughout their lives. Through this contact, Aurora formed cornerstone relationships with her grandparents, an aunt and uncle, and her cousin. They became the touchstone relationships she turns to for security and reassurance. Despite the connections being made, there were aspects of disconnections that occurred.

So here you are making the case that Aurora experiences security in her relationships as a result of having positive relationships with both her adoptive and her first family members. Even

though the openness of the adoption could not be discussed – do I have this right. If I do, where is the evidence that Aurora experiences security in her relationships as a result of having positive connections with both families? Is there a quote or two we could use to make this point.

When reflecting on her growing up years, Aurora identified that she and her adoptive mother did not see eye to eye. She said, “there were some challenges there. I was always trying to please mom. I would go out of my way to please her. To do something. Do special things for her, to be with her.” Aurora reported that her mother was frequently trying to get her to conform to traditional dress and behaviour. She described a strong-minded teen who wanted to explore the world. She added that she started dating her first husband, in part, as a rebellion against her parents. “I wasn't allowed to go out with anybody else except for my brother. So I went out with probably the worst I could have connected up with, out of all them.” Aurora felt confined by traditional definitions of womanhood.

Aurora openly discussed that her adoptive mother favoured her brother, their biological son. It seemed that she had accepted this until she exclaimed, “I spent my whole life trying to please her and it was never good enough.” Aurora described her relationship with her first husband as a rebellion against her parents and how this rift impacted her adoptive mother’s ability to connect with Aurora’s son. The story about her parent’s anniversary party, and all the work she undertook to make their celebration special, illustrates the dynamic that existed and the pain that accompanied it.

Thinking about this, I reflected on who my touchpoint relationships are. I feel uncertain that I have those relationships in my life. Not with my first family members and in my adoptive family many of those relationships are drifting. My cousins are my closest family – having grown up with them and we shared many family vacations and holidays. Like Aurora, I have

passionately claimed my role as a mother. When Aurora passionately spoke of her grandmother, I found myself wondering, ‘who might have had the role in my life, if I had grown up with openness? Would it have been with my aunts, my father’s older sisters with whom I shared a close affinity?’ As an adult, I can say that I have learned a lot about myself through my relationships with my first father and his wife and his extended family but I did not develop the same connection because I was an adult when we met one another.

Aurora did not enjoy a close relationship with her first mother or the siblings that were born after her, despite having close relationships with some other first family members. I wondered if, perhaps, Aurora’s first mother did not have the support or tools she needed to cope with her pregnancy and the resulting shame and trauma interfered with her ability to connect with Aurora in a meaningful way. Aurora has some strong connections in her first family and used those relationships as a mirror to develop similar characteristics. She said “when I need strength, I call on my grandmother, mostly.” Aurora’s self-esteem was positively impacted by the love her grandmother provided to her. She talked about how her aunt, Sally’s mother, “thought the world of me, and I thought the world of them.” Connection to place is also powerful for Aurora, she returned to the farm, throughout her grandparent’s life and continues to visit the town where most of her first family lives, at one point in her life, she owned a home there. She said “I love it (there). I go there frequently. I wish I never sold that house.”

Aurora realized that taking on the role of the good and dutiful daughter was not going to deliver the approval she craved. Aurora tried for many years to be what she thought would be a “good” daughter, going out of her way to please her adoptive mother and trying to be accommodating to her first mother. This was part of her self-concept and for a long time, Aurora realized, it got in the way of Aurora having a happy and satisfying life. She would do this,

hoping to get them to do what she wanted, either offering praise or open to have a deeper discussion about why she had to be adopted in the first place. This notion set her up to experience feeling like she wasn't "good" enough to gain either mother's approval. Aurora can see how she eventually learned that to be happy meant she will inevitably disappoint someone; her grandmother, her first mother, her adoptive mother, and at least she would not disappoint herself.

Aurora, following the lead of her adoptive parents and first grandparents, decided that "being adopted makes no difference". Aurora's children were told about the adoption by their uncle without any preparation or support. The receipt of this information did become problematic for her daughter, at least. Aurora's children needed help to understand adoption and how it impacted their family relationships. It is challenging to explain these circumstances to children in a way that they understand. It is especially difficult to do this as a parent when you haven't been provided with the information and experience to understand it yourself. I wondered too if this incident was also a reflection of the discord between Aurora and her brother.

I reconnected with my first father when my children were young, aged three and five years old. It was very exciting when he arrived at our home for the first time. I thought I had done a good job explaining everything to my children. A few days later, when we were at my adoptive mother's house, my eldest son (aged 5) asked her if Harold, my first father, had been to visit her yet. As we spoke, I came to realize that he thought my first parents and my adoptive parents were friends and had known each other all along. To him, it was logical that a person would only ask a trusted friend to raise their child, not strangers. When he learned that they were strangers and that someone else made the arrangement, that seemed illogical to him. After all, his

mother (me), wouldn't let him go to someone's house for a playdate without meeting the parents first.

Aurora's son-in-law is a first father who has reunited with his daughter and she is now a mother, he is a grandfather. Aurora identified with his daughter, understanding the challenges of reconnecting with her first family and of being a single parent. Aurora described her as "a very strong young lady who has had a lot of turmoil and what she has turned out to be, with all this turmoil, excellent." Aurora has the life experience of being an adopted person to draw on. It has also been part of her self-concept but something she must be careful to only reveal in certain circumstances. Aurora said that she had to be "careful with her words" when she talks to people about adoption, including her own daughter because people misinterpret her meaning.

I have found that meeting fellow adoptees has been a joyful surprise. As a teen, I met a few people who were adopted and when we made the discovery, we did a lot of comparisons of our experiences. As a professional, I had that experience on a larger scale when I attended an adoption conference where almost everyone in attendance had lived experience in adoption, most were adoptees or first family members. I felt safety in that group. I did not have to explain myself or choose my words so carefully.

At this mature stage of life, Aurora is still wondering about her origins seeking more clarity. She and Sally discuss and investigate family secrets, trying to uncover their story. They learned that Sally's mother had another child, who she placed for adoption.

Until after (Sally's mom) passed away, when Sally found out. Because Sally went right away, went to my first mom and asked her and she said I don't know anything about it. Because Sally and my biological mother are very close. She said, "I don't know anything about this" and the one who knew was uncle Pete. Once she approached him and he said

yes, there was another child. And June, one of the other sisters, she knew, and a couple of cousins knew.

