

**DISSERTATION**  
**A PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELINQUISHMENT**  
**AS EXPERIENCED BY MALE ADOPTEES**

**Submitted by**  
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**In partial fulfillment of the requirements**  
**For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**  
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**Spring 2008**

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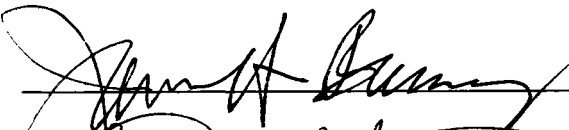
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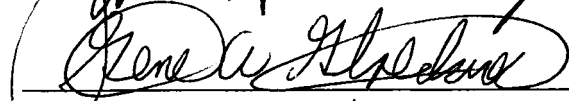
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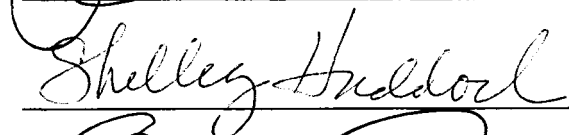
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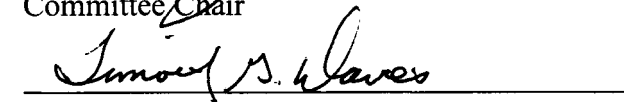
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**ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION**  
**A PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELINQUISHMENT**  
**AS EXPERIENCED BY MALE ADOPTEES**

The purpose of this dissertation was to gain knowledge about men relinquished and adopted as infants through the stories they tell about themselves. The following research questions were addressed: What are the stories male adoptees are told and then tell others about their relinquishment and adoption? How do they understand their relinquishment? What are the effects of relinquishment and adoption on them and what are the specific times or events in their lives when being relinquished or adopted seem to be more noticeable?

Seven men participated in this qualitative phenomenological study. Participants completed a short demographic survey and two personal interviews. All interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed for themes to address the research questions.

All participants were told at a very young age they were adopted. Their stories about their relinquishment and adoption came from documents such as letters from birth parents, information from adoptive parents, and conversations with birth mothers. Participants did not express overt negative feelings toward themselves as a result of being adopted. However, they did have many questions about their true identity. Regarding the impact of adoption, the men stated that adoption was just part of their lives; however, it did make them feel their life experience was unique. Participants struggled to find ways

to define the term “relinquishment,” but all of the participants said that relinquishment was the right decision made by their birth parents and they did not feel “rejected” or “abandoned.” Nearly all of the participants mentioned times in their lives when being relinquished/adopted did have an effect on them, such as becoming a parent and reaching the age of their birth parents. The participants had different backgrounds, different ways of being parented, but had similar life stories.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this research and work to the adoptees that touched my life: Mick, James, Michael, Kathy, Jan, Chris, Damien, Bernadette, Michael #2, Paul, and Doug; to my participants; and all of the people that chose to become adoptive parents. You inspired me to look deeper at what it means to be adopted.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As it is, I took a very long time in completing my research. It would have been impossible to complete writing up my research without the help of several key individuals. My advisor, Dr. Sharon Anderson, always believed in my research. She used a balanced combination of fostering my determination, goal setting and continuous encouragement to keep me on track--for many years. Dr. Jim Banning was endlessly patience and helpful. My other committee members, Drs. Gene Gloeckner and Shelly Haddock, encouraged and offered support for many years also. Thank you.

Computer problems--too numerous to count--extended my timeline more than once. My friend Peter came through every time I had computer, software, or "hardware device" crises. My mentor and friend, Dr. Jim Dugan, shared his resources--books, software, and his wisdom. He never said he was too busy to answer my questions or give me help. Chana Fuller transcribed for me; she also helped with computer problems and let me write while our friendship went on hold. I thank you all; I am indebted.

I need to also acknowledge all my friends who showed continued interest and asked for updates. They also honored my request to put our friendships on hold until I finished writing. Thank you for your lasting patience.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the middle of the 19th century, the word *adoption* has referred to the process of a child being taken in and raised by kin or non-relatives. Adoption has been a practice of many cultures since ancient times (Charon, 1993). The intent of adoption is to make a positive contribution to the lives of the people most closely involved: the child and the adoptive parents. Far from being seen as traumatic, adoption is still generally viewed by the public as fortunate. The child gains as she or he is rescued from being parentless and the adoptive parents are rescued from childlessness (Stozier & Flynn, 1996). However, within the past decade, experts on adoption have been discussing the practice of adoption as including trauma, complete with loss, grieving, and distress (Stozier & Flynn, 1996).

Most professionals suggest adoption is “a positive alternative to biological parenting” (Nelkin & Lindee, 1995, p.71 ). Others do not support adoption, believing that the practice of adoption is “pathology...that genetics is the basis of identity, and that adoptees are amputees” (Nelkin & Lindee, 1995, p.71 ).

Relinquishment and adoption are not simply single events. They are separate, though parallel, processes that have an impact upon and influence each other in multiple ways throughout the adoptee’s life (Nydham, 1999). Each is experienced separately, ambivalently, and each is full of its own emotional meaning. Yet, because they interact with each other as they are experienced, adoption and relinquishment challenge the way

adoptees understand their life stories, their identities, and what is in their hearts (Nydam, 1999). There is a need to research the larger cultural experience of adoption and relinquishment and the impact of these processes on adoptees.

### **Purpose Statement**

Adopted men are not well represented in the research. On the contrary, the literature on adopted women is plentiful with participants sharing their adoption experiences, both positive and negative, and what they feel needs to change with adoption and policies. Typically, this research is written by women about women.

While qualitative and quantitative adoption research is thorough in some areas, it has failed to examine the actual phenomenon of relinquishment after birth. As a result, society's current understanding of relinquishment and adoption are based on stigmatizing beliefs of media, society, lawmakers, physicians, and mental-health workers. Results of this study will provide new information about adoption to adoptive parents, birth parents, psychotherapists, schoolteachers, school counselors, and administrators.

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the meaning of relinquishment as experienced by male adoptees. The primary goal was to understand, honor, and value the participants' relinquishment experiences.

### **Need for/Significance of the Study**

According to statistics, 6 in 10 Americans have experience with adoption (Martin, 1997). It is estimated that approximately 1 million children in the United States live with adoptive parents and that between 2 percent and 4 percent of American families include an adopted child. These adoptions include public, private, kinship, step-parent, transracial, and intercountry/international adoptions (National Adoption Information

Clearing House, 2002; Rowlett, 1998). The National Adoption Clearing House, 2002, data for 2000 stated that 120,000 children are adopted in or into the United States each year. However, this number is likely unreliable because individual states within the U.S. are not required to record the number of adoptions each year.

A significant amount of information about adoptees is based on anecdotal clinical case studies and reports from psychiatric facilities which describe the pathology of adoptees (Landsburg, 1999). There has not been significant research on other aspects of adoption such as an individual's personal experience. Nydam (1999) wrote that adoptees need validation of their birth stories.

After an extensive search of the literature, I found no exclusive research on men and their experience as adoptees. Therefore, this research is significant and makes the following contributions to the literature: 1) all participants were male and adopted before the age of two; 2) the research explored the issues of relinquishment and adoption separately; and 3) the phenomenon of relinquishment and adoption was developed from adoptees' points of view and experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were explored:

1. What stories are male adoptees told about their own relinquishment, and what stories do male adoptees themselves tell about their relinquishment and growing up adopted?
2. How do male adoptees define relinquishment? Are these definitions a central part of how they see themselves?
3. What effect does being relinquished have on male adoptees and how they feel about themselves?

4. Research identifies certain milestones in a woman's life that trigger adoption issues. Are there specific stages, events, or times in the male adoptee's life in which being relinquished and adopted seems to be conspicuously noticeable?

### **Delimitations**

The subjects for this study were U.S. citizens born in the United States. They were male adoptees between the ages of 21 and 36 and adopted before the age of one year. The men were volunteer, non-clinical participants. Participants responded to printed and online advertisements and flyers posted in public locations. (See Appendices A and B.)

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

The assumptions of this study are that the informants were honest in relating their recollections, feelings, and analogies. In all research, it is beyond the control of the interviewer to question the accuracy or authenticity of the informant's reflections and thoughts.

### **Adoption Terms**

*Birth mother and birth father:* Parents who gave birth to the child or the root parents.

*Adoptive parents:* Parents who adopt and raise a child.

*Relinquishment:* The legal process whereby birthparents give up their parental rights to a child.

*Adoption:* A reference to the legal event whereby parental rights are obtained by the non-biological parent or parents (Nydam, 1999; Pavao, 1998).

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

General information about the practice of adoption began to appear in the literature during the 1890's. Fifty years later, researchers began to study adoption. Chapter 2 covers several of those areas: adoption's history; attitudes toward the practice of adoption; the "adoption myth" and secrets; the impact of adoption including grief and loss; the adaptive processes for adoptees; identity development for adoptees; and adjustment of adult adoptees.

### **The History of Adoption**

The history of adoption dates back to the mid 1800's. The first law allowing non-relative adoption was in 1851 in the state of Massachusetts, which meant the problem of a child without family was simplified and accomplished through probate or other state court systems. The adoption of children by non-relatives competed with numbers of children needed in reform schools, orphanages, and "sanctioned child labor arrangements in the pantheon of child-saving methods" (Hart, 1997, p. 14). Home placement of children began to replace orphanages and other types of indenture then under attack for inhumane and exploitative behaviors toward children. Adoption did not become a nationally organized "welfare movement" until late in the 1890's and early 1900's," (Hart, 1997, p. 14).

In the mid 1900s, psychologists began to write and complete research in the area of human connections and attachment. Most noted was John Bowlby, a British

developmental psychologist noted for his pioneering work in attachment theory. Bowlby demonstrated the detrimental effects of maternal deprivation on the young child (Pavao, 1998). Bowlby's theory was eventually instrumental in bringing into adoption policy current mental-health theories that support early placement.

During the next 40 years, several issues and events related to the practice of adoption occurred. First, in the 1960s and early 1970s two reports claimed record-breaking numbers of adoptions. One report claimed 1968 as the peak year for documented adoptions by unrelated persons and 66 percent of these adoptions represented babies who were under one year of age (Pavao, 1998). Another report identified 1970 as having the highest rate of adoptions (175,000) in the U.S. Of these, 89,200 were unrelated adoptions (National Adoption Information Clearing House). Second, in the 1970s there were fewer infants available for adoption. This decrease in the number of babies was due to several factors: efficient contraception, more support available for single mothers, and liberalized abortion laws. During the late 1970s, a third major change occurred in adoption. Adoptive families were allowed to receive more details about the child's biological parents. This type of adoption became known as *open* adoption. The practice of open adoptions became more common in the mid to late 1980s. A fourth change occurred in the 1980s: there was an increase in the adoption of older children and transracial adoptions. With that increase, researchers and adoption workers became aware of the different needs and difficulties of children adopted into families not of their own race (Pavao, 1998). In the 1990s, two major shifts occurred. While there was an increase in adoption awareness among child-welfare and other caring professionals in the adoption field, there was a decrease in adoptions arranged by these same people

(Pavao, 1998). Instead, there has been a revival of the 1920s type of adoptions where lawyers, doctors, and private agents made arrangements between birthparents and adoptive parents. Often, the professionals setting up the adoptions did not have the families' or the children's "best interest at heart" (Pavao, 1998, p.51). Stolen children and gray-market adoptions deceived or misguided both adoptive and birth parents. A few brokers attempted to go around the law and placed babies with the highest bidders. Most often, however, the actual adoptions were handled appropriately and legally (Pavao, 1998). In the late 1990s, the Children's Act of 1998 was passed. This legislation placed emphasis on the birthparents' involvement and on the value for the child of a connection between adoptive and birthparents. The importance of the contract between all parties in the adoption process was recognized (Pavao, 1998).

### ***Attitudes Toward the Practice of Adoption***

In the 1990s, researchers began to study society's attitude toward the practice of adoption. In 1997, 56 percent of Americans had a very positive attitude about adoption ((Martin, D. 1997)) and in 2002 this percentage increased to 63 percent (National Adoption Information Clearing House, 2002). A study conducted a year later (National Adoption Attitudes Survey, 2003) found two-thirds of Americans had a favorable opinion about adoption and two-thirds had some personal experience with adoption. Although each of the ethnic groups in the United States had favorable opinions about adoption, Hispanic individuals were more likely to consider adoption than African- American and Caucasian individuals. This study also found that a large majority of Americans, 94 percent, viewed adoptive parents "as lucky" and 75 percent of Americans believed adoptive parents were very likely to love their adoptive children as much as children born

to them. In addition, over 80 percent of the responded believed that adoptive parents got as much or more satisfaction from raising adopted children as biological children. The individuals with the least positive attitudes toward adoption included those 65 or over, 18-24 year olds, African-Americans, and the least educated.

The current view of adoption seems to recognize the importance of legal action. A contemporary view of adoption sees the practice as,

... a legal process that creates a new, permanent parent-child relationship where one didn't exist before. The adoption proceedings take place in court before a judge. Adoption bestows on the adoptive parent(s) all the rights and responsibilities of a legal parent, and gives the child being adopted all the social, emotional, and legal rights and responsibilities of a family member (<http://adopting.adoption.com/child/what-is-adoption.html>, Retrieved April, 2007).

In the past decade, researchers have studied American society's attitude toward adoption (Martin, D. 1997). The studies show a steady increase in favorable opinions regarding adoption. Also, a study conducted in 2003 (National Adoption Attitudes Survey, 2003) found two-thirds of Americans have some personal experience with adoption and all major ethnicities support adoption at some level.

### ***The Adoption Myth and the Consequences of Secrets***

The *adoption myth* (Brodzinsky, 1987; Lifton, 1994; Pavao, 1998) refers to the "traditions" practiced in the closed-adoption process and is the attempt of society to protect, deny, and keep secret "the existence of a child's life prior to the act of adoption, theoretically minimizing the emotional pain that would be connected to possessing such knowledge" (Wasserman, 1998, p. 18). In a closed adoption, birth records and other adoption information are sealed by the courts. In addition, identifying information about the birth family is often omitted or somehow altered to keep the confidentiality of both

mother and father safe (Wasserman, 1998). The adopted children are given new names and identities, which allows the children to appear as if they were “born into their adopted families” (Wasserman, 1998, p. 18). The family acts as any other non-adoptive family.

Some researchers consider traditional closed-adoption practices to be an experience based in secrecy and loss for the adopted person. Secrets in families often do not go undetected by adopted children. The missing reality of their life before adoption can be a barrier to relationships within the adoptee’s family (Partridge, 1991). For example, Pavao (1998) stated:

Parents and professionals often make the mistake of thinking that adopted children don’t have any concerns about adoptions if they say they don’t or if they don’t ask questions. But, the question is all wrong. These kids do not worry about adoption—they worry about what came before the adoption. Why I was not kept? Where are my birthparents? Do they think of me? Will they take me back? (p. 40)

In the short run, it may have seemed easier for adoptive parents to avoid questions such as those in the previous quote. It may have seemed easier to emphasize the “sunny” side of adoption and ignore the dark side of relinquishment. Silence by the adoptive parents can communicate several unintended messages to the adopted child: your story is unspeakable; your story is something that cannot be condoned; your adoptive parents are not adequate to function as protection against the loss of having been given away (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990).

### **Emotional and Psychological Issues Around Adoption**

There are distinct and extraordinary emotional and psychological issues for the child who is adopted. For every adoptee there is a loss. However, for some adoptees there is a perceived gain even in the face of this loss. This perceived gain can result in healthy

emotional development. For other adoptees the loss translates into maladjustment. In this section the following issues surrounding adoption are addressed: emotional loss for the adoptee, grief and mourning of the loss, the mixed picture of healthy adjustment and psychological problems for adoptees, and identity issues for adoptees.

Prior to the 1990's, the loss experienced by adopted children placed as infants had gone unrecognized by both mental-health professionals and laypersons. It was assumed that these children were placed before primary attachments had developed (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990) and therefore they could or would not suffer loss for birth parents they had not known. In the 1990s, this view changed. Adoption was seen as an emotional trauma for the child. The trauma of losing birthparents and grieving that loss resulted in emotional problems. According to research, these emotional problems were not seen in non-adopted children (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Lifton, 1994; Partridge, 1991; Reiz & Watson, 1992; Wasserman, 1998).

In recent years, adoption specialists have learned to appreciate the distinctive role played by loss in the psychological adjustment of adoptees, regardless of their age at placement (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). Researchers have suggested that although adoptees may have never known their birthparents, a relationship still exists. This perspective is based on 25 years of clinical work with 250 adolescent and pre-adolescent adoptees, a majority of their adoptive parents, and 15 birthmothers (Klass, Nickman, & Silverman, 1998). Over the 25 years, the adoptees described experiences and emotions that paralleled the experiences of bereaved children. This parallel suggested a relationship was established between the adoptee and their birthparents.

The connections are similar in formal characteristics. For both types of loss, a person has detailed thought and powerful emotions about someone who is not

present. Both conscious and unconscious levels of complex thought and emotion can influence choices, behavior, and affect. (Klass, Nickman, & Silverman, 1998, p. 292)

Adoption, divorce, and death all mean notable loss for a child. However, Brodzinsky (1987) believes the loss is greater in adoption. The death of a parent means there is a permanent loss of a single person, and it is common for children who experience death of a parent to feel some sense of family loss. However, the presence of the surviving parent, siblings, and other extended family can help to offset the feelings of loss (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Klass, Nickman, & Silverman, 1998; Lifton, 1994). Unlike the recognition of loss from death through wakes, burials, funerals, and religious ceremonies, adopted children do not have similar supportive rituals that would help them move through the mourning process (Klass, Nickman, & Silverman, 1998; Pavao, 1998). Adoptees are unable to acknowledge their feelings of loss or develop constructive means of coping with the sorrow and loneliness (Klass, Nickman, & Silverman, 1998; Pavao, 1998).

The consequence of loss in adoption has been researched. In general, older research from 1986 to 1997 (Martin, 1997) seems to suggest negative outcomes for adoptees. For example, one study compared adoptees in therapy to adoptees that were not in therapy. All of the adopted individuals scored low on measures of reciprocity, which suggested problems with attachment (Martin, 1997).

In addition to attachment problems, other research has suggested that the stress of loss increased the adoptees vulnerability for behavioral and emotional problems (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Saiz & Main, 2004). Using several standardized instruments, one study compared adopted adolescents to birth adolescents for

psychological adjustment (Martin, 1997). Overall, adoptees tended to show higher levels of delinquent behavior, illicit drug use, and decreased school adjustment. In general, the researcher found emotional and behavioral adjustment and family functioning among adoptees to increase in maladjustment as the age at adoption increased. The adolescents adopted when they were more than 10 years of age differed most. This perspective was associated primarily with adoptees placed at an older age and those who had developed an attachment to their birthparents (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). These behavioral and emotional problems were identified as difficulties with separation, anger, and making transitions (Pavao, 1998; Saiz & Main, 2004).

According to Pavao (1998), anger is a prevailing difficulty for many adopted children. She wrote, “Most of the children whom we see in our clinic are ages four to eight and have particular issues with anger. There is a great deal of loss in adoption, and feelings of loss often manifest themselves as anger” (p. 52). In addition to the emotional problems, Brodzinsky (1987) wrote that adoptees suffered from low self-esteem, learning disabilities, and acting-out behaviors. Emotional and behavioral issues generally do not appear until the elementary years when academic performance and peer relationships increase in importance ( Brodzinsky, 1987; Pavao, 1998).

There is disagreement about whether these types of behavior “depict serious psychiatric pathologies or are just the adoptees’ way of rising to the challenges inherent in adoptive family life” (Silverman& Ollendich, 1999, p. 362). Wierzbicki (1993) stresses that while most adoptees do have greater maladjustment than non-adoptees, most adoptees do not experience psychological problems (Wilson, 2004).