Aurora was longing to know more about her first family and her siblings. She wants to be connected to them. I am also still searching for the missing pieces from the puzzle of my story. It is important to recognize that for people who are not raised within their first family, the primal instinct to feel connected, does not go away. Openness in the form of direct contact can help to validate and nurture this experience and we can see in Aurora's story; that it is equally important to have an open attitude towards sharing information between all of those involved.

Chapter 5: Summary Discussion

The purposes of this research were to explore (1) how people who were adopted over the age of six years old in open adoption arrangements navigate ongoing relationships with first family members and (2) their perceptions of how connection with both adoptive and first family members impacts self-concept. Four women participated in this study, sharing their reflections on their family relationships and impacts on self-concept. In the preceding chapter, the stories of each participant are retold with an emphasis on the navigation of relationships with first and adoptive family members. In the following discussion, I review the common themes that emerged in their stories about how relationships with first family members are navigated and participant's perceptions of how these relationships impact their sense of self-concept. Here I rely more directly on particular quotations from participant stories. Included in this discussion is a summary of the study's strengths and limitations as well as implications of findings and recommendations for practice and future research.

The Problem of Secrecy

Secrecy has long been a central feature of closed adoptions and its legacy has not disappeared despite a growing trend toward openness. Each participant spoke of the effects of the dynamics of secrecy. Cheryl shared that she felt "powerless" to control her need to reach out to her first mother to learn about her circumstances and to generate a deeper understanding of herself. Similarly, Aurora longed to know about the circumstances of her birth and for many years tried to woo her first mother to share this information. Aurora said:

I was trying for the longest time to get her to [talk about the circumstances of my birth]. I would suggest going out to lunch together or for tea, just us. I wanted to ask her

some questions, but it just didn't happen...I just had to let it go because it was eating at me. So, I just left it alone.

Each of the four participants described how powerless, confusing and isolating it felt when they lacked key information about their first family.

One problem with secrecy is that it may lead adoptees to conclusions that the truth about their origins is frightening. Kathy provided an excellent example of this when she compared her relationship with her first parents with the image of the blurred plant, asking "is it a flower or weed?" (see figure 5). Kathy said:

The image is blurred because I don't really know much about them. I have only heard the bad things. I have a nightmare where he [in reference to her biological father] bursts into the room and smashes all the furniture. I don't know if it's real. I want to know but, I am afraid to know.

The effects of fear about one's origins on self-concept should not be underestimated.

And secrets endure. Sometimes they extend to the next generation. In this study, Aurora shared her ambivalence about her children knowing of her adoption status:

I am happy I took my kids out there and they got to know them, that it wasn't a hidden side of my [life]. To them, that was their grandparents. They actually didn't know I was adopted until much later. It was just never said. They were their grandparents and that was all there is to it. It was my sister-in-law that decided that they should know. (My son) said, 'oh ya? Really? (My daughter) was upset at the time because she didn't like the idea that she was not blood-related to her (other) grandparents.

Aurora explained her thinking behind not telling her children:

It wasn't important to me. I just didn't think about it. I guess I might have thought about telling them a couple of times but it was like 'oh ya, maybe someday' but it was no big deal. It didn't change anything.

Aurora normalizes these relationships with the grandparents by conceptualizing them as no different from traditional blood relationships which suggest that this has been a central strategy in clarifying her self-concept. In fact, the importance of understanding this relationship as no different is underscored in the telling of her story when she seemingly glosses over her daughter's upset and does not elaborate on her emotional reaction to her sister-in-law choosing to share the information. Koskinen & Böök (2019), among others, contend that adopted people in general, tend not to discuss their adoptive status because they may feel a kind of social stigma about having a non-traditional family structure (see also Neil 2012). But perhaps, in Aurora's narrative, the denial of difference is too important to her self-concept to risk such discussions. Ironically, Aurora's story is replete with statements that her adoption status made no difference to her and yet, she was hurt that her first mother refused to discuss her birth circumstances. When she examined a family photo taken at the farm that did not include her she said: "This is my sister, which is the one I am in contact with now. She is the youngest sister. I remember...this picture; I wasn't included in this picture and it kind of bothered me. I remember that." And despite her assertions that her adoption status made no difference to her self-concept, it made a big difference in her adoptive family where her mother favoured her biological son over Aurora.

In this study, the outcome of secrecy for each participant was resorting to investigating and/or conducting a relationship in secret with first family members. Even though Aurora has let go of the hope that she will get answers from her first mother, she and her cousin, Sally, are

searching for family history information trying to discover their first father's identity. In the course of this investigation, they uncovered another secret; there was another child who they believe has been adopted. Aurora explained:

We have been searching for our dads for a while and got nowhere until after Aunt Sue [Sally's mom] passed away.... Sally went right away to (my first mom) and asked her about it [the possibility of another child] and she said she didn't know anything about it. The only one who knew was our uncle [their brother]. Once Sally approached him and he said yes, there was another child born. And one of the other sisters, she knew, and a couple of cousins knew. But no one knows what happened to that child.

Kathy is also attempting an investigation of the whereabouts of her first siblings. She said "I have looked myself ... I have googled their names and looked on Facebook, but no luck. I don't know what else to do." To date, the investigation has yielded no results and she seems to be unsure of how to move forward with the search.

MacDonald & McSherry (2011) observed that adopters take an attitude of leaving it to the child to ask for more information. In this study, both Cheryl and Destiny felt unable to talk to their foster/adoptive parents about their desires to have contact with their first mothers. Instead, they found ways to have secret communications. Cheryl said: "I didn't tell my adoptive mom about my birth mom when we started talking on Facebook. I didn't want to get into trouble or hurt her feelings." Destiny said:

My social worker arranged for us to have good-bye visit with my mom when we became crown wards. That meant we weren't going to see her again. At the visit, mom gave me a cellphone. We talked to each other with it. It was secret. Nobody knew about this, not even Dorothy.

No doubt, the reasons for seeking knowledge of and forging relationships with first family members are complex and laden with implications for self-concept formation. But the privacy of the endeavour speaks to the participants' awareness that support for finding information and cultivating relationships is not readily available to them. Unfortunately, relationships pursued in secret potentially risk the adoptee's sense of security and trust with adoptive parents.