There is a discrepancy between findings of clinic-based samples and population-based samples. This discrepancy might suggest that the findings of the clinic-based research are misleading because of selection bias, in that adoptees with maladjustment problems are more likely to contact mental-health services (Fergusson & Horwood, 1998).

Reviews have generally agreed that there are higher levels of externalizing problems with adopted children (Silverman & Ollendich, 1999). In his meta-analysis of 66 published studies, Wierzbicki (1993) found that the effect size for adopted adolescents was greater for externalizing and internalizing behaviors than for non-adopted children. Other experts, Brodzinsky and colleagues (Silverman & Ollendich, 1999) list the following behaviors as those commonly reported in adoptees: increased aggression, defiant behaviors, oppositional behaviors, lying and stealing, substance abuse, antisocial tendencies, learning disabilities, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (Silverman & Ollendich, 1999, p. 361). Research in the United States, as well as other countries, suggests that adopted children are referred to clinicians for psychological treatment two to five times more often than are non-adopted children (Grotevant, 1997). The behavioral issues for referral included: antisocial and provocative behavior, aggression, impulsivity, learning disabilities and depression (Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Grotevant, 1997; (Silverman & Ollendich, 1999). A significant problem with this research, however, is that psychologists or psychiatrists have done the majority of the existing studies, and these studies focus on psychological problems of adoptees (Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Grotevant et. al, 1999; Westwood, 1995).

One explanation for externalizing behaviors is the “bad seed” theory and behavioral genetics (Silverman & Ollendich, 1999). Research has shown that parents of biological children that put them up for adoption do so because of antisocial behavior or antisocial personality problems. The correlation between adoption and externalizing behaviors has resulted in some clinicians labeling these problem behaviors as “the adopted child syndrome” (Wilson, 2004). Wilson suggested that this “syndrome” stems from early loss and associated trauma. Although there may be a gene-to-behavior pathway explanation, it is seriously oversimplified because it fails to include numerous complex variables ( Silverman & Ollendich, 1999; Wilson, 2004). Other variables would include environment, age at time of adoption, and gender of adoptee, to name a few.

Current research suggests a more positive picture of the emotional and psychological adjustment of adoptees. Smith and Brodzinsky (2002) found some adopted children view adoption as somewhat benign or positive. Brodzinsky and Smith (2001) did a recent study on the coping and adjustment of child birthparent loss. Forty-two boys and forty girls participated in the study. The children were 8 to 12 years old with a mean age of 10.6 years. The research group was diverse; 34 children were Caucasian, 30 were African-American, 16 were Asian, and two were biracial. Of the 82 participants, 62 children were placed with parents of the same race. At the time of adoption, children’s ages ranged from 3 months to 10 years. Half of the participants (N=41) were identified for the study from adoption agencies’ records. The remaining 41 participants were recruited from community-based resources or from families’ members who had participated in a previous adoption study.

The results of the Brodzinsky and Smith study (2001), though limited by issues of sampling and use of a newly-created instrument, provided new information regarding birthparent loss. They found that this sample of adopted children reported, “low to moderate negative affect over and preoccupation with birthparent loss” (p .220). This finding supports earlier research that indicated adopted children can identify both positive and negative aspects of their adoption. In addition, curiosity about birthparents and negative affect were only moderately correlated. This suggests children’s cognitions about birthparent loss are not always upsetting. According to Smith and Brodzinsky, (2002), “In describing their coping efforts, children endorsed assistance seeking and cognitive avoidance at higher levels than either problem solving or behavioral avoidance” (p. 13). In other words, some adoptees sought help from parents and used cognitive avoidance rather than behavioral avoidance to reduce distress when they experienced upsetting emotions related to adoption and birth parent loss.

According to Saiz and Main (2004), however, in this and other research some children perceive their adoption as threatening, stigmatizing, or potentially harmful. These perceptions give rise to a pattern of negative emotions associated with distress. Negative emotions might include anger, confusion, anxiety, sadness, shame, or embarrassment.

Other mental-health studies were done with adopted adolescents in ensuing years. In a study of 90 adopted adolescents and their families (Martin, 1997), all children were adopted under 3 years of age and were studied for mental-health status. Of those studied, 66.7 percent were assessed as mentally healthy, while 18 percent suffered from neuroses, and 13.3 percent suffered from more severe disorders. The findings concluded that the

central factors connected with a “successful adolescent” development were related to family interaction and not to events before adoption or to known biological background (Martin, 1997).

### ***Current Adoption Research***

Over the last two decades, the movement has been toward more open adoptions and research is now looking at the differences in children adopted openly. Historically, adoption research documented the higher risk for psychopathology among adopted adolescents. Much of this research, however, was longitudinal and all of it involved families with confidential adoptions. This type of adoption is no longer typical in U.S. adoption practices. As a result, it is possible that much of the literature is no longer valid in our efforts to understand the issues of adopted children and their families (Grotevant, 2001).

More recently, Grotevant (2001), a well-known adoption researcher motivated by gaps in adoption literature, did a longitudinal follow-up on a nationwide study of 190 adoptive families “experiencing different levels of openness in adoption” (p. 2). The children were first seen from 1987 to 1992, when they were between 4 years and 12 years of age. The children were interviewed again at 12 years to 20 years of age, at home with their parents. Within its broader purpose, the study had three specific foci: to predict the adjustment in adolescents who are adopted; to look for changes in adoption openness that have occurred; and last, to “conduct cross-sectional comparisons of identity in adopted adolescents” (p. 3). This longitudinal study draws three major conclusions: (1) both problematic and positive adjustments in adolescents are connected to their relationships with their adoptive families; (2) the level of disclosure in most adoptions remained the

same (fully disclosed, mediated, and confidential) throughout middle childhood to adolescence; (3) communication about adoption is an unfolding process across time. There are distinctive phases in the communication process: adoptive parents providing unsolicited information; adoptive parents responding to curiosity by answering or not disclosing information; and the children taking “control of finding their own information” (p. 5); the sense of one’s self, the adoptive identity, developing during adolescence and is “related to qualities of relationships within the adolescent’s family” (p. 5).

When comparing male and female adoptees, there are differences in research results. Research showed adolescent male adoptees across the nation were significantly less depressed than adolescent female adoptees, and males reported higher levels of self-worth and overall better physical health than females (Burrow, Tubman, & Finley, 2004). Adolescent male adoptees reported fewer psychosomatic conditions than females. Female adoptees reported significantly higher academic grades than male adoptees, as well as significantly fewer learning problems (Burrow, Tubman, & Finley, 2004). This research addresses positive outcomes and processes. Much of the earlier research on adopted adolescents focuses on negatives such as higher rates of psychopathology, disrupted placements, and trauma related to searching for birthparents (Grotevant, 2001).

Another difference between male and female adoptees is locus of control. Locus of control is indicated as a measure of a person’s perception of his or her power to control events. In general, women tend to identify with an internal locus of control while men tend to identify with an external locus of control (Bertocci & Schechter, 1990). In the human development field, it appears the internal locus of control can be an important

touchstone for a consolidated identity (Pavao, 1998). A consolidated identity can then lead to healthy personality development.

### **Identity Development in Adoptees**

Identity is formed from several inputs such as how we see ourselves and how we think others see us as well (Treacher & Katz, 2001). These are abstract qualities (Treacher & Katz, 2001), and the fact that an adoptee has two sets of parents makes questions more complicated about their heritage and parents. “Finding one’s place in the world is usually more difficult for adoptees,” wrote Nydam (1999, p. 43). “Even if adoptees have weathered all the storms of development...and even if they have done well in terms of the necessary mourning that comes with relinquishment, they nevertheless have more with which to deal in adult life” (Nydam, 1999, p. 43).

Why do some adoptees develop psychological and/or behavioral problems while others do not? Why do some adoptive families struggle with discord while other families are more harmonious? Both biology and social environment have influence over behavior (Riggins-Casper 2003; van Zinderen Bakker, 2004). According to McGuffin and Martin (1999), behavior “runs in families.” Individuals tend to resemble their parents, siblings, and other close relatives not just in the way they look, but also in the way they behave. In the case of adoptees, a child’s behavior and physical characteristics would be similar to that of their birthparents. A satisfactory model for complex traits in phenotype is the result of genotype and the environment to which it is exposed (McGuffin & Martin, 1999). Environment can be divided into two broad types; the shared environment that acts on all family members and makes them similar, and non-shared experiences that are specific to individuals, and as would be expected, causes differences in the way family

members behave. Major advances in quantitative psychiatric genetics now make it possible to accurately quantify both genetic and environmental contributions (McGuffin & Martin, 1999). Some behavioral disorders and traits are thought to have a genetic component and yet are influenced by environment. For example, the same gene influences both anxiety and depressive disorders; however, the environment is the influence that determines whether the person shows signs or symptoms of anxiety or depression (McGuffin & Martin, 1999). These findings are important for adoptees questioning their genetic background.

There has been much research done on the stability of personality and self-concept. It is estimated that 40-50 percent of the variance in personalities can be attributed to genetic factors, and personalities have been shown to be quite stable over the life span. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that a person's self-concept is stable and resistant to change (Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006). When people incorporate characteristics of self-presentation into their own identities it is referred to as *internalization* (Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006). This typically has been functional as a shift in private behaviors and/or self-beliefs to parallel the self-presentations. Researchers believe if this process is repeated--self-presentations followed by feedback from an audience and internalization of those self-preservations--this can ultimately lead to a change in self-concept. In truth, research shows people are likely to see themselves as they perceive others see them (Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006).

### ***Adult Adoptees***

Adult adoptees are not over-represented in mental-health facilities. However, there are no statistics that tell how many adult adoptees seek private therapy or support

groups for drug addiction, eating disorders, or depression, or that tell about those who commit suicide (Strozier & Flynn, 1996). According to Nydam (1999), adult adoptees often describe themselves as shy loners or floaters and often lack self-confidence. They might have problems with control and power, intimacy, and commitment. Many adoptees are self-negating and suffer feelings of shame, inner badness, and defectiveness. They fear homelessness and betrayal. But most of all, they fear abandonment. Many adoptees give the message to spouses and friends, “Do anything you want to me, but do not abandon me” (Strozier & Flynn, 1996, p. 24). An assessment of adult adoptees (Martin, 1997) compared in their object-relational and attachment capacity with non-adoptees. The results for adoptees showed that separation from one’s biological mother affects the capacity to form relationships. The adoptees were observed to be more insecurely attached, had increased feelings of abandonment, and sensitivity to issues of object loss (Martin, 1997).

A number of theoretical constructs have been developed to explain the predisposition of adopted children to emotional problems by studying adult adoptees. The Stress and Coping Theory (SCT) (Saiz & Main, 2004) of adoptee adjustment is believed to be the most complete attempt at understanding the complexity of adoptee adjustment. This theory looks at both the developmental and contextual factors of adoptee adjustment (Saiz & Main, 2004). The theory is adoptees that focus on their adoptive loss and view their adoption in more negative ways are believed to experience heightened stress, develop fewer successful coping mechanisms, and experience greater adjustment problems. Conversely, more positive adoptees are also more positive about their adoptive status and experience support within their families and community; they develop less

distress and display stronger coping abilities (Saiz & Main, 2004). The SCT of adoption adjustment is quite compelling; however, data or other theoretical perspectives have not shown any strong support of adoptee adjustment (Saiz & Main, 2004).

Supporters of Individual Psychology Theory (Saiz & Main, 2004) believe the progression of an individual through life is seen in a singular pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting. They call this attitude about life a “lifestyle.” Thereby, if grief, loss, or similar adoptee experience, as suggested by the SCT, are associated with adoptee development, this attitude would be observed in an adoptee’s lifestyle. Adler (Saiz & Main, 2004) wrote a person’s early recollections:

...illuminate the origins of the style of life. The basic attitudes which have guided an individual throughout his life and which prevail, likewise, in his present situation, are reflected in those fragments which he has selected to epitomize his feeling about life, and to cherish in his memory as reminders. He has preserved these as his early recollections. (p.177)

At the start, early recollections were used clinically with diverse groups of individuals. Many published case studies demonstrated the validity of early recollections as a clinical tool and many important researchers in adoption, such as Brodzinsky, were proponents of the SCT. Research using early recollections was used to look at SCT. If adoptee loss is as pervasive as believed, loss and stress would be revealed in the early recollections of adoptees since early recollections are reminders of limitations, assets, and circumstances that a person “carries about” with him or her (Saiz & Main, 2004). A study was done to look at the manifest content of adoptees’ early recollections for qualities that would suggest that adoptees experienced the loss and grief hypothesized by the SC Model of adoptee adjustment (Saiz & Main, 2004). The early recollections of 30 adopted and 30 non-adopted adults were collected and scored and the sample was matched to the

“adopted” and “non-adopted” sets for age and gender. The two populations were also matched for qualities aside from adoption. Such qualities, also believed to influence the reporting of early recollections, were identified as birth order, the experience of parental divorce, and current relationship with parents (Saiz & Main, 2004).

This study found qualities in the early recollections of adoptees that are consistent with the SCT of adoptee adjustment. The findings suggest that when adoptees are compared to non-adoptees, the early recollections of adoptees showed a higher incidence of abandonment, concerns about parental efficacy, loss of control and include an elevated presence of grief and loss themes. Adoptees who reported *acknowledgment of difference* as a family coping style were found to have significantly higher positive affect in their recollections than adoptees who reported a rejection difference family coping style (Saiz & Main, 2004).

The early recollection study supports the SCT of adoptee adjustment; however, male adoptees are underrepresented in this study and the results are not divided by gender. It is unknown if male adoptees had the same results in early recollections as the female adoptee participants. Also, the demographics do not give a thorough picture of the participants in this study. Much undisclosed information could make a considerable difference in the world view of an adoptee. Some of the unmentioned variables include age at time of adoption; predisposition of adoptees in-country adoption versus international adoption (international adoptees who have “lost” their birth country, language, culture and birth family); ethnicity of adoptees and ethnicity/culture of adoptive parents; and other circumstances that would influence adoptee adjustment.

Because there are methodological considerations, including heterogeneity in a group of participants and the selection of a control group, it becomes very complicated and difficult to explain psychological risk. This would include how adjustment to an adoptive family is influenced by age at adoption and developmental considerations, in addition to the adoptees' own evaluation and understanding of their adoptive status. It may be that the complex task adoptees face to integrate their history gives rise to the concerns and questions about adoptees' adjustment (Wilson, 2004).

Current research looks at adult adoptees and how they manage their uncertainty and ambiguous loss about birthparents. In a recent study by Powell & Afifi (2005), in-depth interviews were completed with 53 adult adoptees – 9 males and 44 females – placed for adoption as infants or before preschool. The question posed was “how do adoptees manage their uncertainty and ambiguous loss about birthparents?” (Powell & Afifi, 2005, p. 129). The adoptees in this study experienced differing degrees of ambiguous loss as they worked through the uncertainties about their birthparents. Most of the adoptees grew up in healthy family environments; never having “lost” anything and never knowing their birthparents. However, because they did grow up in families, their loss often went unnoticed or unnamed. The degree of loss varied among the participants (Powell & Afifi, 2005). This was dependent on how they managed their uncertainty regarding their birthparents, which was in part due to the level of communication in their adoptive family. The more secure the adopted person felt in their family, the better they were able to manage their uncertainty and grief. The manner in which individuals cope is based on their family's social support and their own appraisal of the uncertainty and loss. In this study, 28 percent of adoptees felt significant degrees of uncertainty and ambiguous

loss and also had long-lasting trust, attachment and relationship issues. As they began to gather information about birthparents, their uncertainty increased and so did their drive to reduce the uncertainty. Many of the adoptees chose to maintain their current level of uncertainty about their birthparents for fear of rejection, disturbing the life of their birthparents, and discovering the truth about their relinquishment (Powell & Afifi, 2005). Powell and Afifi (2005) came to the conclusion, even though adoptees' are lacking information about their heritage, which it did not necessarily lead to uncertainty or loss. Because adoptees are missing what society refers to as essential biological connections, it is often assumed they long for the information. The result of this study suggests uncertainty "exists only insofar as people perceive it to exist" (Powell & Afifi, 2005, p. 147). This study underrepresented male adoptees and it failed to mention which gender of adoptees was most successful in dealing with uncertainty and ambiguous loss.

### ***Searching for Birthparents and Birthparent Fantasies***

It has been suggested one-third of adoptees search for their birthparents, one-third contemplate searching, and one-third say they will never search. Some (Nydam, 1998; Lichtenstein, 2005; Lifton, 1994) suggest searchers are looking for answers to their romantic fantasies about their biological parents that all adoptees seem to have. Kreuger and Hanna (1997) completed a study that focused on gender differences in adoption and searching. Their findings suggest that males were more likely to have been placed for adoption later than females and that they were more likely to de-emphasize the importance of physical similarities with adoptive family. Additionally, males had more frequent positive reactions to their adoptive status and had noticed very little connection to adoptive status and physical or emotional problems. Male adoptees tended to

internalize their feelings about adoption. Men were also more likely to have started actively searching at a later age. The research found that the gender gap in search behavior is reduced in countries where access to adoption records is easier to obtain (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991).

The “search,” looking for one’s self, is something all humans do. It is not disrespecting one’s present family to search for the past (Pavao, 1998). Pavao (1998) believes the decision to search is normal and not the symptom of a problem. She writes that it is a “normative crisis for adopted persons” (p. 76). For the adopted person, either an actual search for birthparents or origins or an internal search for adult identity is a basic theme. Resolving fantasies into reality, possibly by finding birthparents, even though it might be painful, is part of development for adoptees. Still, adoptees are called to do the “intra psychic and interpersonal investigation” if they are to piece together all the parts of being an adult (Nydham, 1999).

The reasons behind why adoptees search for birthparents has been a topic of intense study. Bertocci and Schechter (1991) reviewed 12 studies on adult adoptee's perception of their need to search. In these 12 studies, the majority of the searchers were White, middle-class females in young adulthood. In the studies that asked participants why the search had been activated, delayed, or avoided, the response was almost universally connected to fears of “hurting, alienating, or losing the adoptive parents” (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991, p. 181). Female adoptees searched more often for birthparents—usually their mothers, when compared to male adoptees. Female adoptees also had closer relationships with their adoptive families and communicated better about their adoptions (Jago, Kreuger, & Hanna, 1997; Riggins-Caspers, 2003). There may be

two reasons for this. First, women who become mothers experience the bonding with a child, which serves as a catalyst for searching. Second, society allows women more leeway in expressing emotions. Female adoptees have the extra burden of conflicting views of sexuality and motherhood. On one hand, their adopted mothers may be infertile, and on the other hand, their birthmother did get pregnant and chose to relinquish them as babies or had them taken away (Nydam, 1999; NAIC, 2001; Pavao, 1998).