Ambiguous Loss, Grief and Secrecy

Loss and grief are inherent in the adoption process and were an important theme across all participant stories. Ambiguous losses are defined as those without clear boundaries, endings or societally recognized rituals for grieving the loss (Boss, 2006 in Samuels 2009). This type of loss can occur in two ways: a person is psychologically present but not physically as in the case of a family member who is missing or when a person is physically present but psychologically absent as can occur when an important person has an addiction (Samuels, 2009). Aurora speaks of the loss of her relationship with her first mother as a psychological absence. She says of her first mother "I don't understand her. I don't get it. She's hot and cold". Kathy described her loss in relation to her experience of physical absence. She describes it as feeling "broken and empty. It's like I am broken inside because I don't know them." Note how she connects this sense of emptiness directly to self-concept. Cheryl described her feelings of loss as evoking "too many emotions to handle." And Destiny does not think about the losses associated with the loss of physical contact with her first family:

Yeah. I don't think about that [in reference to her feelings about not growing up in her first family]. My mom says that a lot too. She says, you guys have been away for a long time. I don't think about it. I don't know why. It's not like I don't want to. I just never think about it.

Although the effect of contact on adoptive family members was not the focus of this study, Post & Zimmerman (2013) found that direct first family contact contributed to adoptive family stress due to the adoptee's experience of ambiguous loss. Study participants were sensitive to how adoptive parents might feel about first family contact and, to varying degrees, aware of the complexities of their grief associated with this contact. I contend that when secrecy about contact with first family members prevails, the experience of loss and its accompanying grief necessarily becomes private and potentially impedes the processes associated with making sense of and grieving the inherent losses in adoption. The relationship between the experience of ambiguous grief and the development of self-concept in adoptees who were older at the time of adoption is an important subject for future investigation.

When contemplating the role of secrecy in the lives of these women, it is difficult to remember that there were elements of openness to each of their adoption circumstances. Openness does not solve the problem of secrecy. All participants in this study spoke of the intense energy they expended focussing on uncovering secrets and making sense of first family relationships. This preoccupation with finding knowledge about first family relationships was present regardless of the quality of their relationship with their adoptive family and this phenomenon is consistent with other research (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2019; Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019). The secrecy phenomenon as expressed in participant attempts to rationalize the missing pieces of information and/or the contradictions that have been offered is closely tied to self-concept clarity

Reflecting on these four stories it is clear that the longing for self-concept clarity is a strong, primal need in each woman and that secrecy erodes this clarity. Aurora's story attests that the need to know and understand does not diminish over time (Koskinen & Böök 2019). Developing

self-concept clarity is a lifelong process and preoccupation with information gaps can lead to a self-concept that is based on fantasies, ambivalence and inaccurate information (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Koskinen & Böök, 2019; Neil 2012).

The Importance of Sibling Relationships

We create self-concept through family relationships and in situations of adoption siblings may play an important role in meeting that need (O'Neill, et al. 2018; Wojciak, 2017). In this study of adoptees, the longing for connection with siblings, known and unknown, was acute. Each participant reflected on the importance of siblings, those they had relationships with and those they had knowledge of but had never met. Both Kathy and Destiny spoke emphatically about the nature of the closeness in their sibling relationships. Kathy said “I didn’t consider taking pictures for (my brother) because he’s always there. I don’t really think of him as separate from me.” Destiny echoed that sentiment when she described herself and her brother as “two peas in a pod”. Destiny stated that she agreed to be adopted, in part, to benefit her brother. In reflecting on this decision, she said:

I’m really proud of my brother. Only God knows where he would be if it [referring to adoption] had not happened. He has been through a lot; made a lot of poor decisions and now he ended up making a bunch of good decisions and everyone is proud of him. (Dorothy) is proud of him, I am proud of him, and my dad is proud of him. Family members, friends, family, everything. Whoever knew him for a long time are the proudest people on the planet.

She is eluding to the idea that getting adopted was a good decision despite the fact that her adoptive family situation didn’t work well for her. The notion that certain siblings are barely separate from them exemplifies how adoptees might rely on these close sibling relationships in

the clarification of their own self-concept. It is powerful that Kathy might metaphorically look at her brother and see an extension of herself or that Destiny looks at her brother and sees their sameness.

Siblings are the longest lifetime relationship we have and are a natural reference point of comparison. And these comparisons may not always be about sameness. The ways that adoptees are different from their siblings also contribute to clarifying self-concept. Although Destiny and her brother are “two peas in a pod” when she compared herself to her older sister she concluded “she’s not a people person, at all. I am a people person.” Further, Destiny’s story also reminds us that relationships with foster siblings may also be important and validating. Destiny remembers the importance of her foster sister attending her competition. “She was working and she came. She surprised me she came. I was so excited. She said she wouldn’t miss it. She was working and she surprised me, she came!” It was clearly an important event to have her foster sister appear at the competition, in fact, she has a photo from the competition on her social media. And turning to Aurora’s story we see how important her relationship was with her adoptive brother in her growing up years:

(My brother) and I had a really good relationship. We knew that mom favoured him. For he and I, we would tease each other about it. I would say ‘you ask mom, it will be fine.’ We did good.

Aurora and her adoptive brother were close when they were growing up and he supported her self-concept clarification by neutralizing the differences in her adoption status.

Ludvigsen & Parnham (2004) interviewed adult adopted people who were searching for siblings in their first family and identified their motivation to seek a sibling was most frequently connected to a burning need to find out what happened to them or simply to meet them because

they had recently learned of their existence. They also found that even when separated at birth, siblings felt emotionally connected to each other. Cheryl described her desire to know her siblings. “I don’t know them but I know about them. I want to know who they are and I want them to know who I am.” Destiny said:

I knew I had sisters. I knew it as soon as that happened. My brother and I were very anxious to meet them. But we had another different life so we had to figure it out. They’re more latched on to me than I am to them. That’s only because I was figuring out some things. But if anything happened, I would take a minute’s heartbeat (to be there).

Despite the passion with which these research participants spoke of their sibling relationships, there is scant understanding in the literature of the role that siblings in open older child adoptions play in self-concept development for people raised outside of their first family and have sibling contact. As we move toward more openness in adoptive relationships, a deeper understanding of this phenomenon will be important.

Good-Bad Binaries, Mother and Family

Participant narratives were replete with good-bad binary contrasts. Gregg (as cited in Wells, 2010) identified that “explicit and recurring contrasts” are indicators of significant information about self-concept that is communicated through our narrative, forms of speech and belief statements” (p. 441) (see also Baden 2007). It is not the actual contrasts that are interesting but the way the individual mediates and holds these binary constructs that reveal self-concept. In this study, participants attributed the “good” and “bad” binary most often to mothers, sometimes to siblings and sometimes to themselves. Destiny described her first mother as “all lies”. And her perceptions of her adoptive mother are not flattering either (see figure 13). Destiny said: “when she had her angry side, her true colours would come out.” Regarding figure 13 she

said: “That’s what it looked like. It’s her true nature, angry. She’s really good at poker face, really, really good. Um, so nobody really expects her to be that way. But it comes out.” While describing her foster mother Destiny said, “she has done so much for us already, there isn’t anyone who would do more for us than Dorothy.” Throughout the narrative, Destiny is making sense of herself in relation to these good/bad mothers. She is compelled to share these comparisons. Aurora also discussed a good/bad binary in relation to mothers. She felt that she was never accepted by her adoptive mother: “I could never please her, it didn’t matter what I did”. By way of contrast, her grandmother was described as: “the strongest most loving person I ever met.”

Cheryl’s description of the good/bad binary is tied directly to her self-concept. She described herself as being “bad” when she explored her connection to her first mother. “I shouldn’t have done it [contacted her first mother], but I had to. I broke the rules.” After returning to her adoptive mother she was “back on track” and she added that she does not “want to mess up again.”. At the end of her narrative, Cheryl is able to hold both positions, acknowledging her need to stay connected to her first mother. “I’m back at my adoptive mom’s house now. I feel so much better but, I still need to reach out to my mom from time to time.” By navigating these opposing experiences, she communicates a more inclusive and clear view of the good and bad binary in relationship to her self-concept. I wonder about the extent that contact with first family highlights the challenge of navigating between the perceived good and bad.

Motherhood was a particularly challenging construct for participants in this study. Freeark et al. (2005) identified that in adoption there are often skewed perceptions and expectations of female relationships and ideals (p. 98). Messing (2006) found that of youth in kin placements,

first mothers were held to an idealized standard and the children were frequently disappointed when she did not meet their expectations. Destiny provided a good example of this when she talked of her first mother

I found out the reason she is pushing to have full custody of me is to receive money. I had a sense she didn't really want me in the house. She isn't easy to care for. Before, she cared if I went back to live with (my adoptive parents). She just doesn't care anymore. I don't want to stay there.

Note how different this description is from Dorothy, who would selflessly do anything for her. Other areas of the research highlight that older adoptees have greater difficulty feeling loved and accepted by their adoptive mothers (Howe et al. 2001). All participants in this study described challenging relationships with their adoptive mothers in addition to challenging relationships with first mothers. Kathy said, "I went to lots of therapy since I was a little kid because it's hard to let my (adoptive parents) love me, especially my mom." Aurora said she tried very hard to feel accepted by her adoptive mother: "There were some challenges there. I was always trying to please mom. I would go out of my way to please her, doing special things for her, to be with her. But it was never enough." Kathy said "My mom and I, we don't really like each other. She is never happy with me and I think she is too strict." Of her angry adoptive mother, Destiny concluded:

It's really disappointing. To be honest. It's unfortunate. It's not what I expected. I just didn't expect it to be so much, or so challenging, or so unexpected. It's just a lot of things I would never think. When I look at her and my relationship, this relationship was unfortunately never able to work out.

It was difficult for participants in this study to trust their first and adoptive mothers. Some researchers speculate that it is because of the unresolved loss of their first mother (Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019; Samuels, 2009; Verrier, 1993). It was beyond the scope of this thesis to explore relationships with mothers for the older adoptive child in open adoption arrangements and their impacts on self-concept clarity, nonetheless, this theme of complicated and conflictual relationships was noteworthy in these data, indicating a potentially fruitful area for further research inquiry.

Similarly, family relationships for participants in this study were impacted by how the ideal family is constructed in western society. This ideal often centers around a nuclear, blood-related, family configuration (Gupta & Featherstone, 2019; Koskinen & Böök, 2019; Neil, 2012). Across all narratives, there was an undercurrent about damaged children and rescuing families and the disappointments associated with a rescuing family that falls short of the ideal. Further investigation of how to disrupt notions of the idealized family so that children adopted at an older age can feel they belong to a family that includes both adoptive and first family relationships is warranted.

Support for Adoptees, Adopting and First Family Members

Building a family through adoption brings unique dynamics into play that asks adoptive parents and adoption professionals to be sensitive to the inner lives of their children (Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharme, 2019; DeJong et al., 2008; Hodges, & Malik, 2016; Hughes, 2009). My experience and the stories of these participants support the idea that collaborative and sustainable contact is mediated by each family member's ability to acknowledge the other's connection to the child and the important role they play (Kim & Tucker, 2019; MacDonald, 2015, McSherry & MacDonald, 2011). In this study, there was little evidence of this

important acknowledgement and commitment to creating a new lifestyle approach that includes first and adoptive family members (Grotevant & Lo, 2017; Holden & Haas, 2015; Kim & Tucker, 2019). In the instances where adoptive families do appear to support this notion, as with Aurora's adoptive parents, there was insufficient support to help first and adoptive families navigate those difficult conversations about the cause or need for adoption. Kathy reported that her adoptive parents seemed fearful of her first family and may have reluctantly agreed to a letter exchange. "They were concerned, because of my (first) dad. But they did agree to do letters with my (first) mom and siblings." When that failed, there were no provisions within the system to follow up so Kathy's parents were advised to stop sending letters. Now that Kathy is older, she contacted the children's aid society herself to understand what happened,

I went by to the children's aid society, to try to find more information. They sent me some information but I still don't know where they [in reference to first family siblings] went or what happened to them. CAS said they haven't heard anything and they don't know what happened either.

Kathy said of the professionals involved in her life, "I wish people had paid more attention to me and my older brothers and sisters. But they didn't do anything." In this study, secrecy and self-concept confusion were perpetuated because of the lack of mechanisms of support for clarifying social history information and facilitating direct communication between first and adoptive families (Koskinen & Böök, 2019; MacDonald & McSherry 2011). Aurora's adoption was a private arrangement that was orchestrated by a lawyer who helped the families to complete the necessary paperwork. Aurora did not understand that she was moving to live with a new family when the adoption occurred:

Interviewer: Was it hard for you to leave your grandparent's house? Was it hard for you to move?

Aurora: I didn't know, I didn't know enough. I was too young, I was six.

Interviewer: Okay, so you didn't really understand what was going on?