Research on adoptees searching for birthparents is often complex and contradictive. Kuhn (2001), an adopted person herself, did a study with adoptees searching for birthparents. Anderson, as cited in Kuhn (2001), believes searching for one's biological heritage is a sign of health and we need to question why some adopted persons choose not to search. The research suggested a prime reason for searching is that adoptees wish to alter the way "in which they experience themselves." More recently, the theoretical, empirical, and clinical case adoption literature found that "familiarity with the birthparents is necessary to the development of a healthy identity in their child" (p.21). She also concluded that adoptees that see themselves as phenotypically dissimilar (look physically or ethnically different) to their adoptive family are more likely to search than adopted persons who believe they look more similar to their adopted family (Kuhn, 2001). She also found adult adoptees that designated themselves as "searching," showed lower self-esteem, poorer identity, less self-satisfaction, and other problems when compared to non-searching adult adoptees. It was also suggested there are disturbed family relationships and personality problems in adoptees that chose to search for birth family members. It was concluded a preoccupation with one's ancestry is compatible with psychological disturbance. On the other hand, it has been attributed that "a lack of

interest” in one’s heritage is related to a secure sense of self (Kuhn, 2001). Most adoptees do not search until their 20’s or 30’s, or until their adoptive parents die (Lifton, 1994; Nydam, 1999). Kuhn’s (2001) sample included 60 students that were recruited from an advertisement in the university paper and from solicitation in lower- division classes throughout a university. The mean age of the participants was 27 years and included 36 percent males and 64 percent females, all who were adopted before the age of two years. In this sample, slightly over one-third of the adoptees indicated having searched for birthparents and found the experience “mildly” positive. It is important to note that questions were not asked as to the extent or outcome of the searching effort. One-third indicated they would never search and the final third said they might search someday. Kuhn stated that adoptees who searched reported more negative attitudes about adoption overall than did non-searchers. They also reported a more distant relationship to adoptive parents than those adopted persons who have not searched for their biological parents (Kuhn, 2001).

Birthparent fantasies are common among adopted persons. Nydam (1994) interviewed 17 adopted adults concerning their birthparent fantasies. They were members of an adoption advocacy and support group in Denver called *Adoptees in Search*. Every participant was in the process of searching for her or his birthparents. The length of their searches stretched from three months to 12 years. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 49. Thirteen subjects were female; four were male and all were Anglo-Americans. All 17 reported birthparent fantasies. Nydam summarized his research findings by stating that relinquished adoptees may have significant use of fantasy as a way to explore their “ongoing relationship with their birthparents” (p.109) even though they were seldom able

to talk about their birthparents with family and friends. All through childhood and into adulthood, the adoptees' fantasies 'stayed' buried in their minds where these thoughts could be reached. These fantasies provide a secret place to go where they could go and work on their ghost parent conundrums (Lifton, 1994; Nydam, 1999).

### **Summary**

According to the National Adoption Attitudes Survey (2003), Americans have a favorable opinion about adoption as well as some personal experience with adoption. Hispanic populations are more likely to consider adoption than African-American and Caucasian populations. Adoption is an effective intervention leading to adopted children catching up with their peers in most areas such as height, attachment, and school achievement. Independent adoptions have become the predominant means for adopting babies.

Adoption is seen differently by adopted children. Some view their adoption as positive while other children may see adoption as threatening, stigmatizing, or potentially harmful. In addition, the adjustment to adoption is multifaceted. The central factor connected with "successful adolescent" development is related to family interaction and less to events before adoption or to known biological background. Finally, one-third of adoptees do search for birthparents, one-third indicated they would never search and the final third said they might search someday. Lastly, the decision to search is considered normal and not the symptom of a problem.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This chapter describes the research method used to study the experience of men relinquished as infants by their birthparents and attempts to capture the meaning of the experience rather than focus on outcomes or results of the experience. In addition, this chapter includes a discussion of the phenomenological approach used and the foundation of this approach in qualitative research methods.

#### *A Phenomenological Method*

As a research method, qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this research. As an epistemology, qualitative research offers a philosophy of phenomenological inquiry using a naturalistic approach to holistically and inductively understand context-specific human experiences. Patton (Creswell, 1998) wrote that theoretically qualitative methods emphasize inductive strategies of theory development. Phenomenological research does not have an objective truth as its end goal; individuals discover the truth in their experience and through personal knowledge. In this qualitative study, I used a selected group of men to look at a specific phenomenon, that of “being relinquished.” The objective was to discover how these men made sense of their worlds and their realities.

Qualitative inquiry methods also allow the investigator to study issues deeply, with the evaluator acting as the instrument (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology, as qualitative inquiry, helps to understand a particular experience as a distinct reality

wherein presuppositions were carefully examined and warily avoided. To honor this researcher role, I adopted a stance of empathetic neutrality (Patton, 1998) in the open-ended interviews and data collection. I brought a willingness to be true to the emerging intricacies, deep emotional complexities, and perspectives—and the commitment to report all findings.

### ***Procedures and Research Questions***

Because qualitative inquiries are emergent in nature, I developed primary questions to focus the study. Seven participants took part in two interviews. The first interview instigated as-complete-as-possible accounts of the adoptees' unique life stories. The second, follow-up interview provided both the participants and me an opportunity to reflect on the impact of the initial interview and to clarify any unclear responses provided in the first interview.

### ***Sampling Techniques***

Participants were located throughout Colorado by advertising online and by flyers posted in public locations. Twice, a friend passed the information on to the possible participant who then contacted me (See Appendices A and B). Ten men responded to the advertisements; however, due to scheduling issues, I was only able to interview seven out of the ten respondents.

## **Procedures**

Telephone contact with each male adoptee determined his interest in and eligibility for participating in this study. An 8-item questionnaire allowed screening of participants and ensured they met the necessary criteria (See Appendix C). The eligible respondents were told the process would require two interviews with me. The first

interview took approximately two hours; it consisted of an in-depth, tape-recorded interview. Participants were told the second meeting would take approximately one hour and would allow them to share any additional thoughts or feelings that might emerge after the first interview. The second interview also provided me an opportunity to clarify responses from the first meeting.

At the first meeting a two-page demographic-information questionnaire and a participation-confirmation letter were completed by participants. Demographic data described the general characteristics of the sample, such as age, birthplace, ethnicity, presence of siblings (biological and/or adopted), and contact with birthmother and/or birthfather (See Table 1). The consent form and demographic survey were collected at the first interview (See Appendices D and E).

## **Interview**

### ***Initial Interview Questions***

The following questions were developed for the initial interviews. The intent of the questions was to generate specific thoughts about adoption.

1. Tell me what you remember about the circumstances of your adoption.
2. Tell me about when you began to understand what it means to be adopted.
3. What were your thoughts then about your birthmother and birthfather?
4. How have you come to understand the circumstances surrounding your relinquishment?

Many times, however, the participants did not need prompting to talk about their adoption experience, and in those cases specific questions were abandoned. As a result, the information that I gathered was often unexpected. I set aside personal values, biases,

and prejudgments in an effort to create a pleasant rapport and atmosphere with participants in every aspect of data collection.

### **Setting**

Interview setting is important in qualitative research, but the nature of this study did not require a specific environment for researcher observations. Comfortable, well-soundproofed, private areas within public settings were chosen. The interviews were kept confidential. I conducted four of the first interviews at Colorado State University's Morgan Library; one in the Music Library at the University of Northern Colorado; one in a public library in a small town on the western slope of Colorado; and one at the Denver campus of Metropolitan State College. I completed five of the second interviews at the Morgan Library, one in a public library in a small town on the western slope of Colorado, and one at the Denver campus of Metropolitan State College.

The interviews occurred in two phases: one to gather information and the second to summarize and clarify and, if necessary, ask more questions. During the first interview, I collected and reviewed the participants' signed consent forms and completed demographic questionnaires. Informants were assured that all information would be kept confidential and their files would be assigned code numbers to protect their identities. They were informed that I would keep the master list of names and code numbers in a locked file, and that I would destroy the list once the data had been collected.

Each interview was audio taped. Initially, participants answered a series of questions designed to provoke the narrative account of their relinquishment experiences and to help them stay focused. The format of the interview was designed to encourage the participants to describe their experiences in their own words and to allow them to share

their personal stories. Upon completion of the interview, the participants and I scheduled appointments for follow-up interviews, which took place four to five weeks after the initial interview. I coded and analyzed the first interviews and developed new interview questions from the emerging themes.

The second interviews were designed to enable participants to discuss any thoughts or feelings about relinquishment that had surfaced during or following the initial interviews. If major concerns or issues resulted from the first interview, the second interview gave me an opportunity to hear their comments and, if necessary, refer them to a psychotherapist. In addition, the second interviews also gave me time to look at the initial transcript and to follow up on any unclear areas or contradictions. At the end of the second interview, participants were asked whether they wished to receive a copy of the results of the study.

### **Demographics**

Each participant completed a one-page demographic survey at the beginning of the first meeting (See Appendix G). All of the participants were adopted before the age of two years. Of the seven adoptees, two were adopted in Colorado, one in New York, one in Pennsylvania, one in Nebraska, one in Indiana, and one in New Mexico. All of the participants were living in Colorado at the time of the first interview. I assigned each man a number for confidentiality purposes, and I have used pseudonyms for the participants as well as others mentioned in the study.

### **Method**

Initially, I made reflective notes after each first interview. Several themes emerged after I listened to the first round of interviews. I formed new questions for

clarification from the first interviews. In the second interviews, I asked the participants to clarify, correct, or add to the information from the first interview. I transcribed all tapes from the first and second interviews, and then I read and reread the transcriptions several times. I analyzed each interview transcript using the principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). I initially coded the first and second interviews of four participants by hand. In this process, themes emerged which I loosely organized and then examined more closely. Through the hand-coding analysis, I linked phrases or key words to passages of the interviews. I then coded the complete transcripts using the *Nvivo* software program. The themes coded both by hand and with computer assistance yielded numerous subordinate themes. I examined each theme to determine its relation to other themes. Eventually, by clustering and collapsing the many themes of each participant's interviews and their individual quotes, major themes developed. This is the with-in case analysis. Some themes of individuals that were less common were not included in the cross-case analysis while others were when they were deemed important. I then integrated the numerous themes and developed main themes across transcripts. These shared themes helped me to extract the essence of the participants' experiences of relinquishment and adoption. To ensure confidentiality, I combined and collated the responses of participants to accurately reflect their story and the feelings behind their story of relinquishment and adoption. In the cross case analysis, the experiences of the seven male adoptees vary greatly, and their perspectives provide a continuum of the phenomenon.

## Analysis/Results

The methodological rationale and process for this study follows the guidelines of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a version of the phenomenological method that accepts the impossibility of gaining straight insight into research participants' realities. IPA's goal is to explore the research participant's perspective from her or his own experience, yet it is generally recognized that such an inquiry necessitates the implication of the researcher's own worldview and also the relationship between participant and researcher. Consequently, the phenomenological analysis the researcher elucidates is an *interpretation* of the participant's reality based on experience (Willig, 2001).

Because the nature of the research question is sensitive, I was concerned with prejudgments as well as elite bias. Epoché was central in my mind as the study took place. *Epoché* is a Greek term that describes the theoretical moment in which all belief in the existence of the real world, and consequently all action in the real world, are suspended (Wikipedia). I set aside personal values, biases, and prejudgments in an effort to create a pleasant rapport and atmosphere with participants in every aspect of data collection. I relied upon intuition, imagination, and universal structures to grasp a picture of the experiences and to hear the voices of the participants.

I checked the validity and reliability of the information in several ways. First, to address validity, I kept a reflexive journal. After I reviewed my notes from the initial interviews, I developed clarifying questions for the follow-up interviews. Next, I interviewed the participants a second time to clarify any misinterpretations on my part and to answer any questions they had. I also encouraged the participants to bring up any

issues they wished to discuss. Throughout the interview process and my analysis and synthesis of the findings, I checked for clarification of my bias by talking with my methodologist several times and by staying in touch with current research (Creswell, 1998; Miles, 1994).

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of men relinquished as infants by birthparents and the personal meaning male adoptees attribute to relinquishment and adoption. As often happens with qualitative studies, the participants told many stories to emphasize their points of view. In this study, the type of stories the participants told naturally separated into several categories: a) stories the men had been told about being relinquished and of their adoption, including events and dates that each participant found unique about his story; b) stories the adopted men told about their childhood and upbringing; and c) the effects of relinquishment as indicated by the stories the men felt compelled to tell about who they are now and who they are becoming. Fictional names are used for all of the participants and all family members to ensure confidentiality

The results from the study are shared as follows. In the first section, each participant is introduced through a short case history and personal demographics. The with-in case analysis captures the emerging themes and the phenomenon of relinquishment and adoption as infants for these men. The second section discusses the cross-case analysis. The third section addresses the results by answering the research questions proposed in Chapter 1.

### ***The Interviews***

The initial interviews started out with leading, warm-up questions. Although several participants were careful to answer “correctly,” other participants appeared very comfortable from the beginning and eagerly talked about what was currently happening in their lives. Many times the questions surprised the adoptees since they purported they had never considered the concept of “relinquishment.” I assured them they could just tell their story and that “tangents” were a part of the process. Several participants volunteered that their adoptive mothers were suspicious of the research project and the intention behind it. I assured them I had no presuppositions, assumptions, or judgments. Several participants interpreted the first question, “Tell me what you remember about your adoption,” literally and answered that they could not remember because they were “only a few days old.” Interestingly, several participants referred to themselves as “the baby” when they talked about the actual relinquishment and adoption process.

### **Within-Case Analysis**

#### ***Mitch’s Story***

Mitch, a 24-year-old graduate student, is starting on his second master’s degree which is in social work. Mitch had found out about the project when a friend forwarded an e-mail from Colorado State University’s student list server. He has never talked to a therapist about his relinquishment or adoption. He was attending graduate school in the South after being flooded out of Tulane University in New Orleans during the Katrina hurricane. At the time of the interview, he had been working as a financial consultant, but he left that position and was preparing for a summer of travel. Mitch had been told that he was born in New York and grew up in the southeastern part of the country. He appeared

to be Caucasian, and he was adopted by a married couple who are Caucasian. He has a sister, also adopted, who is three years older.

Mitch was dressed in casual business attire for the interview because he wanted to wear what was “appropriate.” It seemed that he wanted to do the interview as well as possible and was very conscientious. Frequently he would ask if he was going off on a “tangent” or giving too much information. Throughout the first half of the interview, he earnestly tried to answer the questions the “right” way and was very careful in his mannerisms and choice of words. He did, however, become more comfortable and talked openly, volunteering information he felt was important for me to understand.

In the first interview, when Mitch told his story of relinquishment and adoption, he used the word “normal” 10 times to describe himself, his sister, and his family. He explained that his father is a preacher and that he had the stigma of being a “PK,” or preacher’s kid. He said he appreciates his adoptive parents, but his relationship with his adoptive mom has been more difficult and he has always been closer to his father. He said this about his upbringing: “I come from a very, very conservative family....”

Mitch said he felt it was important for me to know that, in spite of his being a PK and adopted, he was a normal person—he got good grades in school and was never in trouble. He said being adopted “was not a big deal” to him, and he had never had problems talking about it. He said he actually enjoys talking about being adopted. He did have a few friends when he was growing up who also were adopted:

...I never really thought it was a big deal because it wasn't presented to me as a big deal, and it's very interesting the different reactions ... you get from people. I mean, even now, but more, like, as a kid...

Initially, Mitch had a limited amount of information to share but after some probing questions about his relinquishment and adoption, Mitch said this about his adoption:

I haven't talked about the details, no....I don't know. You're putting all these good thoughts in my head that I've never thought of ... I think it might have something to do with me coming from such a traditional, conservative household that I just assumed, you know, it was normal....

Although Mitch's own story of adoption had gaps and holes, what he did know about adoption in general came from a children's book he had growing up. Mitch knew nothing of different types of adoption, such as closed, open, or kinship, but he was very interested in the processes. And even though he has not asked to access his adoption information as an adult, he explained what he knew of his relinquishment and his adoption as a closed adoption.

Mitch thought that because his dad was a preacher, his parents may have gotten preferential treatment in order to adopt him more quickly. He had a few details about how his adoptive family got him and how he feels his story is unique. He explained: "...and then I was born on July 30, and they got me on August 26th of the same year. This is actually their anniversary."

Mitch never asked his adoptive parents any questions about details of his adoption until after the first interview of this project. He said he felt his adoptive mother would not have handled being questioned very well and that she is "just pretty sensitive ... I don't know if she would ever understand, I guess ...." He said he worried that she would be very upset, and it was not worth it.

However, after the first interview, Mitch did go home and he asked his mom about his relinquishment and his birthparents. He then found out his birthmother had

received no prenatal care. This information was an epiphany for him and explained a lot about his poor health at birth. It also made him think differently about his birthmother.

Mitch's adoptive parents had told him early in his life why he was adopted, but he never questioned what he remembered from his childhood. He thought he remembered something about infertility problems that led them to the decision of adoption. Again, he was intrigued by what he did not know, and he went home after the first interview and talked to his adoptive mom. Doing this was a big step for Mitch because he had felt his relationship with his adoptive mom was not close enough for intimate conversation.

During a conversation between Mitch and his mom, she shared with Mitch that she suffered from an emotional breakdown around the time of his adoption. His mother claimed that a contributing factor to her breakdown was learning about a woman drowning her children. After this talk, Mitch felt for the first time that he and his mom had an adult conversation the way a "real" mom and her son would talk. He felt they had turned a corner, and he was very pleased. He said he feels closer to his adoptive mom following their talk, and he believes he now can converse with her as an adult son.

Mitch felt an important part of his story included how he and his sister (who is also adopted) had gone far Left in their political views—far from their parents. His sister knows and keeps the secret that he has published a Left-view article in a magazine. Both he and his sister have traveled extensively and have lived all over the world. Mitch gives away all of his possessions every few years and moves. He says he is not attached to possessions. He discussed how he learned this pattern as a child when his father would be transferred every few years to a new parish. He said this during the first interview,

I think that's why my sister and I are so close because we spent the first 18 years of our life moving every four years, always having to start over. Going from place

to place is so easy for us now, like, it's not a big deal ... the adventure and the newness of any place is just exciting to me. Anything new, and it gets me out of my comfort zone, I love.

During the second interview, Mitch said in a frustrated tone that he needs to stop his “jumpy legs” from moving so much and settle down. He said he really has difficulty staying in one place for too long. He volunteered that he had several serious girlfriends, but he is not certain whether being adopted had any effect on his relationships:

As far as ... intimate relationships ... I don't know if it is one of those things that's caused ... a lot of subtle or unconscious problems or not. I guess I've probably had three “serious” girlfriends, which are over a year, and I mean they've all ended, and they've all ended in good ways, I suppose.

Mitch plans to marry and have a family. When asked whether he would consider adoption, he quickly related the following story. At first, he told the story as if it was about himself, but then he eventually corrected it to say it actually happened to his sister. The story was about a teacher who had accused his sister of lying about being adopted, and his parents had to go to school and have a conference. The teacher was very surprised that his sister really had been adopted. This was one of several situations he mentioned about growing up adopted.

When the topic of relinquishment was broached, Mitch mentioned having shared with friends who are also adopted his desire to search for his birthparents. However, he said he could not search for them for fear of hurting his adoptive parents and that he did not have a “good enough reason”—other than medical information--to really know about them. What Mitch does know is that his birthmother was 14 years old when she had him. At this point he knows nothing about his birthfather.

Mitch also told of an imaginary set of circumstances he had invented surrounding his relinquishment by a very young birthmother. He said he had always assumed that his birthmother wanted to have sex at 13 years old, and he never thought about other circumstances that would have ended in her becoming pregnant. He also assumed his birthfather was both of low socioeconomic status and a teenager. Mitch never seriously considered searching for his parents until an older adopted friend started the process. He said he would only seek out his birthparents for medical information and shared the following story, which makes him feel guilty when he thinks of searching for his birthparents.

I remember once, being 16, real upset, having an argument with my parents, and letting that slip out. Like, playing that card is not something you ever want to do with your parents. You know, like, "Well you're not my real mom." That's like the worst thing you could possibly say to them. I really think that's probably the most hurtful thing I've ever said to her ... that's why, the number one reason why, I wouldn't want to seek out my birthmother or my birthfather is just because, first of all, I don't think I'd have a good enough reason...

At the second interview, Mitch asked me whether anything "blatantly stuck out" about him and whether he seemed normal compared to the other participants. He felt he had had a good conversation with his sister and had learned more about her feelings. He also was surprised and happy about the conversation he had with his mom about his relinquishment and his adoption and still remains ambivalent about finding his birthparents.

### ***Sam's Story***

Sam found out about the research project through a campus newsletter for faculty and staff at a university in the state of Colorado. He was born in Pennsylvania. Sam is a reserved, well-spoken, 37-year-old scientist. He is married and has a young son. He said

he had not talked with a therapist about his adoption or relinquishment. Sam has an adopted sister that is two years younger than he. He was adopted by a Catholic-Italian family in a closed adoption through Catholic Social Services. This organization allowed no exchange of identifying information although they do keep information on file. Sam knows he was born to a Catholic-Italian birthmother. His parents told him his birthmother was young and could not keep him.

When I asked Sam what he remembered of the story of his adoption and how he felt about it, he said this,

No, it never really was a ... it didn't bother me, and it wasn't something that I was really all that curious about. I never felt like I needed to contact my birthparents for any reason. When I was growing up, we never really even discussed it.... My parents tried to have children for a long time, and my mother went through several miscarriages, and they decided to adopt.

Growing up adopted was not an issue with Sam. He stated that he very much likes his adoptive parents and being adopted: "... never really bothered me growing up ... and because I was adopted as an infant, my parents are all that I have known."

Sam said he did not have many discussions with friends about his being adopted. Sam remembered that his parents did belong to some sort of adoption support group when he was young. He met other adoptees in the group but did not stay friends with any of them.

Sam is grateful to his adoptive parents for raising him. He said any trouble he got into was only mischief and that his adopted sister was "good, too"; but he feels she struggled more with adoption issues. Currently he is fairly close to both parents, but when asked, he said he feels he is closer to his mom:

Because growing up, my mom took on a lot of the day-to-day child-rearing responsibilities. I always did things with my dad, but it's really, I think, only over

the past, say, 10 years ... I had good conversations with my dad about personal things. I think he didn't always want to share that stuff with me; I don't know if he was trying to shield me from it—difficulties in his life. He was always willing to listen to me, but it's been a lot easier for me to talk to my mom about different things. I think as a result of that we're closer.

Sam answered the initial questions thoughtfully but appeared more forthcoming when sharing information about his reunification with his birthmom, Gina. Although his adoptive parents were concerned about her “motives,” they did give Sam the initial contact letter from Gina. His birthmother had sought him out and found him when he was almost 25 years old. He reported that this experience has been full of emotional ups and downs. Sam said the first conversation with Gina was about his relinquishment and her relationship with his birthfather. Sam shared: “My birthmother was involved with a married man when she got pregnant and decided to have the baby and give it up for adoption.” Sam said his birthfather does know about him and he has two half-sisters. Interestingly, Sam mentioned that the name his birthmother had given him at birth was the same as his birthfather's. He could not remember the actual name and this frustrated him.

Sam said the only issue he has with his adoptive parents is their reluctance to support his relationship with his birthmother. He has a hard time trying to understand why his adoptive parents are distressed by his relationship with her. He went on to say this about how his adoptive parents have reacted to his birthmother:

I don't know what it is like to be an adoptive parent either, so it may be a concern to them that they are not biologically related to me and that they may feel there are certain connections that we can never make. They may think a birthparent can step in and make that connection.

His parents told his adopted sister about his birthmother contacting him. His sister did not approve of his impending relationship with his birthmother, saying it was a “huge mistake.” Although his sister was initially reluctant about his relationship with his birthmother, she eventually found her own birthfamily:

She was concerned because you never know what you will find; it's just a big black box, a big mystery. At first, she gave me the impression that she didn't really approve, and she didn't know why I was doing it. The fact that we're adopted was more of an issue for my sister. It seemed to concern her more than me. She's recently gotten in touch with her birthmother.

Sam feels his relationship with his birthmother was an impetus for his sister to have a connection with her birthmother. He recommended that his sister not initially tell their parents about her finding her birthfamily because they are still upset over his relationship with his birthmother.

Sam has definite thoughts about adoptive families, and he shared them in the interview. He feels adoptive parents should try to be open to their adoptive children searching for birthparents. He feels his adoption was a successful solution for his adoptive parents and his birthmother. He cares a great deal for all of his parents, adoptive and birth. In his own nuclear family, he has a supportive wife and a son. He states that he is hopeful that someday his son can have open relationships with both families—Sam's adoptive parents and his birthmother. He does worry, however, about his son telling his adoptive parents that he has a relationship with his birthgrandmother. Sam has decided to distance himself from his birthmother until he finds a solution that will make all the relationships work. He said he really wants to stay connected to his birthmother.

### *Tom's Story*

Tom is 31 years old. He was born in Nebraska and grew up not far from where he was born. He has an adopted brother who is three years older. Tom is married and currently has no children. He is an intelligent and intense person and seems to understand himself quite well. He said he is “sarcastic” and not an optimist. Tom has often been to therapy about his adoption and said he plans to continue with therapy as needed.

Tom is a graduate student who is working on his Ph.D. in psychology. He found out about the research project from a friend while he was on a graduate internship in Denver. He graduated from his doctoral program right around the time of the second interview.

Three weeks before our first interview, Tom and his birthmother found each other via an adoption/reunion Website. Tom was actively searching for his birthparents, having signed up on an adoption Website for reunification:

...she had found my information through a Website—one of the major Websites ... for whatever reason, the e-mails did not work ... my phone number was also on there—she ended up calling me on the phone ... that's where we met for the first time and ended up talking for 50 minutes.... I have only e-mailed since.

Tom learned a lot about the circumstances of his relinquishment from his birthmother. Donna was 17 years old when she had him, and she still sees his birthfather on occasion. Tom's birthmother later married someone else and had three daughters. Tom said his sisters have always known about him. His birthmother told him his birthfather also had children. Tom was a bit surprised that Donna, his birthmother, had stayed in the same town where he was born.

Tom was very interested in talking about his newly developing relationship with his biological mom. He was still in awe of all that had happened in the past few weeks:

I never expected that I was going to get that phone call. I've had obviously a lot less time to prepare for what this was going to be like.... She's essentially handed the reins over, and she has given me an open door to ask questions, or say whatever I need to say ... I feel very comfortable with the situation that we've set up to say, 'Well, let's just chat and see what happens ...' ...we swap e-mails, and we have been for several weeks, just kind of talking about where we've been in life, what we're doing now. She's filled in some background, like the ethnicity thing. I think we're just leaving the door open to whatever's going to happen.

I asked Tom what his thoughts were on his birthmother now that they had been in contact. He replied with this answer:

...did I think maybe she should have kept me because she was getting married? I don't know; I guess I've never given it any thought. I'm really a big believer that people do the best thing that they can at any given moment with the knowledge that they have. They may look back on it for the rest of their lives and regret it. I'm certainly guilty of that in many ways myself, but I think, and maybe that's just my own defensiveness or whatever, but I believe that people do the best they can at any given moment.

Tom acknowledged that being found by his birthmother had changed his life, and he said he was having a hard time “making sense of it all.” He said he was totally consumed with thoughts of his birthmother and family for the first few weeks but was now relaxing a bit more. Because the connection with his biological mother is so new, he is still a bit skeptical about the relationship. He said he is especially uncertain of his extended biological family. His tone was a bit firm when he said he was trying to keep expectations moderate:

The people who raised me, these are my parents. These are the people that I have a relationship with; they're the ones who've been there through all the good times and the bad times and all that.... I certainly don't feel any loyalty or any special connection to these people just because I'm genetically related to them. I can't deny the curiosity either ... I think that's where I really struggle.... What kind of a relationship do you have with a biological relative that you don't know? Is it a friendship? Is it a like a second parent? I don't even know what to call this...

When the conversation switched to his adoptive parents, Tom said his relationship with them had never been easy. They were older when they adopted his brother, and then three years later they adopted him. He stated that his adoptive parents have never supported him emotionally, nor do they understand his accomplishments. He said growing up adopted in his family was not without a cost. His “biggest complaint” about growing up was taking care of his adoptive mom. He described a recent fight with her on the phone:

When I had this big fight with her on the phone the other night, she hung up the phone because she couldn't handle it. It didn't matter what I wanted. It didn't matter what I needed to talk about. It only mattered what she wanted.

Tom said he does not remember talking about adoption at home:

...there are so many more preeminent things going on, and he said his household was full of anxiety, and it was “right there, all the time.” Just, even thinking back about the adoption, which could have easily been something they did discuss, it was so far removed from everything else that was going on. Maybe that's a big part of the reason why I've just never thought about it.

Tom became intense and animated when talking about his family and his mom in particular. He said his mom was easily upset and when he was a child, she would blame him for many things. According to him, she would withdraw from him emotionally as a punishment. Tom related the following story to help me understand how difficult it was for him:

I can literally remember times when my mom would not talk to me ... and she made it very clear that it was my fault...what was going on, and that I had to come up with some kind of a way to apologize enough, or something to make it okay. I absolutely despised that. And I remember it so vividly, and I remember just being so upset about it. I mean, as a little kid, how do you make sense of something like that? All you know is that you're bad and your mom is upset about it....

As an adult, Tom still struggles for his parents' approval and support. He said he tries to get his parents engaged in his life,

It's because of that emotional connection, I think. I mean there's still something that I need from them...but it's me that it's affected. I'm the one that has the needs.

Tom said he holds no resentment against his adoptive parents and wants to believe they were doing the best they could at the time. Regardless of what Tom remembers, he said he is still loyal to his adoptive parents:

...but that's the part of me that really tries to give my parents the benefit of the doubt and say, 'Well, they weren't the best parents there ever were.... So they did the best they could and it was pretty poor in many ways ... emotionally in particular.' But, if I wasn't a shrink, I don't think I'd really understand that ... so I try to be as honest as I can be with myself about saying they did the best they could. There are still parts of me that need to be healed as a result of what they did.

Tom said that when he was growing up, his family rarely got together with extended family. He does not consider his adoptive parents' relatives to be his family. At the same time, he stated that he really does not feel any connection to his newly-found biological family yet either. Tom said all his feelings were confused and things felt so uncertain at this point in his life. He shared that he had strong feelings about trust in his adoptive family and strong feelings toward his newly-found biological family:

... You know, people are just people, as far as I m concerned; and one way or the other, you have to earn my trust, you have to earn my respect, and vice versa.

Tom did tell his older brother about his birthmother's contact. He feels closer to his brother now since he has shared the information about talking to his birthmother. He also said his wife is very supportive of this connection.

At the second interview, Tom was agitated. He had something on his mind, and it was obvious he wanted to talk and not be asked questions. He said he had not heard from his biological mom in several weeks, and the rest of our conversation centered on her not continuing her contact with him.

..we had been swapping e-mails relatively regularly ... the most recent, I sent her an e-mail, maybe two weeks ago, and she never responded back. And I actually haven't heard anything from her since then, which is really unique because she had been writing a couple times a week...

He went on with his thoughts:

...a lot of the feelings that have come up have been really hard for me to reconcile ... when you had been hearing from somebody so regularly and they had been— she's always been so adamant about saying it's always so hard for me to restrain myself, I want to write every day ... all this eagerness ... it's easy to be pessimistic in those situations ... clearly this was a farce, or whatever, she was trying to get something from me ... it wasn't for real. I think there's lots of those thoughts running through my head ... what is going on, or what does it all mean? ... Is this somebody trying to pull my chain, and was she trying to get something from me and she was tired of investing the time ... now she's just going to casually disappear....

Tom became more expressive as he talked about the current situation with his birthmother. He said he was torn between letting his biological mom go and trying to figure out why he had not heard from her. He was definitely hurt and afraid he had lost her again. He said he was not really invested in the relationship:

...I mean, I sent her this lengthy e-mail ... She said, "I just haven't heard from you and just wanted to check in." I said, "Well, I sent you this 50-page e-mail a week ago—what happened?" ...I ended up resending ... I am not so invested in this relationship ... not feeling this tremendous sense of loss or connection or loyalty or anything like that, to where I am gonna go to the ends of the earth to pursue it. I am not willing to just abandon it either, but ... I am probably a lot less invested than she is...those feelings...I mean, I don't know how to make sense ... I've been going through lots of experiences lately that I don't know how to explain.... Could it ever go anywhere? I am trying not to be too judgmental about what's going on with me right now ... just thinking that this is so bizarre that I don't know what's gonna happen next.

I asked Tom whether he ever wanted to meet Donna and what that would be like for him. He responded:

... The only thing I can say for sure is it would be weird—very awkward--to meet this person...because I don't know how this person is supposed to fit ... what kind of person they are ... Is it a friend? Is it family?... The whole thing just blows me away.... Do you shake their hand? Give them a hug? Do you high five? ... Everything from the most basic social interaction to what do you talk about ... it completely eludes me.... It could stir up a whole lot of things I don't even know are there, or it could be interestingly nominal ... that's the only thing I know for sure.

Tom said he has conflicted feelings about the family that adopted him. He appreciates that they adopted him, but he still craves emotional support and acknowledgment from them. He was having a difficult time with the emotions surrounding the birthmother who relinquished him, found him, and then stopped e-mailing him. He was struggling to figure out all the emotions he was feeling. He said his wife and her family support him and are truly his family. Tom related that he knows he has issues and fully believes in therapy.

### ***Isaac's Story***

Isaac is single and 24 years old. He attends college and became aware of the research project through a faculty member at Colorado State University. He was born in Denver and grew up in northern Colorado. He said he is half Jewish, and a Jewish adoption agency found him for his parents. I asked Isaac about what he remembered of the circumstances of his relinquishment, a question that he took very literally:

It was a closed adoption. I was 19 days old ... so I don't really remember ... I don't have memory of it ... what I know of the circumstances is that my birthparents were 16 and 17 when I was born. I have some limited information about them—very limited—what they looked like, their hobbies ... I don't have any medical background.... Names [he actually had their first names] ... they both wanted to

graduate high school—go to college, things like that, and so decided to give me up for adoption.

Isaac had additional details about his relinquishment and his adoption because his parents were very open with him. Isaac said his mom had been through years of fertility treatments and they (his adoptive mother and father) had been waiting a year to get a baby to adopt when they got the phone call about his availability. He eagerly told this part of his story:

... I was put in foster care.... The day before, my mom was shoe shopping ... my dad was at home and got a phone call while [that] said “Hey, want a child?” ... my parents went down to the foster family and they were, I guess, jokingly reluctant to give me up...my parents did not even have a car seat yet ... I know my dad told me my mom was holding me on her lap the whole way home ... did not move a muscle. She was so tense and freaked out ... that’s pretty much as far as I know.

His mom eventually started an “adoption business.” Isaac talked about his mom with empathy:

Before I was old enough to be that observant—you know, observant of emotions ... she had pretty much come to terms with it and was starting her adoption business at the time and really wanted to share with other people what she had learned, and how she got through it, and how she was helping us get through it—or me get through it, and then us ...

I asked Isaac when he began to understand what it means to be adopted and he said he had always known he was adopted. He said he had never had a problem with it:

“It was never a big deal at all. And I know that it’s definitely not the case with a lot of people. At least the people I’ve met.”

He reflected on his parent’s open attitude and how they handled his adoption questions:

... they were always open about it—always answered my questions ... never anything that was ... taboo or off limits.... No, it was never a big deal.

Isaac is a self proclaimed “daddy’s boy.” He said this about his relationship with his dad:

I am still definitely closer to my dad, but ... I was a daddy’s boy, and still am ...

He said he feels his adoption was a good thing for all involved and his young birthparents made a good decision to relinquish him. He said he talks freely with others about being adopted, even when they ask tough questions.

Isaac said he put his parents through some tough times when he was in early adolescence. He said his mom let him read from her journal:

...I also have all of these papers; they are stuffed inside of my mom’s journal from the time she got me, and has everything that she wrote, and then came back 15 years later and wrote, “How did you get in all this trouble? I can’t believe it from this beautiful little boy ...” ... there’s a couple entries like that; not many, but yeah, I went through a tough adolescence, too...

Isaac wanted to include his sisters’ stories in the interview. He said his sisters had a harder time with adoption than he did. Now as young adults, they talked with each other about growing up adopted:

...especially as I got older ... I knew she had such a hard time with it. At her worst stage, I wasn’t in my best stage. And I wish I could have been there more for her ... hers was more behavioral, and mine was drugs...

Being half Black and therefore clearly adopted was especially hard for one of Isaac’s sisters. He is closer now to his sisters and they do talk about being adopted. Isaac said this about their relationship:

In the last few years we have all grown a lot closer, and my middle sister moved back ... a month ago after two years.... I’m so glad she is back. But we don’t—it’s not like we’re talking behind our parents’ back; we just end up talking about that. Sometimes it’s funny, sometimes it’s serious.

Isaac went on to tell me about how he identifies himself as Jewish. He said he believes he is probably Hebrew and/or Arabian because of his skin and hair type. He is also one-sixteenth Native American and proud of this heritage. He said his birthmother wanted him to be raised Jewish and he thrives on the identity:

...being born Jewish—the tribal connection ... She was Jewish. My birthfather was not. In Judaism, the lineage goes through the mother, and she was the one that made that decision and did want that [Judaism] for me.

Isaac takes some credit for getting his family involved in the synagogue because they had not been going for many years. He feels this involvement is very important in his life, although he is open-minded:

...we were always Jewish, but they never made any big deal about it. We never went to synagogue until I came home one day in kindergarten and said I wanted to celebrate Hanukkah. I don't get to celebrate Christmas ... They said all right. We joined up with the synagogue...

Isaac said being adopted was “no big deal;” however, he has struggled with intimate relationships. He said he went to therapy about abandonment issues, which he feels might be related to his adoption and relinquishment. Isaac has put his name and information on the Internet adoption sites, but he feels his birthparents could find him anyway if they really wanted to. He has given up hope that they will reunite:

...and I put my name out a little bit here and there on some of the services to hook people back up. I think that's where the attachment issues... some of them stemmed from....

Isaac stated that he thinks the way he was raised also contributed to his abandonment issues:

I've come to some conclusions about different ways my parents raised me ... I slept in my parents' bed until I was 9...and then every night at about 2 in the morning, I'd wake up and crawl into their bed ... here's things like ... there can be

some attachment stuff ... I don't have a solid conclusion, but I think there are a lot of factors, and the relinquishment was definitely one of them....

Isaac's parents were very supportive of his search for his biological parents; they have helped financially, and they have helped get information for him. He said this about his mom:

My mom actually went to the agency that had all my files and got everything she could for me...and paid for it. It wasn't super cheap...and helped me out with that, and nothing ever came of it. I did not really follow up too much...

Isaac said he had adopted friends that sought out their birthparents. They thought that doing so was a "cure." When I asked him to explain, he said, "You know, for their problems." He said he did not think searching for their birthparents was a "cure" for his friends.

Isaac and his sisters were totally accepted by his adoptive parents' extended families. He said he is proud to be adopted into his Jewish family:

My grandma is a Holocaust survivor. They declined going into hiding with the Mains. We are related—my parents even had a letter congratulating them on their wedding. I did all kinds of genealogy on our family in school...

Isaac loves his adoptive family and feels his parents did the right thing in relinquishing him. He hopes his birthparents pursued college and all the things they wished to do. Isaac thinks that people adopting children need to want to be parents, above all. Isaac said he wants to get married and have his own family eventually.

### *Andrew's Story*

Andrew is a 35-year-old accountant with three master's degrees. He was born in Illinois but grew up in Colorado and has served in the military for 15 years. Andrew's wife is Venezuelan and they have a baby daughter. A family friend contacted him about

the study. When I asked Andrew about his relinquishment and adoption, he took part of the question literally.