Aurora: No. Lots of times I did want to go back though. Especially when we were teenagers, with attitude. I want outta here. I wanted to go back to their home. But at the time, I just thought it was going on vacation.

As I probed, Aurora said she didn't remember much from that time in her life because it was so long ago. Perhaps the confusion she experienced contributed to her foggy recollection.

Given that Aurora believed she was going on vacation, we can surmise that none of the adults in her life adequately prepared her for the significant transition that occurred. In working with adopted people and in hearing the stories of these participants, I concur with researchers who highlight how support is needed to help them understand and cope with the adoption experience and particularly, the missing and confusing pieces of information (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019; Samuels, 2009).

In these data, we can see how the traditions of closed adoption continue to encourage disconnections from first families and specifically how these ideas occupy the thought worlds of the older adopted child. As we shift to open adoption arrangements, notions considered normal and neutral in the adoption world are necessarily and importantly called into question. The participants in this study squarely call into question the absence of acknowledgement by adoptive families and by supporting professionals and the lack of a systemic response to the significance that a relationship with first family holds.

Strengths and Limitations

These four narratives describe the experiences of people who were older children when they were adopted. Their stories provide us with in-depth detail into that experience and the possibilities for openness in adoption. I endeavoured to re-tell full stories, honouring the order of the information presented in the interviews balanced with the desire to convey a coherent written account of their oral presentations. Although I endeavoured to present full stories, there are, of course, details that have been omitted. The relative importance of these details may have been unwittingly underestimated. Regrettably, given the disruptions to this research process, I was not able to participate in an extensive member checking process.

I was heavily invested in this topic and arrived at this study with a broad understanding of adoption given my experience of adoption and my profession. I have interviewed many adoptees throughout my career. The sensitivities that I bring to these discussions are a strength. This study is not about finding objectivity however, my particular questions and curiosities may have prompted participants to share details interesting to me, but not necessarily as interesting for the teller.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. When retelling stories, they were my source material. Participants reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy and provided revisions, where necessary. They were provided a liberal opportunity in this process to delete and add materials deemed important to them. We can be confident that the data is accurate. Some will suggest that the sample size for this study is small. Nonetheless, many of the findings are supported by earlier studies with children and youth.

It would be helpful to explore this topic in a larger study and where the participants were from diverse genders and ethnicities and with more variations on contact agreements. This study

does not explore how race and culture impact self-concept for those who were over the age of six when adopted and who have ongoing contact with family members. Based on this small sample it would be important to explore this more fully.

The role of gender and the constructs of mothering and family and how they impact self-concept have also been identified as areas for further research to gain a better understanding of their impact on children who are adopted when older and have contact with first family members.

Future Research and Implications for Practice

I am curious to understand how social work practice and societal attitudes change over the next decade as adoption professionals in Ontario gain more experience and insight into supporting families who are part of open adoption in child welfare. The Ontario child welfare system and Ontario's courts are recognizing the significance of first family relationships. The overarching themes from this research point us in a direction that honours the voices of those who have membership in two families and its impact on self-concept.

Recommendations

1. There must be a significant emphasis placed on nurturing and supporting sibling and stepsibling relationships when seeking open adoption arrangements for young people (Grotevant, Wrobel, et al., 2019; Kim & Tucker 2019). Sibling support and closeness matters for self-concept development and self-esteem. There is a long history in adoption practices of treating these relationships as optional. This research points to the significant role that siblings play in the life of someone who is not living within their first family. Adoptive parents must understand and act on the importance of these relationships. Adoption professionals must be educated to understand the role that siblings play for young people in alternative care and policymakers must establish a support network that will provide guidance and offer problem-solving to families who are

navigating ongoing sibling contact. We need mechanisms to keep all siblings apprised of the birth of new siblings and a way to introduce those individuals to one another so that relationships can be established.

2. Participants who had siblings in their adoptive families spoke of the significant impact that adoptive siblings played in their lives. The significance of relationships with siblings in adoptive arrangements is under-researched. These connections can be a source of support or a source of pain. Professionals must recognize that adoptive siblings can play an important role and they must support a positive connection when possible.

3. In 2021, the Adoption Council of Ontario undertook a needs assessment (Banks, 2022). In the responses, from over 250 adoptive parents, it was identified that they would benefit from educational support for their extended family members so they could better understand their needs as an adoptive family. Without support for the extended family members of adoptive families, adoptive families are left isolated while they help their child make meaning of their experience. But the findings of this study, suggest that this recommendation does not go far enough. Relationships with extended first family members also play a potentially important role in open adoption arrangements and support must be made available to first family members as well as adoptive family.

Aurora's story highlights the prominent place of relationships with grandparents in her developing sense of self-concept and connectedness. Historically, adoption practices have centred around the idea of failed parenting and extended family relationships have, by extension, also ended. This is reminiscent of the Victorian values of punishment and deservedness that were prevalent when adoption practices became more formalized. New perspectives that value inclusivity and focus on connections instead of blame, are needed

and will hopefully lead to broader definitions of the ‘acceptable’ family configuration.

Approaching the whole grouping as one large system will help.

4. Foster families are family too! Foster parents shape the future for the children they care for even though their role is seen as temporary for adopted children. Destiny’s account of her strong relationship with a foster parent reminds us that these connections matter and when positive, should be encouraged. Kathy shared unpleasant memories from her time in foster care and the realities must be considered as adopted young people make sense of their identities.
5. Every participant indicated that they believed that adoptive parents and the children in their home could benefit by having professionals in their life who can help them navigate the complex dynamics of open adoption. I wholeheartedly agree. Adoption practices that encourage and support first family relationships are not a central feature of social work practices in Ontario. In my child welfare experience, relationships with parents whose children become permanent wards and all first family connections, should some exist, are not formally supported when adoption arrangements are finalized. Adoptive and first families are left to navigate this new family structure on their own. Adoptive parents are left to share sensitive social history information with their children. They are also expected to coordinate calendars to accommodate visits as well as address any developmental, emotional or cognitive delays their child may experience as a result of earlier adverse experiences. First families are left to cope with and sort out the aftermath of loss, often with few personal resources (financial or emotional coping skills). Then they are told to organize visits several times year and cope with the additional stress that can accompany the fallout from those visits. Current preparation training for adoptive

parents is insufficient to help prospective adoptive parents understand the emotional and practical implications of face-to-face contact (Banks, 2022). The current lack of support is, in part, a function of the lingering belief that adoption provides a fresh start and a new identity for the adoptee that is free from the taint of first family connection. Remnants of this discourse continue to permeate our thinking about adoption practices. This false thinking must be identified and challenged if families are to cope with and thrive in this new family structure.

6. This research and others demonstrate how difficult it can be for adopted people to trust adoptive parents and feel accepted by them (Freeark et al. 2005, Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019; Messing, 2006; Samuels, 2009). Service providers must understand how the outcome of loss expresses itself for people who are adopted. Often the focus is on behavioural outcomes instead of understanding the emotions that drive the behaviour.
7. This research points to significant challenges for our participants to connect with their adoptive mothers. Some limited research (i.e. Freeark et al. 2005) explores this dimension of adoption. Further exploration, including a feminist analysis, is indicated. On a practice level, service providers should be attuned to these challenges and offer increased support for mothers and their adopted children.
8. Grief persists. There seems to be an emerging suggestion in the public sphere that openness will ameliorate the grief that people experience when they must leave the care of their first parents and move into alternative care. While keeping important people in the life of a child will minimize the number of losses they experience it will not prevent the experiences of loss and the resulting grief. Social work education must include the emotional, developmental, physical and spiritual impact of separation from first family

relationships. Everyone who cares for a child or youth with this experience must remember this important factor.

9. All child welfare professionals should receive training and clinical support related to self-concept development for children and youth who reside in adopted homes. It is imperative that they understand the significant role that all relationships play in self-concept development. In my experience, this area has been significantly overlooked in child welfare. There is almost no consideration given to help workers recognize how to talk with a child or youth about their lives and often there is scant social history on file. Workers are frequently overloaded and the tasks associated with gathering up missing pieces of information and seeking out additional relatives are only superficially undertaken. This work demands mindful attention.

Conclusion

It is challenging for adopted young people to create self-concept clarity (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2019; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; DeJong, et al., 2016; Schachter & Ventura, 2008). These participants' stories highlight the need to create a mechanism in their respective families and in social services' infrastructure where adopted people can ask questions and share experiences. This study underscores the significant role that first family plays in the adoptee's understanding of themselves (Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2019; Fahlberg, 2012; Gebyehu, 2008; Kaplan Roszia & Davis Maxon, 2019; Koskinen & Böök, 2019; Samuels, 2009). It is naïve to think that older adoptees will conform to the notion of a 'fresh start' in their new adoptive family and not seek out first family contact when it is readily accessible via social media (Greenhow, 2015; Greenhow, et al., 2017; McSherry & MacDonald,

2013; Simpson, 2019; Wisso, et al., 2019). This desire to know is healthy and normal, not a symptom of maladjustment or rejection of their adoptive family.

Kathy, Aurora and I continue to search for the missing family members from our first family. Aurora and her cousin continue to uncover family secrets. I continue to search for my first mother's first family, scouring DNA databases looking for close relatives that I do not recognize. Destiny is searching too, for her place to belong, where she can feel safe and accepted. Supporters of openness suggest that having direct contact with the child's first family would put an end to the endless seeking and wondering. Based on the experiences of participants in this study, I challenge this idea. Openness is unlikely to bring the seeking and wondering to a close. It would seem that openness does not signal an end to the secrecy that surrounds adoption. For us (myself and the participants) contact did not prevent seeking and wondering. Rather, it seems that some information encourages new questions that are perhaps more pointed than might be when only a blank slate is in view. To use a puzzle analogy, in a more closed adoption the adopted person may not have a frame or picture reference as to how to construct the puzzle. With openness, there is a partially completed puzzle present and so the outline of the missing pieces is more defined.

When I began this research, I wanted to understand how or if people who grew up with direct contact with first family had an easier time integrating those relationships into their life and self-concept than I did. I was only a few years into my relationship with my first father and I realized it was going to take a commitment to this new relationship if it was going to become a part of my life. These women showed me that even when there is contact it is not necessarily easier to feel connected to your first family or to have them as part of your life. They did seem to have a

better understanding of who the individual players are in their first family than I do, and from a socio-genealogical perspective, it suggests they have a stronger sense of their self-concept.

In a closed adoption, the only reflection back to me was from my adoptive parents and the only information I had about my first family came from them. It was presented to me in skewed ways. My parents loved me but didn't always understand me or my first parents. Those misunderstandings often felt like a rejection. My desire to find my first parents and reconnect was experienced as a rejection by my adoptive mother, it was tremendously difficult for her to accept. I have learned that openness does not make this easier, only different. Aurora's advice was to "focus on where you find love and acceptance and know that when people cannot give you this, it is their failing, not yours." This is the advice I will take into the second half of my life.

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Appendix A

Legislation Timeline for Adoption in Ontario

Year	Event
1799	The Orphan's Act. Provided for orphans to be bound to be an apprenticeship until they were 18 (girls) and 21 (boys)
1893	The Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to and better protection of Children. This act stipulated those towns and cities must provide temporary shelters for children in need. This became the basis of the Ontario Child Welfare system, established local Children's Aid Societies and made child abuse an indictable offence.
1921	Protection of the Children of Unmarried Parents Act & The Adoption Act. The Children of Unmarried Parents Act established that being an unmarried mother was the basis for the Children's Aid Society to investigate and possibly remove the child from their care due to her immoral lifestyle. The Adoption Act formalized adoption in Ontario law-making adoption accessible for all. Before the Adoption Act adoptions could only occur as an act of parliament.
1927	Challenges to the Adoption Act established confidentiality – first parents would not know who the adopters were, adopters would not know who the first parents were.
1937	Amendments to the Adoption Act allowed for the adoption of children without parental consent.
1954	The Child Welfare Act. The Children's Welfare Act contained some significant changes to the Victorian system. It gave the government the power to establish its own institutions for the care of children and the detention of young offenders. More oversight of institutions that provided care to children was established. The term "child in need of protection" was introduced.
1978	The Adoption Disclosure Registry was established. This was a passive registry that allowed first parents and children to register and if a match was detected each party would be notified.
1984	The Adoption Disclosure Registry is now able to search for first parents on behalf of adopted people and if the first parent is agreeable, first parent and child are re-introduced to one another with counselling from a social worker.
1991	United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Children – indicates that children who are adopted out of the country should only occur when parents have given clear informed consent to the process.
2000	Ontario policy and practices surrounding adoption were expanded to allow two non-related adults to adopt a child. This was understood to include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people.
2005	Adoption Information Disclosure Act. Under this act, the Adoption Disclosure Registry remains but searches are abolished. Now individuals who were adopted can apply for their original birth information once they attain 18 years of age. When the adopted person is 19 years old, the first family can apply for identifying information regarding the child's new adopted identity. The legislation was

retroactive to all adoptions in the province and was struck down because many first family members, mostly first mothers, expressed concern that they were promised anonymity at the time they placed a child for adoption and they feared judgement and retribution from their family, many of whom did not know the earlier adoption placement.

- 2006 Child and Family Services Amendment Act. amendments were implemented to offer a more flexible approach to child welfare. The legislation will now be reviewed every 5 years. This significant change to the child welfare legislation is meant to ensure that practices and the values guiding them are aligned with larger societal values. This review process has led to many changes, as seen in later years, to adoption legislation in Ontario since then.
- 2008 The Access to Adoption Records Act came into effect to address privacy concerns that arose from the 2005 Adoption Information Disclosure Act. First parents who did not want their identity to be disclosed could register a no disclosure veto and a no-contact request. First parents who were involved in adoption before 2008 could decide if they wanted their identity revealed to their child and if they wanted contact. Adopted persons were also offered the option to file either and if the no contact notice was not honoured then the person would be subject to a fine of up to \$50,000.
- 2011 Child and Family Services Act is amended to allow crown wards with access to be adopted by converting the access order to a contact order or agreement. Subsidies for adoptive families become a provincially mandated program.
- 2017 Child Youth and Family Services Act. More emphasis is placed on the views of the child, referred to Kaitlyn's principal. Children can now self-identify as First Nation, Metis or Inuit. Openness orders can now be made with a child's Indigenous band. Children are no longer referred to as "wards" and will be referred to as being in the care (temporary or extended) of the Society.

Appendix B: A Survey of Adoptive Parent Recruitment Strategies in Ontario

- AdoptOntario is a program administered by the Adoption Council of Ontario. Their goal is to support adoptive parents as they navigate the world of adoption and to find homes for “Ontario’s children” by making connections between Ontario families, and children in the care of Children’s Aid Societies who are waiting. AdoptOntario provides a photo listing, databank, matching tool and clinical support for families and adoption professionals. (Adoption Council of Ontario, 2020).

- Wendy’s Wonderful Kids is a program where workers are trained to develop profiles of children and to mount a unique, child-specific recruitment strategy (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2009). Targeted recruitment strategies have been used in Ontario and elsewhere since the 1950s (Ontario, 2020). Today’s Child was a monthly newspaper article that appeared in the Toronto Telegram and later the Toronto Star featuring a child or sibling group in need of a family. In the late 1960s, there was a feature on the television news where young people were presented who needed a permanent home (Allen, 2017). Along similar lines, each year in the United States between the American Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, the Dave Thomas Foundation airs a two-hour national television show called “A Home for the Holidays” which raises awareness and presents profiles of specific children. Presently, through the Dave Thomas Foundation, full-time recruitment positions are funded in several CASs in Ontario and British Columbia and several adoption agencies in the United States.

- A Family Finder is a social worker whose focus is on locating family members who may be able to make a permanent connection to a child. Family finders may ‘find’ extended family members who are willing and able to raise a child. Alternatively,

they may locate extended family who can commit to a long-term relationship with the child, even though they cannot provide a stable home.

- The Heart Gallery is a recruitment tool that originated in the United States and was introduced to Canada by the Ottawa Children's Aid Society and The Adoption Council of Canada (ACC) (ACC, 2013). Essentially, it is a travelling roadshow of portraits of foster children who require a permanent adoption placement. This exhibit is presented in public arenas to help raise awareness of the need for homes for specific children.
- There are now specific recruiting programs in Ontario to provide permanency relationships for young adults. Aging out of foster care has been identified as a time when children are particularly vulnerable (O'Brien, 2008). The Never Too Late program recruits, trains and matches potential families with older teens or young adults who are or were in the extended care of a Children's Aid Society and will be or have aged out of foster care.

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Older Child Adoption: Using photovoice to reflect of relationships with Adoptive and First Family

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore and document the experience of people who were adopted when they were over the age of 6 years. *The researcher, Dawn M. Tracz, is an MSW candidate who wishes to use this study as part of the requirements for a thesis. Dawn is being supervised by Nancy Freymond an associate professor at the Faculty of Social work.*

INFORMATION

You have been asked to participate in this study because the researcher is interested to learn more about the experiences of people who are adopted when they are over the age of 6 years. You indicated that you might be interested in sharing your views about adoption and that you had been adopted when you were at least 6 years old and that you have relationships with your first and adoptive families. Study participants are requested to participate in a series of interviews and to take photographs to represent their relationships with their birth and adoptive families. All interviews will be confidential and information will be shared in a non-identifying manner. It is important to note that direct quotes may be taken from the interview and therefore some aspects of the participant's story may be identifying in nature. All participants can request that their interview be used to provide information only and that no direct quotes used. All direct quotes will be shared with participants before they are included in the published study and they will not be used without consent from the participant.

It is expected that your participation in the study will consist of two individual interviews. Interviews will likely last about 1 hour each. They will not have a specific timetable for start and end and the participants are encouraged to express when he or she would like to end the interview. Each interview will occur at an agreed upon location, time and date. There will be 5 participants that will be participating in the research. You will be invited to participate in a focus group after your individual interviews.

Information will be digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim to written form. Digital information will be stored on a password protected computer. All written material and photographs will be stored in a locked filing cabinet that is accessible only to the researcher. Data will be held for an indeterminate amount of time. If it is destroyed, all written material will be shredded and digital recordings will be erased.

This study has been created with the intention to provide a voice for those who have experienced adoption so that adoption professionals and prospective adoptive parents will have a better understanding of the experience of children who are adopted when they are older. This information will not be used for any other purpose without the expressed written consent from each participant.

RISKS

Discussion of personal experiences may evoke an emotional response for some study participants. If any participant wishes to seek supportive counselling during or after participation in the study, referrals to an appropriate support person will be provided. If during the interviews a participant feels that he or she does not want to proceed they are permitted to withdraw their participation in the study.

You may want to talk to someone for support before during or after your participation in this study. You may want to contact a counsellor who is on the list provided by the researcher or at

WLU COUNSELLING
2nd Floor, Student Services Building
Room SS2-203
Wilfrid Laurier University
75 University Avenue West
Waterloo, Ontario
N2L 3C5

519-884-0710 x 2338, EMAIL: counselling@wlu.ca

BENEFITS

A study of this nature is designed to provide a deep description of the relationships that you have with your birth and adoptive families. Participants may benefit from telling their story as a means of personal expression. The results of this study will be used to influence adoption practices and inform adoption practitioners and adoptive parents of the experience of adopted people.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All interviews will be confidential and information will be shared in a non-identifying manner. Names and addresses will not be published in any written materials related to this study. Pseudonyms will be employed.

All recorded interviews will be transcribed by the researcher. It is important to note that direct quotes may be taken from the interview to illustrate an important finding in the study. Every effort will be made to preserve confidentiality however some aspects of the participant's story may be identified in nature, therefore, all direct quotes will be used only if explicit consent is received from the study participant.

Participant's initials

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher, Dawn Tracz, at Wilfrid Laurier University, Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work, trac6510@mylaurier.ca or 416-318-8338. Dawn Tracz is being supervised by Nancy Freymond, Wilfrid Laurier University, Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of

Social Work and can be reached at nfreymond@wlu.ca. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board REB APPROVAL #3768. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 4994(10) or rbasso@wlu.ca

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) you choose. You have the right to request that direct quotations be omitted from the final report.

FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

The research will be disseminated by being presented in journal articles and presentation to adoption professionals in Ontario. It is likely that this information will be presented to the following Children's Aid Societies, Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Native Child and Family Services, Halton Children's Aid Society, Family and Children's Services of Waterloo, Durham Child and Family Services, York Region Child and Family Services and Peel Children's Aid Society.

If you wish to receive a summary of the study findings it can be mailed to you if you provide your full address and contact information. It is expected that this research will be completed by December 2014.

_____ I request a summary of the study findings

Participant name and address: _____

CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix D: Interview Guide for First Meeting

1. Introductions
2. My name and role as researcher
 - a. I am an MSW student at Wilfrid Laurier using this research towards my thesis
 - b. I was employed by Peel CAS and have worked in the field of adoption for 12 years
 - c. I want to understand the relationships that exist for those who were adopted when they were over the age of 6 with their birth and adoptive families.
 - d. I was adopted as an infant so I have a personal interest in learning more about adoption
3. My intention is to understand experiences of being adopted as an “older child” to help to modify or change adoption practices
 - a. Benefits of this study are: (1) your experiences can help guide adoption professionals as they plan for older child adoptions and as they support adoptive families and birth families (2) some people may find it liberating to talk about their experiences and to meet others who have had similar experiences
 - b. Risks associated with the study: (1) talking about these potentially emotional/intimate may stir up feelings of sadness, regret, anger and loss (2) this is an exploration of your experiences so I can better understand the dynamics of having birth and adoptive family, this is not therapy or counselling.
 - c. Specifically, I am interested in your relationships with your birth family and adoptive family. What is it like for you in a relationship with _____?
4. Why did I choose photography?
 - a. Sometimes relationships are hard to capture with words.
 - i. Emotion can be confusing or intense or both
 - b. We don’t always have words for our experiences, adoption has been socially constructed by myths –what are they?
5. State that participation is voluntary and that if people agree to participate, they have the right to refuse to answer any questions and they can end the conversation at any time

6. Explain how their responses will be kept confidential.
 - a. Pseudonyms will be used in the written report
 - b. Direct quotes or photographs will not be used without permission
 - c. Data will be recorded and transcribed by me. I will maintain the recordings and transcripts in a locked filing cabinet. YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO ASK THAT INTERVIEWS ARE NOT RECORDED (AUDIO OR VIDEO).
 - d. Photographs should not involve people WHO ARE IDENTIFYING (I.E. LARGE CROWDS ARE ALRIGHT BUT NO CLOSE-UP PHOTOS)
 - e. IF YOU CHOSE TO ATTEND THE FOCUS GROUP, I WILL ONLY USE FIRST NAMES OR I CAN EMPLOY A PSEUDONYM IF YOU PREFER
7. Future conversations will be taped and transcribed to maintain the accuracy of the responses. You can refuse to have them taped if you wish. In that case, I will make notes following our interview. THE DIGITAL INFORMATION WILL BE STORED ON A PASSWORD-PROTECTED COMPUTER AND THE PRINTED INFORMATION WILL BE STORED IN A LOCKED FILING CABINET. BOTH ARE ONLY ACCESSIBLE BY THE RESEARCHER.
8. Mention that the survey has been approved by the University Research Ethics Board and tell people they can contact the Chair of the REB if they have any questions about the ethics of the project.
9. How and when feedback will be provided.
 - a. Thesis expected to be complete in June 2014.
 - b. During group meetings I hope that we will have a list of recommendations/observations of common experiences
 - c. I will present my findings in a journal article and possible in presentations to adoption professionals in the GTA.
10. What is expected of participants?

- a. Taking photographs – can use their digital (on a cell phone or other) or I will provide a disposable – does the participant have a preference? SUGGEST THAT THEY REFRAIN FROM TAKING PICTURES OF PEOPLE THAT ARE IDENTIFYING, THE IMAGES SHOULD REPRESENT WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE IN THAT RELATIONSHIP
 - b. Attending one individual interview after images are captured, approximately 1 hour
11. Invite the individual to participate in the research project. – review and sign consent
12. Once images are captured, we will review them together

Appendix E: Recruitment Flyer

Were you adopted when you were over 6 years old?



Dawn Tracz,
416-318-8338 or trac6510@mylaurier.ca

If you were, then you could qualify to participate in a study

I am interested in talking with individuals who are at least 16 years old and have relationships with members of their adoptive and their birth families. Your participation will be kept confidential.

Why this Study?

We don't know much about what it's like to have relationships with birth and adoptive family at the same time. We want to hear about your experience. Some people don't like to talk about the past, especially if it's been painful. We want to know about your experience of current relationships; you don't have to talk about anything from the past if you don't want to.

What will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to meet with the researcher twice on your own with the option to participate in one focus group. You will be asked to take pictures that remind you of your significant relationships and then describe those photos in your own words. All responses will be kept confidential.

**Why is this
important now?**

CALL 416-318-8338 OR EMAIL
TRAC6510@MYLAURIER.CA
FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Ontario Provincial
Government and the Children's
Aid Societies are focusing on
finding permanent homes for
older children. I want to
understand how to best support
children in their homes.

Older Child Adoption Study

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