I was two days old, so I don't remember anything about anything as far as when it happened. I guess the cool thing my adoptive parents did was they didn't try to hide anything from me at any point in my life. The story I remember is my parents, they really wanted to have a family, and ... they tried for several years to have kids naturally ... and they couldn't really figure out what the problem was ... up until that point, they hadn't considered adoption.

Andrew said his parents never kept secrets from him. He knew other adoptees who found out they were adopted at a much later time. His adoptive parents gave him a letter written by his birthparents:

...when I was 10, 11, 12, they gave that to me to read. ...and they said, "You can read this and you can know something about it..." ...but they have always been ... upfront.... That's pretty much what I remember ... letter was written, my parents were both college students, they were unmarried ... it's this general kind of thing.... "Your father had two brothers, one brother was a pilot. Your dad was ... studying engineering. Your mom ... was working part time as a secretary," just really general things like that. To tell you the truth, I didn't really get into it that much because I really thought that the people that raised me really are my parents.

Andrew was adamant about not being interested in his birthparents:

...and just even reading about it, it's like reading a novel or a book ... I don't really have a vested interest in who they are, who they were, and who they are now. I don't know if that sounds ... it can't sound that cold, but I don't care, I really don't care....

While Andrew said he is not interested in his birthparents and has had no contact with them, he did indicate that he feels they had good cause to relinquish him. He had this to say about his relinquishment:

As a kid, though, my understanding of adoption was ... I never felt ... rejected or anything... I've always felt ... it was a practical decision. That was the earliest I can remember, too. Never felt rejected.

Andrew and his wife had their first baby days before our initial interview, and he said since his daughter was born he does have different thoughts about his relinquishment and birthmother. He said he can now understand how hard it would have been to relinquish an infant. "...but I guess as a kid I never really understood what that meant ... I didn't really understand what even my birthparents would have went through making a decision like that..."

As we continued to discuss Andrew's birthparents, an interesting twist to his story came to the surface. He said his adoptive parents have encouraged him to search for his birthmother, and that his dad knew his birthparents' names. Over and over his parents have offered to give him the information, but he has always refused:

...And they have always asked me, "Don't you want to know? Don't you want to research?" ...I've always been like "NO!"... "I have this information out here; do you want it?" And I am always like "NO!" And I think that even bothers him more ... it's like "Just stop bringing it up ... my feeling is ... live and let live, and let's move forward." I am a forward-looking kind of person ... but I could care less. I don't even like photos—who cares? ...that was yesterday. So it really rubs me the wrong way and goes against my nature to really even contemplate, to think about things like that.

On the other hand, Andrew is interested in his medical information:

...this additional piece of information ... it's not going to add anything to my life ... the thing that I do want to know is this medical information for my own life ... and my daughter, and that's why I would care about that. But, beyond that...nothing else.

Andrew and I discussed his childhood as an adoptee. He said when he was a kid no one asked about his adoption and as he got older he never minded talking about being adopted:

... I've never been embarrassed, either ... I think that the older you get or the more people want to know about your life, or where you come from...but I've always been like, "Hey, I am adopted." I think I get more reaction of "Oh, how's that affected you," or "Really?" ...people are really like "Oh my god! How do you go

through life,” or “How’s that?” ...I’ve never thought of it as ... I’ve always taken it as a fact of who I am and how I came into being ... I never looked at it in a negative light, at all.

Andrew said his family was very strict and very structured.. He feels his childhood was stifled and he struggled with his parents’ beliefs. He knew from a young age he wanted to live a different life:

But, living in a Christian Fundamentalist house ... I am not saying I wanted to go raise hell and all this stuff. I just had my own idea of what life should be like and what I wanted to do in life. But when you have a Christian Fundamentalist parent saying, “OK, every day you are going to go to church and worship God. Sunday evening, you go to church and worship God. Wednesday evening, you go to church and worship God...Friday...” ...it kinda cramps your style when you’re an independent person. Especially if you do not believe in that kind of stuff and I had a hard time believing in that at a young age.

Because Andrew was raised in such a structured family, he said he actually went in the opposite direction of his upbringing:

What's kind of funny, my parents are strict fundamentalist Baptist and when I was growing up...I went to church 4 to 5 times a week until I was 18 years old.... Now I am an atheist. ...and my sister followed in their footsteps and she’s a missionary in Mexico.

Andrew had plans at an early age about what he wanted. He was just patient and waited until he graduated from high school:

...instead of going out smoking and drinking and rebelling against my parents, and getting into more trouble ... I sucked it up for 18 years of my life.... It was a conscious decision ... there’s a song by ... Journey on the *Escape* album, and it’s called “Escape” ...was my favorite because I internalized it. I remember even as a 16- to 17-year old thinking, "In a year, I am going to be able to escape." It kept me going, “I know there is a life out there.” What is weird ... I am an atheist and I can say that: *I am an atheist* ... and it takes a while, after 18 years, even if you don’t believe in it, you are indoctrinated in that stuff, and it takes a while to just shed it.

On the other hand, he appreciates how his adoptive parents raised him:

Yeah, yeah, I am extremely grateful to ... my adoptive parents for raising me the way they did ... they are a little strange and out there, but, you know, “Thanks for bringing me up the way you did.”

Andrew's parents said college was too expensive and he could not go. Andrew then told them he planned on going into the armed forces as soon as he graduated from high school. He said his parents then changed their attitude toward his going to college. He said he had been “raised in a bubble,” and his parents had felt college would corrupt him.

Andrew said he has always been closer to his adoptive mother. He said his father told him that adopting someone else's child and then bonding to this baby was a strange experience:

...he said... “...one day ... you are childless, and then the next day you have a kid...” He did relate to me that ... it was something weird for him really ...he said it was easier to love my sister right as soon as she was born than it was to love me when I got home... “I have this kid, I am not going to treat it bad or anything ... but you know, I don't really love him right now.” He did relate that to me, that it took some time ... with me ... with my kid, yeah; as soon as she's there ... I mean it's like right away ... I can kinda see what he was saying, too ... but my dad did relate to me, it took him about a month.

At the end of the interview, I asked Andrew what he would do if his daughter wanted to find her biological grandparents some day. This caught him totally off guard. He said he had never even considered that idea. He took time and said he would not encourage her to look for them but would support her if she felt she needed to make contact. I also asked Andrew if he had ever talked to a therapist. He said he saw a therapist once, and “Not for me—hated it.”

### *Toff's Story*

Toff is a 28-year-old middle-school teacher and a graduate student. Toff found out about the study through his wife. He was born in Denver and grew up in Colorado. Toff is biracial—Caucasian and Chinese. A Caucasian couple adopted him and he has an adopted younger sister who is Caucasian. Toff's parents decided to get divorced shortly after they adopted his sister. While he has a good deal of information about them, he has not had contact with his birthparents. He and his wife are currently childless. Toff said he has not seen a therapist about his adoption issues. He said his adoptive mom is a counselor and an educator.

When asked what he remembers about his relinquishment, Toff indicated that there were probably two issues that influenced his relinquishment. The first issues having young birthparents and the second he felt was being biracial. He had this to say:

...let's see, my biological parents were young when they had me, and I guess, according to my adoptive parents, they never met them, but ... and were both still in high school ... my biological father was Chinese. So they decided to give me up in hopes of ... a better life, I guess, that's what they felt like they could offer.

The circumstances surrounding Toff's adoption were infertility problems for his adoptive parents:

...my mom found out she couldn't have kids when she was 31. I want to say ... and let's see, I came along when she was 38. So they waited quite a long time, and I think they had kinda gone back and forth and didn't really know what to do ... I know my mom really wanted to have kids, and my dad ultimately wanted to, too. He's a little bit younger than my mom—he's like 2 to 3 years younger ... they had known that they wanted to [adopt], but they didn't know the process, and so it took some time to learn the process...

Toff said his parents had told him at a very young age that he was adopted and they had said it was nothing to be ashamed of. He said he did not necessarily remember a

specific time when he really understood what it meant to be adopted. His mom had children's books around to help explain adoption to his sister and him:

...there are tons of books about adoption everywhere ... I had access to them, although, you know, growing up I was learning-disabled and dyslexic, and so back then ... I didn't really care about them. ...there was a children's book about adoption, and actually there was two or three of them, and we used to read those together once in a while ... and that was really cool ... thinking back, that really did help.

Being biracial and racism are issues Toff and his family have experienced from the onset of his adoption. His mom told him a story about a social worker who came to check on him after he had been placed with his parents. He had this to say about an incident:

...the social workers...there was lot of under-the-table racism that was going on around the time I was being adopted ... there was a caseworker— I'm hearing this from my mom—who came to the house after I had been placed ... to do visits periodically, for the first six months or a year. And the first visit ... this caseworker came to my mom...I guess she turned my ear back, and said, "This is the color he's going to be for the rest of his life"; and my mom, being pretty well educated ... threw her out of the house immediately and said we needed to have another caseworker.

There was a point when Toff, although very young, wanted to know more about his ethnicity. He said he had asked his mom about it once, thinking there were not many Asian people in the world: "...I do remember lots of questions from me about ethnicity...." As a teenager, friends and parents of friends seem to discount his Asian background:

...sometimes, I had to explain ... a lot to my friends, and their parents. They would discount it. "Oh, that's just Toff. We don't think of him as anything other than just Toff." ... And even though that was an important part of who I was ... they minimized it. Which, looking back at that now, at the time, I was, well, kinda like, "Well, whatever; that's their prerogative." But now, I look back at that and ... maybe that's a coping mechanism that some people have to have.

At college, Toff said he really explored his identity as an adoptee and as an Asian-American. He said he feels he gained a lot from his experience in the Asian student association at college and exploring his heritage by living with an Asian family for a time.

Toff also remembers explaining adoption to his sister and how they were very special because they had been adopted:

“...but I can remember me saying that this is how I think it is: ‘It’s really neat and cool because you’re not like anybody else on our block, and except for me...’”

Toff said he believed everything he said at the time. Eventually, as he got older, he met more adoptees and found out he and his sister were not the only adopted children:

“...that was interesting, because then all of a sudden it seemed ‘Oh, this is not just a special thing for me in my situation...’”

He said he does not want to search for his birthparents, fearing he would interrupt their lives. He said he had talked to his adoptive mom, who had always been supportive, not so long ago about searching for his birthparents:

...she said actually, “It doesn’t bother me because I know that you guys are comfortable (my sister and I) with the identity that you have, and if that’s another part of your identity that you want to explore, that’s fine.” ...mom and my dad ... they’ve been nothing but supportive about that...they have told us always, at some point, “If you ever do want to find your biological parents, we will do everything we can to help you do that.” ...I am pretty comfortable in my own skin, where I am at, and, I mean, that’s about it, I’m not opposed to it, but I am not necessarily for it, either, I’m just kinda in the middle...

Toff said that growing up adopted in a family where the parents’ divorce had its own unique problems. He said he feels the combination made a difference to him and, even more so, to his sister. Here is Toff’s perspective:

...in my family, my sister was adopted, and then in six months ... to a year, my dad decided he wanted a divorce ... my sister was really pretty young, and I was pretty young, too.... I can remember growing up ... she seemed to have a lot more issues with being adopted than I ever did for some reason, and I think maybe it was the external circumstances of my dad leaving, and ... my parents were divorced, but they are best friends to each other, and they have been for years ... in spite of being remarried and married and divorced ... over and over ... they are still good friends.

Toff reiterated about his dad and mom getting remarried. He said his dad remarried twice, and this was a very hard thing for Toff and his sister. He struggles with his relationship with his adoptive dad:

...he got remarried. He got married to a lady ... She had three kids ... that were quite a bit older ... he related really well to them, did not really relate very well to us ... we always saw them more as his kids ... by the time I was 16, I just refused to go to his house any more.... Then they got a divorce, and he kinda came crashing back into my sister and my lives, but we were older, and ... now he has remarried again in just the last ... 4 years, and it's a lady from the Ukraine, and ... he brought her kids over.... I have kinda put that barrier back there again. ...it was painful to see the ... who's supposed to be your dad ... closer to other kids, and it was this kinda weird ... I know he loves us, and I know he cares about us, but there was this weird comparison all the time ... and he helped them go through college ... there was no financial backing for me to go to college from him ... my dad always seemed like he was always looking for some other family to be part of ... I think it has to do with my dad being pretty abused when he was a kid ... we love him, he's our dad by name, but I have other male figures in my life that I would say are more father-like than he was.

Toff said even though his dad was not available to him, he had strong male role models growing up:

Like there was my stepdad, that my mom got remarried to; there's my uncle who is my mom's brother ... the people that used to live across the street, I think I told you about ... their family. We all grew up together. I was really close to their dad, and still am. ...I have a lot of male figures in my life.

Toff is very close to his adoptive mom and sister. His adoptive dad has drifted in and out of his life and has other stepchildren. Toff feels they are more important to his

dad than he and his sister are. He currently is in graduate school. Toff is married with no children. His wife and sister are best friends, and he sees this relationship as very positive.

### *Xavier's Story*

At the time of the interviews, Xavier was 21 years old. He found out about the project through Colorado State University's FYI list serve. Xavier was born in New Mexico, where he spent much of his childhood; he then moved to Colorado as a teenager. He is biracial, Mexican-Pueblo and Native American. He was adopted by a Caucasian couple. Xavier is single and he has not been to a therapist about his adoption or relinquishment.

When I asked Xavier to talk about what he knew of the circumstances related to his relinquishment and adoption, he became solemn and said it was weird that he had a brother he never met. Xavier was born nine months after his brother died:

...my older brother from my adoptive parents was born in 1980, and he had a lot of ... health issues and ... Down's syndrome ... and just didn't develop very well. But, they didn't know that until he was born ... it was just really hard on my parents ... he lived to be 3 and died in 1983. November ... which is kind of interesting. Nine months before I was born. Doctors told them it [Down syndrome] might be hereditary, it might not ... they knew some people at church ... this guy who was an adoption lawyer ... they talked to him, and he like bumped them ahead of the list.... And then they are like "We have this little baby boy ... his birthparents are ... both 16, in high school, they were dating, she got pregnant, he left ..." ... my birth grandmother, her mom, wanted her to keep me. But, she said, "No," that she wanted to go to college ... and do other things. So, I mean 16 is pretty young. Sixteen's pretty young!

Xavier told more of what he knew about his adoption. He said he feels his story is unique in many ways and he was eager to talk about it. His parents followed the process of his gestation through information they got from the doctor's office. He related:

...And so every time my birthmother went in for monthly check-ups, they'd call my parents right away. "Her check-ups are good. He's looking healthy"... then I was born in August ... My parents got me like in a couple days. My aunt and my uncle paid for me ... till my parents could pay me off. They said they paid ... \$1,500 or something."

Xavier said he feels his parents were very appropriate in telling him at a young age about his adoption. He remembered:

Well, I was so young I don't remember the first time when they told me. Like, which is outrageous. Yeah. They did a really good job about it. I don't know how they first phrased it. But I wasn't like freaked out at all. I don't know, it was kind of weird.

Even though he knows much of his oral history, Xavier said he's frustrated with not having any written information about himself, at least a medical history. He said this when we were discussing his adoption:

It was a closed adoption ... So nothin'. Oh, I don't have ... I don't have anything. It's really frustrating. I have nothin'. I have what hospital I was born in, what day, and what time it was.... I have the amended one [birth certificate]. The originals are sealed. I looked it up. They're sealed, and the judge can only open them if I go to court and ... have ... a really good purpose for opening them ... really good. Basically, "Oh, I'm on death row..." Yeah. I pretty much need to be "...I'm gonna die in 6 months if I don't know what hereditary disease I have." Which I wouldn't mind lying about at all...

Xavier had another interesting story to tell. He said his adoptive mom is certain that she ran into his birthgrandmother and his birthmother at the store. He said this about his mom's experience:

I was ... one or two and she was pushing me. I was playing with something, and we were in the card section, and she saw this lady who was Hispanic and had freckles. She was with this gorgeous grandmother lady. Who just looked really, whatever, great ... the mother who was approximately the age—17—looked over and had this weird look on her face/eyes, whatever... She just ... stared at me with the weird, not weird, but just kind of ... intense ... "Whoa!" And mom was ... "This is my kid! Get away from him!" Something ... that, yeah. I was ... two, I

don't know. I was younger... She swears up and down that that was her. "The Lord brought her into our lives to calm her heart." I think that's what she said.

According to Xavier, his adoptive grandfather wanted to keep his adoption a secret from him. He said this about that situation:

But I guess when I was younger my grandpa said, "Well, just don't tell him. [laughs] You don't need to tell him; he's part of our family now." My mom's like, "Ahh, he's not going to look like us." ...I don't look like them at all [laughs] ... My dad's ... the whitest person in the world, ... white as could be ... right now he's white, white hair, balding.

Xavier did feel different at times because he felt he was a visible adoptee, but he joked with his friends about it. He saw other families where everyone looked alike:

...pastor had nine kids and all of them looked ... like him.... And my best friend, his family ... there were ... six people, and they all looked alike.... So that was when I was ... "I don't look like ... anyone ... anyone in my life." My friend Joel [people say to him] ... "Well, you look kind of like your dad, more like your mom." ....But with me it's ... there's no one that's ... like me.

In school, Xavier experienced the challenges of being adopted and explaining that to others who did not believe him. He said teachers even challenged his adoption status,

Isn't that weird? Yeah, it kind of was freaky, especially in middle school. All the teachers would be like, "You're adopted?" "Yeah." "Well, you look just like your mom." I'm like mmm-mm ... And I think part of it's because, and this is kind of funny too, because we act so much alike ... it's kind of scary. I want to take some more good qualities from my dad because I have a lot of his ... his sense of humor and that sort of stuff. But ... my mom and I, it's kind of freaky, we're really alike.... I think it's the whole only-child ... Not that she babied me, but that she was just really close.

Xavier asked me about nature versus nurture. He had been thinking about these things when he said this:

I hear that the older you get, the more like your biological parents you get.... It's kind of freaky, though. 'Cause I kind of don't want to know ... That's the thing I'm

confused about. Is there ... are we supposed to be like our biological parents? But ... there's way too much environment. You know what I mean?

Xavier said he has been interested in reunification for a long time. He has been in contact with a mediator, "a person that helps reunite adoptees and their birthparent." He has been actively searching for his birthparents:

I gave her the word. She just hasn't found anything. 'Cause we always joke that her name was ... Marie Gonzales, and then she married someone ... Jose whatever ... I have no idea... [what I would say to her] ... probably make some joke about ... probably laugh it off. Probably thank her, that's what I'd do.

...I did adoption.com. I did a few of those, but nothing happens... I just put my stuff in, and I look at what's there ... kind of just prayed about it, and I'm ... "Uh, if God really wants me to meet her ... she'll come to my door." I mean, I'll make some attempt, but... Some people get way obsessed, and I'm... She didn't parent me... She had sex, carried me for 9 months, and had me. Which I'm not ... discrediting that, but it's not ... the diapers, and all through school helping with science fair projects, you know. Not that I'm not that impressed, I'm just kind of ... "you're not that important to me." If that makes any sense.

He thinks about his birthmother and her perspective on him:

That's weird. I don't even know if she's alive... What if she was living down the street from me and knew about me all along, but didn't want to interfere with my life 'cause she was afraid?

Xavier and I talked about his identity with the culture he was raised in and how some of this has changed since moving to Colorado. He finds Latino/Hispanic culture to be different in Colorado:

...We went into a bunch of cultural stuff. But it wasn't out of the ordinary. If that makes sense. We ate at a Mexican restaurant, real Mexican food. We went to cultural things just because that was the entertainment. We went to the Moon Fiesta because we could. Whereas now, here in Colorado, it's almost forced. As bad as that sounds. "Oh, my gosh, the Native American ceremony's going on. Oh, gosh; we have to go..." ...it's this cultural thing ... [Before] it was just ... the thing. It's just what you do. You eat the fry bread on the side of the road... It wasn't a big deal to me. I didn't really care about being Hispanic. I didn't even really consider

myself Hispanic until I was ... 14 to 15. Once I entered high school up here ... everyone's white. There's one black person in my 360-people class.... We moved to Parker, which ... is possibly the whitest city in this entire world.

Xavier said he misses some things about New Mexico. He made jokes about being Hispanic and playing the stereotype with friends. "...the only thing I miss is the culture thing. That's why I want to go to New York. 'Cause they're edgy, but they're very cultured. And it's not ... White suburbia..."

Xavier has experienced racism in his adoptive family. He said he was relieved to not be related by blood to his adoptive father's relatives. He told of this story that happened just a few years ago:

My dad's uncle, we were staying at their ... the backwoods of Pennsylvania. He comes and sits on my bed and I wake up, and he's ... "Xavier, did you know that I was in the KKK?"... I called home to my mom. I was ... "Thank the Lord I'm adopted!" That's what I told her. "Thank you, Lord!" I told my dad that. I told my grandma. These people are freaks ... I don't want any of this in my blood ... Oh, my gosh! It's frightening...

Although Xavier would like to find his birthmother, he loves his adoptive parents and sees it as positive that he was adopted. College has opened his eyes to different types of people that he has accepted. His parents have a hard time relating to some of his friends. Xavier's interactions with some of his extended family members highlight the racism he has experienced.

Family has a different meaning for Xavier as an adopted, only child. He expressed strong feelings about people nonchalantly having kids and putting them up for adoption. His view is that too many people do not really want to be parents and they should not be getting pregnant.

Toward the end of the interview, Xavier asked me the question he had been wondering about: “Do you think I need to go to a therapist? That's one of the questions... Do a lot of people go to the therapist?”

All the voices of the participants are represented in their stories of adoption and their life stories. Their personalities are reflected in their thoughts and words. Each story, while unique, has elements similar to the other stories. All of the men said they believe their birthparents made the right decision to relinquish them and they feel grateful to their adoptive parents. The participants have many similarities and differences in their perceptions about adoption, relationships with adoptive parents, searching for birthparents and many other themes. In the next section, I compare the participants' stories and examine common themes.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

Willig (2001) wrote that it makes sense to look across the entire “corpus” of data from participants who share common criteria that they have described to the researcher. Integration should include a master list of themes that captures the “quality of the participants' shared experience” and the “phenomenon under investigation” (Willig, 2001, p. 80). In this way, the phenomenon will eventually emerge. While coding the transcripts, it became evident that the seven participants shared many common experiences. The common experiences began fitting into different themes. The experiences are not identical, and I present them as existing along a continuum within a theme. In the next section, I compare and contrast the case studies and examine the common themes.

## Themes

Inductive analysis of the biographical transcripts led to the identification of numerous themes demonstrating a continuum phenomenon in the lives of the adopted participants. The numerous subjects were collapsed, and a list of major participant experiences, many across a continuum, emerged. Although the interviews were not structured, leading questions helped at times to focus the participants. These questions served as demarcation points for grouping the themes. Following is a list of themes that have been cross analyzed:

1. My birth story.
2. My adoption.
3. I was adopted through my church.
4. My adoption was unique.
5. For me, being adopted is “no big deal.”
6. The role of religion in my life.
7. My identity as a male adoptee.
8. My experience with bias and racism.
9. Thoughts about my birthparents.
10. Am I a product of nature or nurture?
11. Searching for my birthparents.
12. My birthmother found me.
13. My adoptive parents.
14. My extended adoptive family.
15. My thoughts and feelings about abortion, adoption, and having children.

### *My Birth Story*

I asked each adoptee the same opening question: *Tell me what you remember about the circumstances of your adoption.* Based on the data the adoptees provided, none had knowledge of being related by blood to his adoptive family, and all of the adoptions were intrastate adoptions within the United States. All participants had been adopted before the age of one year. The participants admitted that the details were from memory only, but each felt confident that the details were accurate because they had heard the stories repeatedly. In addition to retelling the stories they had heard from adoptive parents, three men also had letters with non-identifying information from their birthmothers and birthfathers and two of them had details directly from their birthmothers. Those participants who had letters from birthparents had them in their possession and appeared to have memorized every detail stated in the letter. Two participants actually knew about the cost of their adoptions.

Six participants felt confident they knew quite a bit about their adoption stories. It is interesting to note that following the first interview, two participants talked to their adoptive moms about their recollection of their relinquishment and adoption stories. As a result, these two added some details to their stories during the second interviews.

All of the participants spoke of young birthmothers, whose ages ranged from 14 years to 20 years at the time of birth. Three men recalled circumstances in which the biological fathers also had been very young and incapable of caring for them and/ or chose not to acknowledge their responsibility as a father.

### ***My Adoption***

All but one participant recalled the circumstances of their adoptions from an early age. Infertility had been the main circumstance their adoptive parents had decided to adopt children. All participants but one stated their adoptive parents had wanted children and had tried for a number of years to conceive. One man's adoptive mom said they adopted him and his brother because having children was what they were "supposed to do."

In summary, all of the men had some idea and some understanding about the circumstances of their adoption. Several of them knew a lot of detail about their adoptive parents' struggles with infertility and their wish to be parents.

### ***I Was Adopted Through My Church***

All participants described their adoptions as "closed," with one participant's parents having been informed about his birthmother's condition all the way through her pregnancy. Five participants (Mitch, Sam, Isaac, Andrew, and Xavier) had been adopted through specific religious organizations such as the Baptist Church, Catholic Social Services and Jewish Social Services.

### ***My Adoption was Unique***

Six participants told about their adoptions having a unique—and for one participant, almost a divine—component. For one participant, Xavier, he was born nine months after his adoptive parents' biological son died. His adoptive mom shared a story about a prayer and scripture time and how this experience coincided with his birth. Other participants mentioned "unique" aspects of their adoption such as being adopted on the adoptive parents' anniversary, people close to the adoptive parents having dreams about

the baby to be adopted, a birthmother living in a Colorado town close to where the participant currently lives, and the possibility of a foster parent actually being the birth grandmother.

***Being Adopted is “No Big Deal”***

All of the participants but one, Tom, used phrases such as “no big deal” or “never a big deal” to describe their experience of being adopted. For these men, “no big deal” about being adopted was possibly due to the open and honest communication they had with their adoptive parents while growing up. Participants told how their adoptive parents answered questions and made birthparent information available to them. They all knew they were adopted at an early age.

Although some of the participants saw their adoption as “no big deal,” a few of them said they had realized at a fairly young age that being adopted did make them different from other kids. One participant became aware of this when he realized he didn’t look like anyone else in his family. Another participant recalled elementary school and how he was the only adopted child in his class. A third participant indicated that even at the young age of four or five, he knew or recognized his situation was different. After watching a show where a cat was giving birth to kittens, he told his adoptive mom, “Oh, I wish I could have been with you since I was born.”

Two participants talked about how being adopted was not a “big deal” for them but it was an issue for friends. One of these participants shared how this was a surprise for him: “...and it's different people, you know... [people] react to it very differently, but I guess to me it's always been normal and it hasn't been a big deal...”

### ***The Role of Religion in My Life***

Five of the participants had stories or experiences to share about religion. They shared the role religion played in their lives as children and how it impacts them today as adults. For some of these participants, the connection was practicing the religion and it appeared they were comfortable with this in their lives. For others, being raised in a religious, conservative home was equated to being “raised inside a bubble.” These participants viewed this aspect of family life as overprotective and isolating.

### ***My Identity as a Male Adoptee***

Identity as a theme came up for all adoptees during the interviews. Some of the participants had more information about their biological parents, such as ethnicity and religious background. This data came from letters written by biological parents. Other participants knew pieces of information about their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds from their adoptive parents. Two participants had contact with their birthmothers who provided them with greater details about their background. Regardless of the amount of information the participants knew about their backgrounds, the issue of identity was important to all of the participants.

### ***My Experience with Bias and Racism***

At least half of the participants had experienced overt bias or racism through comments made directly to them or to others who then relayed the comment on to them. The racial or biased comments addressed issues of interracial dating and marriage, the family history with the KKK, and not being someone’s “real kids.”

### ***My Thoughts about My Birthparents***

All of the participants said they had had thoughts about their birthparents. For some of the participants, these thoughts were developed from fantasies about their birthparents and what they were doing at the current time. These ideas or fantasies would be as extreme as--what if my birthmother was a celebrity?-- or less extreme with some ideas that maybe the birthmother went on to have many children and as a result there are many half siblings. For other participants, their stories or thoughts were developed around actual information they had been given about their birthparents. For some participants, thoughts of their birthparents were accompanied by mixed emotions. On one hand some participants have gratitude for their adopted parents and being adopted, and on the other hand these same participants feel the pull to connect with their birthparents.

### ***Am I a Product of Nature or Nurture?***

Besides questioning themselves about “What is nature?” and “What is nurture?” in their genotypic and phenotypic traits, the adoptive parents of the participants asked or addressed the impact of nature over nurture. For example, the adoptive parents have reminded their adopted sons about the biological side of their heritage, such as tendencies toward alcoholism. Six of the seven participants mentioned nature versus nurture. They mentioned both wondering about what they are *not* by nurture and about what they *are* by nature.

All of the adoptees in this study questioned themselves about their nature genetics and what impact nurture has had on their lives. Many of the adoptive parents talked to their sons about traits that might be genetic when they had concerns about their sons’

experimental behavior such as drinking alcohol or lack of study habits. The men felt they were influenced by both genetics and their upbringing.

### ***Searching for My Birthparents***

The ultimate thoughts about birthparents include the determination to find them. Searching for birthparents is one aspect that had changed over time for the participants. All participants had some curiosity about who they were and more about their genetic makeup—especially their medical history. Two participants had been found by their birthmothers and two other participants have been actively using the Internet and mediators to search for their birthparents in the past two years, but with no success. The adoptees were very interested in medical histories and in what traits they had inherited from their birthparents. Of the three remaining participants, two expressed interest in searching for their birthparents, but they were not pursuing a search at the time of the interviews and one was adamant that he would not ever search for his birthparents.

### ***My Birthmother Found Me***

Two birthmothers of participants in this study searched for and found their sons. One has been “found” by his birthmother for ten years and the relationship is positive. Because his relationship with his birthmother has caused problems with his adoptive parents, he decided to detach somewhat from his birthmother. He feels guilt about this and plans to strengthen the relationship with his birthmother again. The other participant is just developing a relationship with his birthmother and finds the whole experience confusing. He does not plan to tell his adoptive family about his birthmother, as he believes this would be detrimental.

### ***My Relinquishment Was Justified***

All participants believed their relinquishments were justified. Their reasons or responses for justification included that their birthmother or birthparents were too young (teenage moms) to care for them, or that there were extenuating circumstances that prevented their birthmothers from raising them. Although one participant wondered what his life might have been like had his birthmother raised him, he and the six other participants expressed gratitude to their birthparents for relinquishing them for adoption.

### ***My Adoptive Parents***

All of the participants talked about their relationships with their adoptive parents. The relationships ranged from very close to very strained. Two of the participants had strong ties to their adoptive mothers and said they were also close to their adoptive fathers. One participant was closer to his adoptive father and saw a progression and maturation in their relationship, whereas his relationship with his adoptive mother was strained. Three of the participants had strained relationships with their adoptive parents for various reasons such as differences in religious beliefs or reunification with a birthmother. Even though some of the relationships were strained between the participants and their adoptive parents, all the participants expressed some level of gratitude to their adoptive parents for adopting them.

### ***My Extended Adoptive Family***

The word “family” held a lot of significance for all of the participants. Each participant had a significant piece of his story to tell regarding a relationship in at least one of his extended adoptive families. Some stories were positive, and others were negative. Many of the adoptive families were not close to extended family members.

However, all of the participants mentioned extended family in their stories.

### ***My Thoughts about Abortion, Adoption, and Having Children***

The participants overall had strong feelings about people having or adopting children. All except one participant mentioned “children” or “kids” in some respect. Two participants mentioned the term “abortion” as it related to having unplanned children, and two others talked about adoption as a possibility for their own families. One participant was very certain he wished to have his own biological children someday.

The participants in this study told many personal stories to emphasize their experiences with relinquishment and adoption. The main themes comprised in the cross-analysis are knowledge about birthparents and relinquishment; circumstances of adoption; unique adoption stories; being adopted is “no big deal;” the experience of growing up adopted; the role of religion; my identity as an adopted male; experiences with bias and racism; thoughts about birthparents; relationships with adoptive parents; and feelings about people having children and adopting children. It is important to note that in order for the adopted men to explain their unique experience to a researcher; they were compelled to outline their entire lives. They included specific events and people that would contribute to the researcher’s understanding of their experience.

### **Analysis of the Research Questions**

The following will present the findings as they relate to the research questions proposed in Chapter 1. The answers to the research questions were gleaned from information gathered in the interviews and by thorough coding of themes.

*What stories are male adoptees told about their own relinquishment and what stories do male adoptees themselves tell about their relinquishment and growing up adopted?*

The participants in this study were asked to time-travel backwards and share what they knew about their relinquishment as infants. At the beginning of their stories, they looked into the past and shared what they remembered. Some found the past to be unclear and others remembered everything very clearly. Overall, the *adoption* part of looking at their lives was “no big deal” for the men. Their adoptive parents wanted to have children and could not: adoption was a logical choice. Because adoption was presented as “no big deal” to most of these men, they grew up with those feelings. However, adoption did make the men feel or see their experience as unique. Six of the participants told of unique circumstances surrounding their adoptions.

There is a continuum of information about their birthparents and their backgrounds. The information participants received from adoptive and birthparents ranges from very little to quite complete. Six of seven participants repeated the stories their adoptive parents gave them about relinquishment and adoption. Three men also recited information from documents such as letters from birthparents.

As they reflected on their stories, several participants, Isaac, Xavier and Toff, gave detailed descriptions of what they remember about their childhood as an adopted son. They talked about reading books on adoption with adoptive parents, their parents attending support groups, and having adopted friends. Mitch reflected on everything and everyone in his story as being “normal,” whereas Sam was less interested in talking about the details of his early life. One participant, Tom, does not distinctly remember his

adoptive parents talking to him about his relinquishment or adoption. The story he told was full of anguish and distress.

Growing up adopted was first purported as “no big deal” by all of the participants. Several men including Andrew and Mitch said they enjoyed talking to people about being adopted. They said it is a part of who they are and it is unique. Isaac felt he adjusted well,

I never had a problem with it. It was never a big deal at all. And I know that it’s definitely not the case with a lot of people. At least the people I’ve met. A lot of the people I’ve met have had a much tougher time with it...

Three of the participants felt their stories needed to include experiences they found perplexing and that caused resentment. Mitch’s friend’s mom, not knowing Mitch was adopted, mentioned adoptees had problems and were not “grounded.” Tom’s uncle said he and his brother were not his mom’s “real” kids. Xavier experienced overt racism by relatives, and Toff’s mom experienced it by a social worker.

The participants told their stories of adoption and relinquishment as they remember being told by adoptive and birthparents. Several remember reading about their birthparents and adoption in letters and other documents.

***How do male adoptees define relinquishment? Are these definitions a central part of how they see themselves?***

The participants did not necessarily define relinquishment. Isaac said his birthparents “decided to give me up for adoption.” The men used interesting words to explain how their adoptive parents were told a child had been relinquished for adoption. These words included, “we have a boy ready,” and “we have this kid available.” They all saw their birthparents’ circumstances as extenuating and that their young parents were justified in relinquishing them for adoption. They offered statements such as my

birthparents made the “right decision to give me up” and let “the baby have a better life” than what they, as parents, could have offered. All the participants said it was the right decision made by very young people. The participants said they did not feel “rejected” or “abandoned.” They did not outwardly attribute being relinquished for adoption to any central part of how they saw themselves.

Two of the participants struggled with the word “relinquishment.” The following is an example:

It's adoption ... She gave up on me. I'm just trying to ... I don't know.... It was more of like a ... relinquishment to me sounds more like ... How do I put it?... but it's too squeaky clean for me.... No, I think it's more that it takes all of the emotion out of it by making it squeaky clean. Like "relinquishment." Like there is no emotion behind that.

***What effect does being relinquished have on male adoptees and how they feel about themselves?***

Overall the participants did not express any strong overt negative feelings toward themselves; they did, however, have many questions about who they are. While they say they strongly see themselves as a part of their adoptive families, at the same time, they longed to know who they are. One participant had an epiphany during the first interview. He has an adopted sister, so there are four family members. He looked at me and said, “I guess none of us are biologically related.” For the first time he realized four unrelated people lived together and called themselves a family.

Each of the participants wondered about the nature versus nurture issue. Were they more a product of their environment or their genetics? The men talked about what they identify about themselves that came from their birthparents. Some of them referred to their physical characteristics or personality traits they knew or assumed came from

birthparents. One participant knew he was short because both of his birthparents were short, and he believed he was Arabic from his skin tone and hair. Another participant expressed relief to not have the same depression problems or addictive personality as his adoptive family. Other participants focused on what they didn't get from their birthparents or their confusion about whether they were a product of nature or nurture. All the participants wondered about their medical histories.

Not looking like anyone in their adoptive families or anyone they even know was an issue for at least half of the participants. Two of the participants always felt they "passed" as biological kids and were not as concerned about who they looked like. To cope, two of the participants used a sense of humor to make themselves into whoever they want to be.

Interestingly, while four of the participants did not feel they had substantial issues with relinquishment and adoption, they did see their adopted sisters as having issues with relinquishment and adoption. They said they discussed adoption and relinquishment with their adopted sisters, and the sisters seemed to feel less connected to their adoptive families.

Two participants wondered about the impact of their relinquishment on their lives. Both participants said they have been in therapy and question how their issues relate to relinquishment. One participant stated he was aware of his attachment issues, and the other has worked very hard at understanding himself and at making personal changes.

*Are there specific stages, events or times in the male adoptee's life in which relinquished and adopted seems to be conspicuously noticeable?*

While none of the participants mentioned anything that would be considered “conspicuously noticeable,” nearly all of the participants mentioned times when being relinquished/adopted did have an effect on them. For example, age or becoming a certain age seemed to bring some awareness. One participant mentioned turning sixteen years old--the same age as his birthmother when she relinquished him--and saying to himself, “There is no way I could have a child now.” Another participant remembered as he “became more mature,” that he was a bit shocked when he realized how very young his birthmother was at fourteen when she gave birth to him. A third participant, at 21, realized he had attachment issues. He attributes his relationship problems partly to being relinquished.

Another stage in life that seemed to impact participants was fatherhood. One participant said he never realized what choosing to relinquish a baby meant for his birthparents until he became a father. Another participant said being a father and raising a child made him understand the challenge it would have been for his birthmother to raise him on her own.

Choosing to search for birthparents is another significant event. None of them mentioned a particular moment when they decided to find their birthparents; however, three participants had registered online with an adoption reunification site.

### **Conclusion**

The key findings in this study represent a phenomenological study of seven men relinquished at birth and adopted before the age of one year. All participants were living

in the northern region of Colorado. The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding, through themes and clusters of information, the phenomenon of “male adoptees relinquished at birth.” The findings encompass events from the entire lives of the participants, including what they felt were significant to the understanding of their personal journey.

The main themes comprised in the cross-analysis are knowledge about birth parents and relinquishment; circumstances of adoption; unique adoption stories; the experience of growing up adopted; being adopted is “no big deal”; the role of religion; identity of male adoptees; experiences with bias and racism; thoughts about birthparents; nature versus nature; searching for birthparents; relationships with adoptive parents and, extended family; feelings about adoption, abortion and people having children.

The findings disclosed that five participants had teenage birthmothers and two birthmothers were around twenty. All the adopted men felt their relinquishments had been justified. The participants told their life stories as they remembered from adoptive parents, from information in letters from birthparents and from birthmothers. All of the men had an understanding about the circumstances of their adoption and their adoptive parents’ difficulties with infertility and their wish to be parents. The participants identified very much with unique aspects of their adoptions, which they included in their biographical interviews.

All but one participant said that being adopted was not a “big deal” to them, because adoption had not presented to them as an issue. The men are all brothers and they all mentioned their relationships with their siblings. All participants with adopted sisters felt their sisters had issues in their lives related to relinquishment and adoption. The men

identified with being adopted and had taken aspects of their adopted status, including ethnicity if it was known, and incorporated it into their identity. Five of seven participants had been affiliated with religious organizations, and they explained how religion had shaped their identities and what role it plays in their lives today.

It was also discovered that four of seven participants had felt racism or bias because of their ethnicity or their status as an adoptee. In many cases, it was a member of the participant's adoptive family that had perpetrated the incident. All of the participants had thoughts about their birthparents, and especially thoughts about their birthmothers. Their thoughts ranged from searching for birthparents, expressing concern for birthparents, fantasies about birthparents, and denying thoughts about birthparents.

The adoptees in this study questioned themselves about nature and nurture. All the participants asked themselves, "Am I true to my nature or am I a result of how I was raised?" Most believed they are influenced by both nature and nurture. The adoptees were also very interested in their medical histories. These questions were an impetus for two participants to actively search for their birthparents with mediators. In total, three men were registered with Internet adoption search sites. All found the experience to be frustrating. One man did not want to interfere in his birthparents' lives, and one did not want to damage his relationship with his adoptive parents, especially his mom. One family was encouraging and supportive of their son searching, but he refused any information. He also would not ever encourage his daughter to find her birth grandparents. Participants were also located by birthparents. Two men had been reunited with their birthmothers. One has been "found" by his birthmother for ten years and the relationship is positive. Because his relationship with his birthmother was causing

problems with his adoptive parents, he decided to detach somewhat from his birthmother. He felt guilt about this and plans to strengthen the relationship with his birthmother. The other participant is just developing a relationship with his birthmother and finds the whole experience confusing. He does not plan to tell his adoptive family about his birthmother, as he believes this would be detrimental.

In regard to relinquishment, all participants felt their relinquishments were justified by their young parents. One newly reunited son felt his birthmother would have done a better job of raising him than his adoptive mom did. The other participant who had been reunited with his birthmother, thought about how his life might have been if she had kept him.

All the participants, regardless of relationships, said they appreciated their adoptive parents. The majority felt closer to their adoptive moms. Two men felt closer to their adoptive fathers, and one man said his relationship with his adoptive parents had been strained because of his relationship with his birthmother. The other participant, who had just reunited with his birthmother, had the most difficult relationship with his adoptive parents. Additionally, all of the participants mentioned extended family in their stories and three were close to many extended family members. Two other participants had a difficult time feeling connected to extended family. One man moved far from his extended family, but was very close with them when he was growing up.

All but one of the men mentioned children in some respect. One topic discussed by several participants was about birthmothers having chosen adoption over abortion. Those who mentioned having children articulated that they took both adoptive and biological parenting very seriously. The son reunited with his birthmother and having

upset his adoptive parents, left the message for people adopting children to be honest. He said it would be best if adoptive parents explained adoption early on and to be understanding should their child decide to search for birthparents.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

This last chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of the problem and summarizes the study. The second section compares and contrasts the study with the current literature. The third section presents unanticipated findings, and the fourth section shares conclusions drawn from the findings along with implications for action and recommendations for further research. The final section contains concluding words about the findings of the study and the adoptees who participated.

### **Summary of the Study**

A significant amount of knowledge about adoptees is based on traditional adoption literature from anecdotal clinical case studies and reports on the pathology of adoptees treated in psychiatric facilities. Very little research focuses solely on male adoptees, and female adoptees are often over-represented in mixed-gender adoption studies (Landsburg, 1999). This study will contribute to the understanding of relinquishment, especially for adopted men.

To understand the phenomenon of relinquishment and adoption, it is important to understand the characteristics of the participants' demographics. These characteristics include why the son was adopted, place of adoption, agents of adoption, type of adoption, family status, and ethnicity. Six of the seven participants in this study were adopted

because their adoptive parents could not have children. This basis for adoption aligns with the literature: Most adoptive parents adopt because they are unable to bear children (Klass, Nickman, & Silverman, 1998). The participants in this study were adopted in the United States and from across the country: Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Colorado, Missouri, North Carolina, and Illinois. The findings in this research showed that adoption practices in these states were similar. The adoptions in this study took place in the 1970s and 1980s. All of the adoptions in the study are considered to be “closed” adoptions, with birth records and other adoption information sealed to keep the confidentiality of both parties.

The majority of the relinquished men were adopted through various religious organizations: Catholic (1), Baptist (3), and Jewish (1). One participant was adopted through social services, and one was unclear about how his parents adopted him. The youngest participant was adopted in 1985 through an arrangement made with his birthmother, a lawyer, and the Baptist church. Most of the men in the study spent some time in foster care.

All but one participant’s adoptive parents were married at the time of the interviews. All adoptive parents were Caucasian two of the adopted men were biracial, and the others thought they were predominantly White. Although socio-economic status was not mentioned, two adoptive families borrowed money from relatives to “pay” for their adopted sons.

Based upon the stories the participants told about themselves, this phenomenological study has explored the perceptions of men relinquished and adopted as infants. For the study, I developed and posed research questions to address the following:

the stories male adoptees are told and the stories they tell about their relinquishment and adoption; how male adoptees understand their relinquishment; the effects relinquishment and adoption might have on male adoptees; and how certain milestones in men's lives might trigger adoption issues. My examination of the adoptees' stories, revealed emerging themes that helped to answer the research questions and describe the phenomenon.

### **Major Findings: Findings Related to the Literature**

Phenomenology is concerned with knowledge and meaning. The objective of phenomenological study is to frame the way in which the world presents itself to an individual in an immediate (uncontaminated) way, including hunches, moods, vague feelings, and ideas on the edge of consciousness. Some argue that the goal of genuine phenomenological research should be to understand lived experience (Willig, 2001).

### **Adjustment to Being Adopted: Growing Up Adopted**

Six of the adopted men in this study reported that being adopted was “no big deal,” and they felt they were well adjusted with few problems. They felt that growing up adopted presented few problems. They all did well in school, had friends, and were involved in the community. One participant reported having learning disabilities and not having liked to read as a boy. He had overcome school problems and had become a teacher; he was a graduate student during the interviews. Just one participant reported having emotional problems. The adopted men reported that as children they were never in any serious trouble. Also, six of the seven participants never had behavior problems as adolescents. One participant said he had gone through a difficult period as a teenager and worried his parents with his trouble involving drug use. He had eventually moved on,

exploring other areas such as his spirituality and Jewish heritage, growing dreadlocks, and seeking a college education.

These findings are contrary to older studies, including one that Brodzinsky (1987) performed that said children who are adopted often have difficulties with separation, anger, and making transitions, and that many times these issues tend to be magnified for adoptees (Pavao, 1998). Brodzinsky (1987) wrote that adoptees also suffer from low self-esteem, learning disabilities, and acting-out behaviors. In addition, Pavao (1998) asserts that school can be problematic for some adopted children.

Newer research by Smith and Brodzinsky (2002) supports the findings of the current study, that participants view their adoptions as being positive. They (Smith & Brodzinsky, 2002) found that some adopted children view adoption as somewhat benign or positive. Qualitative and meta-analytic reports conclude that the majority of adopted children are well adjusted (Grotevant, 2001; Smith & Brodzinsky, 2002). While the participants in this study had relatively few problems, they reported that as they became closer to their sisters they were more aware of their sisters' issues and problems with adoption. Smith and Brodzinsky (2002) report that adoptees that focus on their adoptive loss and view their adoption in more negative ways are believed to experience heightened stress, develop fewer successful coping skills, and experience greater adjustment problems. Smith and Brodzinsky (2002) assert that the experience of loss develops over time in conjunction with the child's increasing insight into the meaning and implications of being adopted, including the loss of birthparents and extended birth family. Other studies about female adoptees are not in the scope of this report.

## **Grief and Loss Associated with Relinquishment and Adoption**

In the past, grief and loss issues were major subjects of adoption research. In recent years, coping, adaptation, and looking at positive outcomes to adoption have come into the research and literature. Newer studies (Smith & Brodzinsky, 2002) say adoptees are seen as a group at somewhat greater risk for problems with adjustment, stress, and coping. At the core of this perspective is the belief that adoption is associated with many inherent loss-related experiences. If adoptee loss is as pervasive as believed (Saiz & Main, 2004), however, this loss and stress would be revealed in the early recollections of adoptees, since early recollections are reminders of limitations, assets, and circumstances that a person “carries about” with him or her (Saiz & Main, 2004).

The adopted men in this study told of their earliest recollections, and they never mentioned that they felt grief or had feelings of loss. They all saw their birthparents’ circumstances as extenuating and that their young parents were justified in relinquishing them for adoption. The participants said they did not feel “rejected” or “abandoned.” All the adopted men interviewed considered their adoptive parents to be their “parents.” They did not outwardly attribute being relinquished for adoption to any central part of how they saw themselves.

Another factor in the phenomenon of the participants in this study is that all were adopted before the age of one year. Given that fact, the research of Brodzinsky & Schechter, (1990) and Powell and Afifi (2005) might be relevant. Brodzinsky says loss associated with early adoption is covert and subtle. Powell and Afifi (2005) found that most adoptees growing up in healthy family environments and never having “lost” anything often had loss that went unnoticed or unnamed. The piece of research that

clearly supports the findings in this current study of male adoptees relinquished at birth says that even though adoptees are lacking information about their heritage, this lack does not necessarily lead to feelings of uncertainty or loss in the adoptees. Also, because adoptees are missing what society refers to as essential biological connections (Powell & Afifi, 2005); it is often assumed they long for the information. Powell and Afifi's study suggests uncertainty "exists only insofar as people perceive it to exist" (p.147). The adopted men in this study did not perceive themselves as having issues with grief and/or loss over being relinquished by birthparents. They were, however, all interested in their birthparents: They were either curious about them or they were seriously determined to find them.

### **Identity in Male Adoptees**

According to Treacher and Katz (2001), identity is how we feel about ourselves and how we perceive others see us. What is difficult to define is how individuals experience and explain themselves, and how they are perceived by society because these qualities are abstract. These identity questions and definitions are especially difficult for someone who has been relinquished and adopted.

Research indicates that individuals' search-for-self begins in late adolescence and early adulthood (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Kuhn, 2001; Nydam, 1999; Pavao, 1998). For the participants in this study, the process of forming their identities and defining their roles in life differed from each other in many respects and was similar in others.

Some men in the study had more information than others about their biological parents. All of the participants said they identified as adoptees and, if they had that

information, identified with their ethnicity or with being biracial. Even a little information about their birthparents' backgrounds seemed to contribute to the identities of several participants. The adopted men took pieces from all four parents and tried to decide "Who am I?" Three of the men decided to no longer identify with their adoptive parents' conservative views or the fundamentalist Baptist church. One participant identified strongly with his adoptive parents' genealogy.

Research indicates that adoptees, besides suffering the normal identity crisis of adolescence, have additional complications because of "genealogical bewilderment." The fact that adoptees have two sets of parents makes questions about their heritage and parents more complicated (Treacher & Katz, 2001; Westwood, 1995). The research says adult adoptees often describe themselves as shy loners or floaters, and they often lack self-confidence (Nydam, 1999). However, only one adoptee in this study said he was very "independent," and the majority of the men did not appear to lack in self-confidence. They did, however, want to be identified as being unique individuals.

### **Nature versus Nurture**

Six of the seven participants mentioned nature versus nurture. All of the adoptees in this study questioned themselves about what impact their nature—the genetics they inherited from their biological parents--and what impact nurture—living in nonbiological families—has had on their lives. The men said they were fairly certain they had been influenced by both genetics and their upbringing. They were trying to make sense of their behaviors—both similar and dissimilar—relative to their birthparents and adoptive parents. Several of the men said they had heard or thought their birthparents were intelligent and had other talents. Quantitative psychiatric genetics (McGuffin & Martin,

1999) now make it possible to accurately quantify both genetic and environmental contributions to a person's makeup. According to research, phenotype is the result of genotype and the environment to which it is exposed (McGuffin & Martin, 1999).

Environment can be divided into two broad types: the shared environment that acts on all family members and makes them similar, and non-shared experiences that are specific to individuals, and, as would be expected, cause differences in the way family members behave (McGuffin & Martin, 1999).

Much research has been done on the stability of personality and self-concept. This research suggests that approximately 40 percent to 50 percent of the variance in personalities can be attributed to genetic factors, and that personalities are quite stable over a lifetime. There is also strong evidence that a person's self-concept is stable and resistant to change (Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006). These findings could be important for adopted persons who are questioning their behavior, interests, and how both genetics and environment are influences.

### **Thoughts about Birthparents: Fantasies/Ghost Parents**

All of the participants in the current study had thoughts about their birthparents. They included these thoughts throughout their stories. The thoughts they had about their birthparents—usually about birthmothers—varied widely. One man had dichotomous thoughts, ranging from his birthmother being a glamorous celebrity to her being a single mother living in squalor. Another participant made assumptions about his birthmother's socioeconomic status, his siblings, and their well-being. Another had thoughts of his birth father being abusive and his birthmother being a crack addict. Several participants made comments that alluded to their birthparents still being in a relationship together. Two

participants mentioned “owing” their birthmothers, or that their birthmothers would want something from them. Overall, the men had less-favorable thoughts about their birthfathers. Two men in particular had thoughts about their birthfathers having run away after they got their birthmothers pregnant.

A questionnaire survey by Klass & Silverman & Ollendich, (1998) examined the grief and birthparent fantasies of female adoptees from a non-clinical population. The results have relevance to findings in this study. Klass’s findings show that the most frequent fantasy images appear to be those that concern the character of the birthmother: her moral, psychological, and social attitudes. This research adds to the data that supports the idea that individuals, adopted or not, are compelled toward a “resolution of loss that incorporates the inner representation of a loved one into their everyday life” (Klass & Silverman, 1998, p. 292). Nydam (1999) summarized his research findings on birthparent fantasies by stating that relinquished adoptees may make significant use of fantasy as a way to explore their “ongoing relationship with their birthparents” (p.109). He found that adoptees are seldom able to talk about their birthparents with family and friends. Throughout their lives, adoptees' fantasies are accessible in their minds, where they can reach and revise these thoughts (Nydam, 1999; Lifton, 1994).

### **Searching for Birth Parents**

In the past, families often kept secrets from adopted children, sometimes by not ever telling them they were adopted. Since the mid-1980s, however, adoptions have become more open, and secrets about adoption have become less prevalent. Around that time, adoptive parents started joining adoptive-parent support groups and became educated about parenting adopted children. Among those individuals who were adopted

when contact with birth families was not sanctioned, increasing numbers are seeking out and finding their birth families (National Adoption Attitude Survey; 2002). Some researchers (Nydram, 1999) Lichtenstein, 2005; Lifton, 1994) suggest searchers are looking for answers to their romantic fantasies about their biological parents (Nydram, 1999; Pavao, 1998).

That they had been adopted was not a secret for any of the participants in the current study. All of the men in this study had been made aware of their adoption status at an early age. Several men said they could and had been encouraged to talk about adoption and related topics within their family. Several others did not bring up adoption at all in their homes. They feared hurting or upsetting their adoptive mothers and consequently had little information about themselves. Eventually, they uncovered information themselves or their birthmothers shared details with them.

It was actually the participants who kept secrets from their adoptive parents about things they did against their parent's beliefs, especially about their searches for or even finding birthparents. Regardless of the level of communication within the participants' families, the men in this study who were ready to search for their birthparents were activists. They got online, found mediators, and began the hunt. Several participants had help and support in searching for their birthparents. One man's parents had offered repeatedly to give him information that they had about his birthparents. In her study of adopted persons from Israel, Lichtenstein (2005) found that adoptees were more likely to share their information about searching for birthparents if their adoptive parents were open to discussing the adoption. All of the participants but one in the current study felt they had been able to discuss adoption in some respect when they were growing up. Two

participants mentioned that through the interviewing process they had come to realize they had always avoided asking their parents questions about their adoption.

Search tools such as the Internet and reunification mediators have changed the way adoptees and birthparents can locate one another. Research is also changing because of technology, such as the use of online surveys to gain information regarding adoption. In this study, one participant began searching for his birthparents when he was 21 and one participant began searching at the age of 19. Three participants had been actively using the Internet to search for their birthparents for several years, but two had no success. The other participant's birthmother found him at the Website on which he had registered. Two men had also used mediators to assist them. Powell and Afifi (2005) found that most adoptees do not search for birth family until their 20s and 30s, or until after their adoptive parents die.

According to Powell and Afifi (2005), how adult adoptees manage their uncertainty regarding their birthparents is in part related to the level of communication in their adoptive family. The more secure they feel in their family, the better they are able to manage their uncertainty and grief (Powell & Afifi, 2005). Although in the current study one participant's adoptive mom encouraged him to find his birthparents, he chose not to. He felt he needed to respect their privacy and did not want to disrupt their lives should he be a "secret" in their past. Only one participant said he had never felt he needed to contact his birthparents for any reason. He knew a little about his relinquishment before his birthmother had found him. One man expressed interest in searching for his birthparents, but he said he was afraid of hurting his adoptive parents—especially his

adoptive mom. He had seriously contemplated searching at one point, he said. In this study, one participant was adamant that he would not ever search for his birthparents.

The feelings of these adoptees are supported by Powell and Afifi's (2005) research, which found that many adoptees choose not to search for birthparents for fear of rejection, disturbing the life of their birthparents, and discovering the truth about their relinquishment. Other literature (Kuhn, 2001) says searching for one's biological heritage is a sign of health, and we need to question why some adopted persons choose not to search. One primary reason for searching is that adoptees wish to alter the way "in which they experience themselves" (Kuhn, 2001; p. 21). Researchers Powell and Afifi (2005) agree, saying that even though adoptees are lacking information about their heritage, this lack does not necessarily lead to feelings of uncertainty or loss. In fact, some research suggests that "a lack of interest" in one's heritage is related to a secure sense of self (Kuhn, 2001)

According to the research, one-third of adoptees do search, one-third have indicated they would never search, and the final one-third said they might search someday (Powell & Afifi, 2005). This data supports the findings in this current study, in which three men had actively searched. Two participants had been found by their birthmothers, one participant was precontemplative, one participant was contemplative, and one participant said he would never search.

Powell and Afifi (2005) also say adoptees who search report more negative attitudes about adoption than non-searchers; the searchers also reported a more distant relationship with adoptive parents. That portion of the research does not support the

findings in the current study. Among all participants, two adoptees who were currently searching reported the closest relationships with their adoptive parents.

According to Pavao (1998), searching for birthparents becomes problematic for adopted persons when there are blocks to gaining relinquishment information; fear, and therefore no support on the part of the adoptive parents; adoptee fear of knowledge about birthparents; and legal matters, such as state laws related to obtaining information. For two participants in the current study who were searching to find their birthparents, the search had been expensive, difficult, and unsuccessful, but most of all frustrating. State laws and other blocks also had prevented them from obtaining information.

### **Surprises: Unanticipated Findings in the Research**

The interviews with participants were relaxed and unstructured. Because there were only guiding questions, the participants often digressed to stories *they* wanted to tell *me*. Because I didn't want to mistakenly convey a lack of interest in their stories, I found it difficult not to ask the participants to go "deeper" on some subjects.

I experienced one surprise right before an interview when a participant's adoptive mom called him. He and I had talked on the phone several times, and he told me his adoptive mom was suspicious of my intentions: "Is she weird? Leave if she's a weirdo." The participant assured his mom my intentions were honorable.

During the interviews with the participants, it was a surprise when, in addition to telling me their stories, all four men with adopted sisters wanted to include their sisters' experiences, too. They were very empathetic to the feelings their sisters had around relinquishment and adoption. One adoptee mentioned that his sister knew she was relinquished because her birthparents decided to divorce, and this knowledge was very

difficult for her when their adoptive parents divorced also. Two men felt guilty they had not been more aware of their adopted sisters' pain and distress when they were growing up. One said he missed the opportunity to "be there" for his adopted sisters, both of whom had suffered challenges as adolescents.

A surprise in the interviews came when three participants mentioned that they were very close to their adoptive grandparents and to their grandmothers in particular. Two men told funny and interesting stories, and it was clear how close they felt and how much they loved their adoptive grandmothers. They also mentioned strong relationships with other relatives of their adoptive families. Two participants told similar stories about relatives loaning their adoptive parents the money to adopt them.

At times, a participant brought up a subject that totally caught me off guard, and I had to just nod and acknowledge that I was hearing him. For example, one participant's adoptive father said he had trouble bonding to his son after he had adopted him. The father compared how he had bonded with his biological daughter, who was born a year after the adoption. The father said it was strange to one day, all of a sudden, become a parent by adopting someone else's child,

Participants told experiences of bias and racism. Four of seven participants told stories about friends' parents, their adoptive relatives, and a social worker making comments to them or about them regarding their adoption status, their biracial status, or both. Although all but one participant minimized the incidences, they all still experienced the remarks as shocking, anger-inducing, and hurtful.

Another surprise in the interviews came when several of the men's comments went on lengthy tangents regarding people indiscriminately adopting or having children.

Two participants specifically had strong feelings about who should be parents and have or adopt children. My greatest surprise was the openness of participants and their willingness to share intimate stories about their adoptive families, their birth families, and the emotional side of themselves. The more introverted participants took longer to open up, but all the men seemed to be forthcoming and genuine in their disclosures.

### **Conclusions**

The majority of adoptees manage to live lives free of pathology; after all, Saiz (2001) reminds us that Tarzan, Moses, Hercules, and Superman were all adopted. If we throw Oedipus into the mix, however, we are reminded that some adoptees might be susceptible to psychological difficulty.

Famous adoptees include Sarah Ann McLachlan (born January 28, 1968), a Canadian musician, singer and songwriter; Darryl “DMC” Matthews McDaniels (birth name, Darryl Lovelace, born May 31, 1964), a pioneer of hip-hop culture and a founding member of the legendary hip-hop group RunDMC. Another famous adoptee was David R. Thomas, who was adopted as an infant, but his adoptive mother died when he was five. His adoptive father remarried several times. Thomas did not learn he was adopted until he was 13 when he found out from his grandmother. From the age of 12, he worked in the restaurant business. He was a high-school dropout and left home after the 10th grade. Thomas founded the Wendy's franchise restaurant chain in 1969. In 1992, he established the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption to promote adoption-law simplification and reduce the costs of adopting in the United States of America.

The participants in this study wished to add to the knowledge about male adoptees, and they volunteered to be in a vulnerable situation. They wanted to tell their

stories, and several mentioned that they liked talking about adoption. Many of the men seemed very sad when they were telling how hard their adoptive parents had struggled to have biological children. By telling the unique circumstances of their adoptions, the participants also expressed they were meant to be with their adoptive families. Several participants alluded to the fragility of their adoptive moms and appeared to “walk on glass” around them, yet all of the men gave credit for their successes to their parents. One participant became a psychologist with a Ph.D.; one participant was a middle-school teacher; one participant was a microbiologist with a Ph.D.; one participant had three master’s degrees. One participant was a social scientist starting another degree in social policy. The two younger participants were still undecided about certain decisions in their personal lives and careers. Several participants served people in some capacity in their work; this role of service may speak to their characters and their upbringings.

“Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their ethics strict” (Willig, 2001, p.79). As the researcher, I made every attempt to allow the adopted men in this study to be in control of the interviews. They could disclose what they chose. As tension eased and the participants felt I was benevolent, rapport built between us and the stories emerged, layer upon layer.

Qualitative interpretation of events and phenomenon can be difficult to thoroughly and systematically explain (Willig, 2001). Although language is the primary means to express phenomenology, nonverbal means of gathering phenomenological insights, such as gesture, expression, and movement, are also informative in gaining insight into participants’ private thoughts and beliefs. Insights are interpretations, and essential meanings are discovered instead of constructed (Miles, 1994).

In this study, each man wants to know who he is as he cultivates hope and wonder. According to Gabriel Marcel (Nydam, 1999), the French existentialist, hope is neither grounded in a past moment of history nor in a still-unrealized future, but in human experience itself, specifically in transcendent experience. Marcel's description of hope is of an "ongoing process, a way of being, that ebbs and flows as one's life unfolds" (Nydam, 1999, p. 119).

According to Marcel,

He who hopes, inasmuch as his hope is real and not to be reduced to a mere platonic wish, seems to himself to be involved in some kind of a process; and it is only from this point of view that it is possible to realize what is specific, and I should add super rational, perhaps also super relational, in hope. For to use once again the expression I have so often employed, hope is a mystery, not a problem. (Nydam, 1999, p. 119)

For the adopted men in this research, maintaining hope is an ongoing journey.

In the past, research about adopted persons often resulted in stigmatizing beliefs among the media, society, lawmakers, physicians, and mental-health workers. The studies of adopted adults focused on women and consistently underrepresented men; studies about only male adoptees appear to be nonexistent. In some literature, adopted persons are still portrayed as depressed, with low self-esteem; issues with control, power, intimacy, commitment, and myriad other psychosocial problems. It can also be pointed out that these problems are found in the general population of non-adopted adults. In contrast, this current study, in line with other recent research, found positive outcomes and processes in the adopted adult population studied.

The men in this study were high achievers, several with multiple graduate degrees, others in graduate school, others graduating from or contemplating college. All participants seemed to have a strong sense of self, and several of the men had examined

their spiritual selves. It appears that the participants in this study could exemplify the *nature and nurture* theory: that both genetics and environment contribute to a person's outcome.

In every research study, there is the chance of a reciprocal story. In other words, the participants in this study might have presented what they wanted to be or what they were trying to be, rather than how they really are. They might have intentionally "omitted" any negative perceptions they may have about themselves. For the current study, the participants might have wanted to present a more positive image. I acknowledge that the responses included in this study are representative only of the participants and not necessarily of the entire population of adopted men relinquished at birth.

My review of the literature revealed "old" studies that supported my findings in some areas, such as adoption practices, birthparent fantasies, and the process of searching for birthparents. However, the support for this study was stronger from new research studies. No longer is it inevitable that adoptees will suffer emotional disturbances; to the contrary, some adopted children who are presented with adoption as being positive see adoption as somewhat benign or positive. This differing perspective results in very little adoption-related distress (Smith & Brodzinsky, 2002).

In conclusion, most of the adoptees in this study grew up in healthy family environments with parents and other relatives who nurtured and loved them. Each participant has found his own life path, shown resilience, and sought out help when he encountered difficulties in his life. None of the participants claimed to be "free" of all problems, nor did they feel sorry for themselves. It seemed egos were in good balance

with self-esteem. I believe several participants volunteered to be interviewed so they could tell their stories to someone who wanted to know—someone who cared. I think several participants wanted to find out more about themselves and possibly about other adopted men.

### **Implications for Action**

I find it disheartening that as recently as 2001, Kuhn reported the main cultural view is one that sees “adoptees as different and that difference is denoted by pathology and deviancy” (Kuhn, 2001). More recent research reveals more positive outcomes for adopted persons. The findings in this current research also indicate positive outcomes and processes. Thus, it would behoove persons in positions of power to disseminate the newer research findings to those who can make a difference (Kuhn, 2001, p. 2). The findings in this study and other more recent research could help change the attitude of the public relative to adoption and adoptees. New knowledge needs to be disseminated to family members, teachers, counselors, church members, and all others directly involved with raising and caring for adopted children. The media could help create a more positive image of adoptees by changing the way they portray and treat adopted persons on TV and in films. If the public is made aware that adoption and the adjustment of adoptees can have positive outcomes, the result could be fewer children in foster homes and more children adopted.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Recommendations for future research emerged during the interviews; these recommendations come from this study on male adoptees, from the participants, and from

the literature review. I propose three studies with varying populations and research approaches.

First, another phenomenological study research design could examine transracial relinquishment and adoption. One participant with two biracial sisters indicated that his sisters might have had a harder time as adoptees because they were the only Black girls in their town growing up in a Caucasian family. How much of a role does cultural heritage and ethnicity play in adoptees' perceptions about relinquishment and adoption?

Another study could use focus groups to interview adopted siblings. Research questions would allude to the adoptees' different experiences growing up in the same family environment. Locus of control, gender differences, and resiliency would be interest areas.

A third study, similar to this current study, could study international adoptees living in American culture. Personality, environment—including parenting styles--and gender comparisons could be made with other studies.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I feel honored to have been allowed into the private lives of the seven participants in this study. Like them, I was uncertain about how the interviews would unfold. I left every interview feeling enlightened—more pieces of the puzzle had been put into place. The participants *all* had different personalities, and all their stories were diverse. Many times we were laughing hard, and sometimes the topics were disturbing. I had to be a researcher and not a psychotherapist. One participant in particular seemed to want to see whether I knew as much about adoption as he did!

I do not consider myself to be an expert in adoption, by any means; however, I do feel more qualified now to confront those individuals who have misgivings about adoption and adoptees. In the past, I could not have given myself the credibility I now feel I have. With this study, the other research, and resources, I can respond to those with misunderstandings about adoption and dispute their beliefs with research.

At a conference for the Colorado Alliance for Adoption last year, I talked with a single mom who had adopted two boys, then five years and seven years old. I asked her at what age she had told her boys they were adopted, and she said she had not really given that any thought. I was glad she was at that conference to gain a better understanding of the importance of being open and honest with children that are adopted.

The parenting we receive—our environment in combination with our genetics—makes us who we are. This is also a truth for adopted people. Adoptees have no more, no fewer problems than other populations. They do have unique histories, including diverse religious backgrounds, sometimes several ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and sometimes much that is unknown. Adopted persons do not want sympathy, but they do want others to understand that the status of being adopted is unique—it is not a symptom of a person with a problem. Adopted persons need their adoption to be seen as an important part of who they are.

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## **APPENDICES**

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE ADVERTISEMENT/FLYER

**VOLUNTEERS WANTED:**

Male Adoptees 21 years and older for

Adoption Research Project

**Colorado State University Ph.D. student is researching adoption as experienced by men adopted as infants. All information is confidential. Research requires two taped interviews lasting approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours each.**

Project to begin fall of 2004. If you are interested in participating, please call 402-4600 and leave a message with your name and phone number or e-mail [dgsrnlrf@lamar.colostate.edu](mailto:dgsrnlrf@lamar.colostate.edu)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **SAMPLE E-COMMENT ONLINE ADVERTISEMENT**

Volunteers wanted: Male Adoptees 21 years and older for Adoption Research Project

Colorado State University Ph.D. student (from School of Education) is researching adoption as experienced by men adopted as infants. All information is confidential. Research requires two taped interviews lasting approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours each.

Project to begin summer of 2005.

If you are interested in participating, please call

Rose Quinn, Ph.D. doctoral candidate  
School of Education  
402-4600

**APPENDIX C**  
**PHONE SCREENING INTERVIEW**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

1) What is your name?

\_\_\_\_\_

2) How did you hear about this study?

\_\_\_\_\_

3) Are you 21 or over?    Yes    No

4) You are adopted?    Yes    No

5) Were you adopted before you were two years old?    Yes    No

6) You understand the project requires two taped interviews?    Yes    No

7) Do you wish to participate in this research?    Yes    No

**APPENDIX D**

**SAMPLE CONSENT FORM**

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY  
INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH  
PROJECT

**TITLE OF PROJECT: A Phenomenology of Relinquishment as Experienced  
by Male Adoptees.**

**NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Dr. Sharon Anderson

**NAME OF CO-INVESTIGATOR:** Rose Quinn

**CONTACT NAME AND PHONE NUMBER FOR**

**QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS:** Rose Quinn (970) 530-4600

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

**The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the  
phenomenon of relinquishment as experienced by male adoptees. To date, few  
studies exist that look at how adopted individuals perceive their experience of being  
adopted.**

**PROCEDURES/METHODS TO BE USED:**

You will be interviewed in person by the co-investigator to gain a better understanding of your individual experience of adoption. First, an eight-item questionnaire will ensure you meet the necessary criteria. The process requires two meetings with the interviewer. The first interview will take between one and one and a half hours and will consist of an in-depth, tape-recorded interview. The second meeting will take approximately one hour. This second meeting will allow you to share any additional thoughts or feelings

that may emerge since the first interview. It will provide the interviewer an opportunity to clarify some of the responses from the first meeting. The second interview will also be tape-recorded.

**RISKS INHERENT IN THE PROCEDURES:**

There is minimal psychological risk involved by participation. However, it is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and any potential but unknown risks.

**BENEFITS:**

There are no known benefits to the participant.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

All electronic tapes will be destroyed subsequent to the completion of the project. The American Psychological Association recommends that transcripts be maintained for three years after the study is completed. The transcripts will be kept locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's home and will be destroyed by a paper-shredding machine after three years.

All recordings will have identifying information removed before being transcribed by another party. The transcripts will not be seen by anyone other than the transcriber, the researcher, Rose Quinn, her dissertation advisors and possibly the Human Research Committee or other human protection bodies.

During the study, all names and phone numbers will be coded and **only** Rose Quinn will have access to this information. After completion of the study, this information will be shredded.

**LIABILITY:**

The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility in an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

Questions about participants' rights may be directed to Celia S. Walker at (970) 491-1563.

**PARTICIPATION:**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent. You may stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this documentation containing two pages.

---

Participant name (printed)

---

Participant signature

---

Witness to signature (project staff)

## APPENDIX E

### SAMPLE OF DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Phone numbers: Home \_\_\_\_\_  
Work/Cell \_\_\_\_\_
4. E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Place of birth: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Age at time of adoption: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Your ethnic background if known: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Ethnicity of adoptive mother: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Ethnicity of adoptive father: \_\_\_\_\_
11. Did your adoptive parents also have biological children? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, how many sisters? \_\_\_\_\_ How many brothers? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Did you grow up with any biological sisters or brothers? yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, how many sisters? \_\_\_\_\_ How many brothers? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Have you had contact with your birthmother since you were adopted? Yes \_\_\_ no \_\_\_  
Do you have contact now? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Have you had contact with your birthfather since you were adopted? yes \_\_\_ no \_\_\_
15. Are your adoptive parents related to you in any way? yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, how? \_\_\_\_\_

16. Have you ever been to see a mental health counselor or therapist?

Yes \_\_\_ no \_\_\_

17. How did you find that experience? \_\_\_\_\_

18. What is your present occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX F**  
**SAMPLE OF LINK LIST**

<b>Link List</b>			
<b>Participants</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Date of Interview 1</b>	<b>Date of Interview 2</b>
James H.	001	11/01/04	11/14/04
Mick H.	002	11/03/04	11/16/04
Michael B.	003	11/06/04	11/20/04

**APPENDIX G**  
**DEMOGRAPHICS TABLE**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age at Adoption</b>	<b>Sister</b>	<b>Brother</b>	<b>Pass/Visible</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Searching</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Children</b>
Mitch	4 weeks	1 older adopted	N/A	Pass	Baptist	Master's Degree Sociology	Yes	Single	No
Sam	2-3 weeks	1 younger adopted	N/A	Pass	Catholic	Ph.D.	Found by birthmom	Married	1 son
Issac	19 days	2 younger adopted	N/A	Pass	Jewish	Some community college	Yes	Single	No
Toff	7 weeks	1 younger adopted	N/A	Visible	No mention	Master's Degree	No	Married	No
Andrew	2 days	1 younger born to parents		Pass	Baptist		No	Married	1 daughter
Xavier	2 days	N/A	1 deceased older brother born to parents	?	Baptist	BA	Yes	Single	No
Tom	Several days	N/A	1 older adopted	Yes	No mention	Ph.D.	Found by birthmom	Married	No

**APPENDIX H**  
**THEMES FROM TRANSCRIPTS**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Mitch</b>	<b>Sam</b>	<b>Isaac</b>	<b>Toff</b>	<b>Andres</b>	<b>Xavier</b>	<b>Tom</b>
My birth parents were young	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Yes	Yes
My relinquishment was justified	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Yes	Uncertain
Religion played a big part in my life growing up	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
I was raised in a “bubble”	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Uncertain	No
I question nature vs. nurture	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Being adopted is no “big deal”	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Uncertain
My sister had a harder time being adopted than I did	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	NA	NA
My mom’s insecurity prevents me from searching	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
I struggle to meet the needs of my adopted mom	Yes	Yes	No	No	No/Yes	Yes	Yes
I have divided loyalties to my adopted parents and birthmom	NA	Yes	NA	NA	NA	NA	Yes
I like telling people I am adopted	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Unknown
I have a unique story about my adoption	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
I have talked to a therapist about my issues	No	No	Yes	Mom is therapist	Yes, and hated it	No	Yes
I know my birthparents’ ethnicity	German Irish	Italian German	Jewish+ 1/16 NA	Chinese Caucasian	*Unknown	Hispanic +NA	Caucasian
Reason adopted	Adopted mom’s infertility	Adopted mom’s infertility	Both adopted parents’ infertility	Adopted mom’s infertility	Adopted mom thought to be infertile	Replace lost child	Adopted parents’ infertility
Type of adoption	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Semi-closed	Closed
It was expensive to adopt me	NA	NA	Yes	NA	NA	Yes	NA
I was adopted through a religious organization	Yes Baptist	Yes Catholic	Yes Jewish	No	Yes Baptist	--	Unknown
My biological dad did not take responsibility for me – my understanding is he left	Unknown	Yes	No	No	Unknown	Yes	Yes
I have a thorough understanding of adoption processes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

(continued)

### Themes from Transcripts (continued)

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Mitch</b>	<b>Sam</b>	<b>Isaac</b>	<b>Toff</b>	<b>Andrew</b>	<b>Xavier</b>	<b>Tom</b>
I could talk openly about adoption with my parents	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
My adopted mom feels threatened by birthmom	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Somewhat	Yes/most likely
I would like to meet my biological mom	Yes	I have	Yes	No	No	Yes	I have
I have a good understanding of the adoption process	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Unknown
I have experienced racism	No	No	No	Unknown	No	Yes	No
I feel I look like my parents	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Unknown
I made up stories about my biological mom/parents	Yes	Unknown	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown
I would only meet my biological parents for medical history	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
I am currently searching	No	N/A	Yes	No	No	Yes	N/A
I would say my relationship with my adoptive parents is good	Yes	Yes but	Yes	Yes but	Yes but	Yes	No
I will support my child/children if they were to search for their biological grandparents	Unknown	Yes but	Yes	Unknown	Yes but	Yes	Unknown
I think people are cavalier about having/adopting children	Unknown	Unknown	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes