

THE EXPERIENCES OF ADOPTIVE MOTHERS:  
AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
ANALYSIS

CHARLOTTE HARRIS

This research is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology.

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**STUDENT DECLARATION**

University of East London  
School of Psychology  
Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted for any degree and it is not being concurrently submitted for any degree.

This research is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology.

This thesis is the result of my own work and investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references in the text. A full reference list is appended.

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## ABSTRACT

Research suggests that little is known about the experiences of adoptive parents, particularly adoptive mothers, who are seen to be a hidden population within the academic literature. This study explores the experiences of nine adoptive mothers living in a small unitary authority in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, which was then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Three superordinate themes emerged from the data: 'Becoming 'Mum'', 'The Melting Pot of Emotion', 'Social Stigma of Adoption'. Demonstrating the complexity and diversity of the women's experience, three less common themes were also identified: 'Fragility of Adoption', 'The Reward of Adoption', 'The Child Mediating the Experience'. The women's experience conveys the overwhelming nature of adoptive motherhood, and supports the notion of adoptive motherhood as a multifaceted social phenomenon. A parallel between these findings and the motherhood literature is seen, with the feminist discourse of society emerging from the women's interviews. Of particular interest is the influence of psychological theory and the perceived continued social stigma on the experiences of adoptive mothers. It is argued that the insights the study provides are important for the professional practice of Educational Psychologists and Adoption Services, and future areas for exploration are suggested.

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## **CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Overview**

The research presented in this thesis explores the experiences of adoptive mothers, and as such this chapter aims to introduce the concept and nature of adoption. Firstly, adoption as understood within this study is defined, followed by an overview of adoption statistics. The changing context of adoption is then discussed, bringing adoption policy and practice right up to May 2012. Finally, the aims and rationale underpinning the research are presented, along with a brief discussion and personal reflection about the chosen research topic.

### **1.2 Defining Adoption**

In its simplest form, adoption is about providing a permanent family for children whose birth family are unable to care for them and meet their needs (Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997). It is about the long-term welfare of the child, but,

At its best, adoption also meets the needs of the adopting family who have wished for a child or further children, as well as the family into which the child was born, who have willingly or unwillingly surrendered the care of the child (Triseliotis et al., 1997, p.1).

Within current adoption policy there is an element of legality and regulation within the adoption definition. Adoption is defined by the Department of Health (2000, p.6) as a process that “irrevocably gives recognition to the legal transfer of a child from his or her birth family to the adoptive family”, and this forms the framework by which adoption is discussed within this research.

A distinction has been made within this research between adoption, Special Guardianships, and step-parent adoptions, and focuses purely on adoption which has taken place through the Local Authority Adoption Agency. Special Guardianships were introduced in 2005 when the Adoption and Children Act (2002) took full effect and, while providing “a legally secure foundation for building a permanent relationship between the child and their special guardian” (Department for Education, 2011a), maintain a legal link between the child and the birth parent. This is not the case with adoption, as the adoptive parents are given full legal responsibility for the child and all legal ties with the birth parents are broken. With regards to step-parent adoption, while

legally binding, this form of adoption is likely to be experienced differently, and these parents are likely to have “different concerns than many other people who choose to adopt in quite different circumstances” (Adoption and Fostering Information Line, 2011).

For the purposes of this study an adoptive mother is recognised as a woman who has been through the Local Authority adoption process, and been placed with a child for adoption through the Local Authority Adoption agency, either as part of a couple or as a single person. They have secured or are in the final stages of securing legal responsibility for the child via a final court order.

### **1.3 Adoption Statistics**

The most recent Department for Education (DfE, 2011b) statistics show that 3,050 Looked After Children (LAC) were adopted, and a further 2,450 LAC were placed for adoption, between 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011 in England. This was a 5% decrease from 2010, an 8% decrease from 2007, and a statistic that many feel is ‘of real concern’ (Pearce, 2011). The Office for National Statistics (2011) suggest that this trend may be accounted for by the introduction of Special Guardianships in December 2005, while Pearce (2011) attributes the reduction in adoptions over the last few years, in part, to the decreasing availability of adoptive parents. It is suggested by Pearce (2011) that not only have Local Authorities reduced their focus on the recruitment of adoptive parents, but also the current economic climate is deterring people from adopting when financial futures are unclear.

In addition to fewer adoptive parents, the 2011 data shows that fewer LAC children are being placed for adoption year-on-year (DfE, 2011b). This is despite the fact that the number of children Looked After by Local Authorities increased by 6% between 2009 and 2010, and is likely to continue to increase due in part to the controversy of the Baby P case and the Safeguarding and Child Protection debates that followed (Francis, 2010).

The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF, 2011) have criticised the data, suggesting that it does not fully represent adoption ‘activity’ in England. The current data published by the DfE (2011b) only accounts for those adoptions that have

been finalised through an adoption order, and does not consider adoption placements where a child is placed with their adoptive parents, but a final order has not been agreed.

It is unclear how many adults become prospective adoptive parents each year, but the DfE (2010) statistics show that in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 2,900 adults were placed with a child, thus becoming adoptive parents. Locally, within the Authority in which this research took place, on average 60 new adopter enquiries are made each year and 10 prospective adoption households undergo assessments each month (statistics based on those recorded between March and September 2011 by the Local Authority Adoption and Fostering Services Team Manager). The DfE (2011b) statistics show that between 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011 approximately 20 children were adopted within the Local Authority in which this research took place, with an average of 17 adoptions each year since 2007.

The various statistics discussed above reveal a striking proportion of the population (both children and adults) who experience, and are affected by, the complex adoption process. With new Government initiatives, discussed in later sections, these numbers are likely to increase in future years.

#### **1.4 The Changing Context of Adoption**

The population of adopted children, and the context and reasons for adoption, have changed dramatically since its legal introduction in the 1920's, but adoption in its simplest form can be traced back approximately 2,000 years. Triseliotis et al. (1997) describe five distinct periods of adoption practice, each of which reflect the customs, beliefs and social 'preoccupations' of the time. It is clear that the focus of adoption changes at each point in time, with changing recognition of the various members of the 'adoption triangle' (Brodzinsky and Schechter, 1990) i.e. the child, adoptive parents, and birth parents, as being at the centre of the process.

The first period identified by Triseliotis et al. (1997, p.4) is that of Greek and Roman times, where adoption was seen as serving 'the interests of those adopting'. In the second period, the nineteenth century, the focus moved towards the child and finding security for the many children housed in traditional institutions, such as poorhouses. It was in this second period that legislation was developed to provide regulation and legal

security for all parties, starting with America in the 1850's and then England in 1926. Triseliotis et al. (1997) argue that this reflects the more liberal nature of America at the time, compared to Britain's class-conscious society in which adoption was less acceptable.

The end of World War II marked the beginning of Triseliotis et al.'s (1997) third period in adoption history. Adoption at this time was "viewed as a solution to the problem of infertility and became popular among middle classes" (Triseliotis et al., 1997, p.7). Adoption agencies became focused on 'perfect' matches which were as biologically similar as possible, thus creating the 'perfect family'. Theories such as those of Freud and Bowlby became popular and seem to have influenced the adoption process quite dramatically at this time. While the debate regarding the outcomes for children adopted at an older age continues in modern day literature, at this time adoption agencies concentrated on infant adoption and early attachment, and older children placed for adoption therefore tended to be raised in residential settings. Unlike previous periods, the focus in this third period was on what Triseliotis et al. (1997, p.8) describe as "a child for a home", demonstrating how quickly societal pressures can influence and shape adoption. This was also a period of great secrecy as many adoptive parents tried to hide the fact that their child came from an illegitimate home. As Keating (2009, p.4) states, adopters became concerned that "their respectability and social standing would be directly threatened if people knew their child was adopted". This led to the idea of 'closed adoptions', with the ties between birth mother and child being severed, and the child growing up unaware of their adoptive status.

In the 1960's adoption was again viewed as being a child-centred process rather than one aiming to meet the needs and wants of prospective adoptive parents. By the 1980's transracial, and lesbian and gay adoption became more widely accepted, although both continue to be debated in what Hicks (2005) terms 'heteronormative' arguments, and numbers of same sex adopters remain relatively low. The 2010 statistics (DfE, 2010) show that of the 2,900 couples who adopted children between 31<sup>st</sup> March 2009 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 120 were in a same sex partnership, with male and female numbers being fairly even. Hicks (2005, p.50) suggests that many lesbian and gay adopters may not put themselves forward for adoption because "there is still much work to be done and...lesbians and gay men are still affected by the many negative attitudes about gay

parenting that pervade our society”. Within this fourth period it can be seen that the concept of adoption saw a dramatic shift, with expansions in the definitions and decisions not only regarding which children should be put forward for adoption, but also which families were suitable to adopt.

The fifth period in adoption history identified by Triseliotis et al. (1997) includes the development of the 1989 Children’s Act, which saw the child’s welfare as paramount and gave impetus to the need to consider the child’s wishes in any decision making process. It also saw the rise of what Triseliotis et al. (1997, p.9) describe as the “family preservation movement”, in which there was an increased focus on keeping birth families together using “intensive and sustained birth family support” (Rushton, 2003, p.4).

### **1.5 Adoption in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Policy and Practice**

Triseliotis et al.’s (1997) book is now quite dated and while covering a vast period in time cannot account for changes in adoption over the last 15 years. In 2002, the Adoption and Children Act (2002) was published to integrate adoption legislation with the Children’s Act (1989), and places “adopted children’s interests at the centre of policy and practice decisions, ensuring that the child’s welfare is the primary consideration for all decisions relating to adoption” (Hawkins et al., 2007, p.5).

While the main focus now lies firmly with the welfare of the child, the 2002 Act also recognises the affect that the often long and arduous process of adoption has on the prospective adoptive parents. The White Paper (Department of Health, 2000, p.34) argues for “fairer, faster and more transparent assessment procedures”, and sets out clear National Standards regarding both the pre- and post-assessment process, as well as post-placement support that should be available.

Adoption has seen a recent rise in significance for the British Government, and was in and out of the media quite frequently while this research took place. In July 2011 the Government appointed an ‘Adoption Tsar’, Martin Narey, the first of his kind, to review the adoption system. This, one could argue, may have marked the beginning of the sixth period in adoption history. The focus now appears to be about raising the profile of

adoption and reiterates the ideas of the Government in 2002, which aimed to increase the numbers of children placed for adoption by 40% (Rushton, 2003).

From the statistics it is clear that this target was not met, and in fact quite the opposite trend ensued, but with the appointment of Martin Narey it seems that the Government is again attempting to radically increase the number of adoptions in the UK. Narey (2011, p.3) argues that, “Adoption is the ultimate intervention in the life of a child and one that, we know, can and does transform lives, particularly when the adoption is made at an early age”. However, Narey’s comments were based on a limited eight week investigation of adoption in the UK, and as an emotive subject, while receiving an initial positive response, evoked some debate as it was argued that the initial findings and suggestions were too simplistic (Lakhani, 2011; Pemberton, 2011).

Following Narey’s (2011) report, and an initial consultation period, in March 2012 the Government published ‘An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Long Delays’ (DfE, 2012a). This action plan sets out Government proposals to change the adoption process, looking to speed up the process for children, improve the service for prospective adopters, and strengthen Local Authority accountability (DfE, 2012b). The Queen’s Speech on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2012 outlined the forthcoming Children and Families Bill and also reiterated the Government proposals in the ‘Action Plan for Adoption’, focusing in particular on the need to speed up adoption (BBC News, 2012).

Subsequently, the UK Government announced the publication of adoption ‘scorecards’, which it is hoped will help to address the current delays in the adoption system (DfE, 2012c). The scorecards will set out minimum expectations for the speed it takes Local Authorities to place children for adoption after they have been taken in to care. It will also allow Local Authorities and adoption agencies to monitor and compare their performance, which should at the very least “stimulate learning, focus minds and generate action” (Simmonds, 2012). This new initiative has however been met with a mixed reaction from Local Authorities and national adoption agencies such as the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). Harrison (2012) highlights how Local Authority council members have expressed concern that the scorecard system does not take into account a number of factors that affect the speed in which some adoptions take place, and therefore does not allow for an accurate comparison of

performance. In addition, Local Authorities have pointed out that the initiative may put prospective adoptive parents off adoption (Harrison, 2012). With a focus on speed, Simmonds (2012) argues that “it must not confuse timeliness with speediness that results in the wrong child being placed with the wrong adopters”, thus affecting the experiences of those involved and the overall success of the adoption.

It seems inevitable that further policy reforms are likely to affect all three parties of the adoption ‘triangle’. As Rushton (2003, p.7) states, “the successful recruitment of new adoptive parents can be considered the sine qua non of adoption policy”, and this is likely to be the case if Governmental policy looks to not only increase the numbers of adoptions taking place year on year, but the speed with which children pass through the adoption system. It is therefore important that the experiences of adoptive parents are explored now, and in the future, if they are to be seen as essential to increasing adoption in England.

### **1.6 The Need to Understand the Experiences of Adoptive Mothers**

The exploration of adoption history demonstrates that adoption is continuously changing and evolving in line with social and Governmental pressures, and in this respect adoption “becomes a ‘moving target’ for researchers” (Rushton, 2003, p.vii). The changes to, and evolution of, legislation and the adoption process have undoubtedly affected the experiences and lives of all members of the ‘adoption triangle’, and will continue to do so as the Government interest increases. With this in mind, Hawkins et al. (2007, p.6) state that, “it is crucial to listen to the views of *all* involved in adoption”.

Within the adoption literature the voices of adoptive parents have received little prominence, particularly in the UK (Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Sykes, 2000; Brodzinsky, 1993; Brodzinsky and Schechter, 1990). It is therefore argued that, given the rise in significance of adoption in both political and media circles, it is important to understand how the process of adoption itself is experienced by adoptive parents. Given the extreme stress, uncertainty and challenges that adoptive parents face throughout their journey to parenthood (Cooper and Johnson, 2007; Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Rushton, 2003), it is also argued that, “The more that practice is underpinned by secure research-based knowledge, the more the risk of disruption and unstable placements should be reduced” (Rushton, 2003, p.38).

The Government in its recent publication (DfE, 2012a) has also acknowledged that there is limited research into the experiences of adoptive parents, and while now striving to demonstrate the value of adoptive parents, state that “It is symptomatic of a system which does not always pay enough attention to prospective adopters that we do not currently have any comprehensive national information about their experiences” (DfE, 2012a, p.28). Although not a nationwide exploration, it is argued that this research is an important step forward in this area, and may go some way to illuminating how adoption is experienced by adoptive mothers.

Additionally, given the professional domain in which this study was carried out, the experiences of adoptive mothers are of great interest to Educational Psychologists. Gaining a better understanding of the process of adoption, how it is lived, and the challenges faced by mothers bringing up children who have been adopted, will stand Educational Psychologists in good stead when working with adopted children and their parents. Cuckle and Bamford (2000) assert that all parents need reassurance that their opinions and contributions are valued by education professionals, particularly Educational Psychologists, and therefore it is important that such professionals listen to this group of parents.

### **1.7 Research Aims**

The aim of this research is therefore to explore, in depth, the experiences of adoptive mothers living in a unitary Local Authority in England. It is argued that only through exploring people’s experiences that adoption and the underlying dynamics can be understood. It is anticipated that the research will provide a greater understanding about how the process of adoption itself is experienced, the facilitating and impeding influences that affect the experiences of adoptive mothers, and what meaning adoptive mothers give to each element of their experiences. Additionally, it is hoped that this study will help to support policy development to assist all professionals working for or with Adoption Services to work more effectively together to improve the experiences of adoptive parents. With regards to Educational Psychologists, it is hoped that the study will help to inform new ways of working with adoptive parents, for example by supporting the development and implementation of effective parental support services.

Therefore, the overarching research question is:

“What is the experience of adoption for women who have become adoptive mothers?”

### **1.8 Personal Reflection**

Shaw (2010, p.233) argues that “reflexivity is integral to experiential qualitative research in psychology”, with reflexivity being classed as an awareness and honesty about ones feelings and emotions surrounding the research. Although this will be discussed further in Chapter 3 and 5, it is important here that the reader gains an initial understanding of the researcher’s personal and professional positioning, along with the reasons why this particular research topic was chosen.

Since finishing my undergraduate degree, and having worked in a school with a very high proportion of Looked After Children, I have been interested in how Educational Psychologists can work to support this vulnerable group of children. This interest has stayed with me throughout my training as an Educational Psychologist, but I have also been drawn to work in closely related areas such as adoption. Through discussions with various professionals at the beginning of my Year 2 Trainee Educational Psychologist placement in a Local Authority, the idea of research in the area of adoption began to come to life. As this research took shape, I attended a post-adoption support group, and was humbled by the honesty the parents expressed about their experiences and the emotions that go with these experiences. It became apparent that a lot of these parents wanted their stories heard and would be happy to participate in research, and the decision was therefore made to explore the experiences of adoptive mothers.

During the initial stages of writing the thesis, adoption received a great deal of media attention. While helpful for my understanding and knowledge of adoption, I found myself struggling to decide which argument was, in a sense, ‘right’. Should adoption numbers be increased? Should the process be sped up and the bureaucracy reduced? How will this affect children in care? Of particular relevance bearing in mind my research, how will this affect adoptive parents, and how can my research be of use?

## **CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Overview**

This chapter offers a systematic and critical review of the literature regarding the experiences of adoption from the perspective of adoptive parents. The review highlights the limited availability of literature and knowledge regarding the experiences of adoptive parents, specifically of adoptive mothers, who appear to be a hidden population within the academic literature (Gair, 1999). To this end, while the overarching focus is the experiences of adoptive mothers, literature pertaining to the experiences of adoptive parents is also considered. The review goes on to focus on pertinent aspects of adoption, including motherhood and identity, the experiences of contact in adoption, and mental health and adoption. A review of psychological issues in adoption and theoretical models relevant to the experiences of adoptive mothers is provided, and the chapter ends with a brief exploration of the motherhood literature.

### **2.2 Systematic Literature Search**

A systematic literature search was completed to find the most relevant literature available that addresses the question ‘What is the experience of adoption for adoptive mothers?’. A Venn diagram was drawn to break the research question into its component parts, with a view to identifying key words (see Appendix 1). Key words identified included: adoption, mothers, adoptive mothers, parents, experiences, life experience, impact, and core issues. The key words were then combined using Boolean phrases such as ‘adoption AND mothers AND experience’ and entered in to a variety of databases. EBSCO was used to access articles from databases, including Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO. Searches were also completed in Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and ingentaconnect. Appendix 2 provides a diagrammatic representation of the searches undertaken and the articles retrieved.

Within EBSCO a specification was made for peer-reviewed articles only, and searches were refined by date (1990-2011), thesaurus terms (adoption and adoptive parents), and major headings (adoptive parents and mothers). A critical appraisal of titles and abstracts was then completed using the exclusion and inclusion criteria in Appendix 3, which excluded articles related to foster carers, children’s experiences, international

adoptions, and fathers, amongst others. Duplicate articles were then removed. Overall, 28 unique articles were identified across the various searches. Critical reading of the full journal articles, which re-applied the exclusion and inclusion criteria in Appendix 3, provided further exclusions, with 10 being included within the systematic literature review below. An outline of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, along with a table outlining the decision making process undertaken to reduce the original 28 papers to just 10 can be found in Appendices 3 and 4. The final 10 papers included within the literature search can be seen in bold in Appendix 4.

Following electronic searches a snowball technique was used to search for relevant references within article reference lists. When reading the original 28 papers identified through the systematic literature search, references within the main body of the paper, which were of interest and potential relevance, were noted and investigated further. The inclusion and exclusion criteria employed in the systematic search (see Appendix 3) were used when deciding which papers to include. This identified a further four papers for inclusion within the review of adoption literature. A table outlining these four papers, the source of these papers, and the inclusion criteria employed can be found in Appendix 5.

### **2.3 Adoption Literature**

Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey and Stewart (2004, p.38) contend that research investigating transition periods in adulthood, such as becoming a parent, focuses on biological parents rather than those people who have become parents through adoption. Additionally, within the adoption literature, adoptive parents appear to have a hidden voice, as it seems “few authors approach the problems experienced by adoptive parents as independent issues worth addressing in their own right” (Wegar, 2000, p.365). Gair (1996) argues that the adoptive parents’ overarching ‘story’ is missing from much of the literature, and this seems to be particularly true within the UK literature. Much of the adoption research that explores the experiences of adoptive parents focuses on specific aspects and key areas of the experience, for example, contact, identity, and mental health, and does not reveal the ‘whole’ phenomena as adoptive parents experience it. These studies therefore do not afford adoptive parents the opportunity to identify the important aspects of their experience and which aspects have particular meaning for them, a specific aim of this Doctoral research.

With regards to adoptive mothers, much of the motherhood literature relates to the meaning of motherhood, and when adoption is included it seems that assumptions are made based on societal values rather than experiential research. While slightly dated, it is argued that Woollett and Phoenix's (1991, p.228) statement still holds true, that "Most research on adoption is concerned with the impact of adoption on children's development and as a consequence there is little information about how women who become mothers in this way...experience motherhood".

### **2.3.1 Experiences of Adoptive Mothers**

Probably the most comprehensive piece of research looking at the experiences of adoptive mothers comes from Gair (1996), and appears to be in direct response to the limited exploration of the experiences of adoptive mothers in previous research. In her Doctoral thesis Gair (1996) investigated the experiences of 50 adoptive mothers across the 'life cycle', looking specifically at two significant periods: early post adoption mothering, and mothering in the teenage years. Using a mixed methodology, Gair (1996) explored "the reality of adoption for adoptive mothers" (Gair, 1996, p.14) via qualitative, feminist research methods and a number of quantitative standardised scales. Mothers who had adopted children under the age of 12 months between 1960 and 1994 were interviewed about their experiences across the adoption lifecycle with a view to allowing them to define the nature of their experiences of motherhood. Gair (1996) sought to build a theory and explanation of how adoptive mothers experience their mothering role in adoption, thus supporting and informing social work practice in the future.

Gair (1996, p.412) found that early post adoption mothering was "a time of overwhelming experiences" and these mothers were vulnerable to the pressures, stress and distress recognised in birth mothers raising children in a modern society. Adoptive mothers also recognised the disparity between their expectations and the realities of their role, and questioned their knowledge of how they thought adoptive motherhood would be. For mothers of children in their teenage years, the most emotionally charged experiences were based around contact with birth parents, with adoptive mothers expressing emotions ranging from feelings of anxiety, to ambivalence, to acceptance. In addition, the results suggested that, based on the prevailing circumstance, adoptive mothers employ a number of coping strategies across the adoption lifecycle.

Overall, Gair's (1996) findings help to shed some light on the experiences of adoptive mothers. Commonalities and divergences are evident in the research findings, and Gair (1996) herself points to the unexpected diversity in the experiences of adoptive mothers, contradicting her initial assumption that adoptive mothers would present a 'united voice'. This unanticipated finding may be explained by the fact that the participant sample spanned 34 years, during which time adoption policy and practice, and attitudes towards adoption, changed dramatically, not only in Queensland, Australia, but also across the world. Questions therefore lie with the applicability of the results to current adoption experiences if one considers the further developments that have taken place over the last 14 years. Additionally, one may question the validity of participant reports 36 years after the adoption, and given that Gair's (1996) research took place in Queensland, Australia, the question of generalizability of these results must be considered.

Additionally, the specific method of analysis employed by Gair (1996) is ambiguous, and the analysis seems to have been conducted under the umbrella of 'qualitative, feminist' research methods. Gair (1996) purports to draw on different analytic methods, for example, Grounded Theory and McCracken's (1988, as cited in Gair, 1996) five stage process to analysis, and the analytic technique employed seems to have developed as the analytic process progressed. In this respect, the description to a certain degree seems to lack transparency and coherence, which Yardley (2000, p.221) sees as key characteristics of 'good' qualitative research. Meyrick (2006, p.806) argues that transparency enables the reader to judge the decisions made by the researcher, while Yardley (2000, P.221) sees transparency and coherence as measures of the power and persuasiveness of the research. One may therefore argue that the results should be understood with some tentativeness, and that Gair's (1996) research leaves scope for more rigorous research, which explores the experiences of adoptive mothers through an interpretative lens and seeks to understand rather than explain this 'hidden' phenomenon.

Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik (2007) examined the experiences of adoptive single mothers in Israel and found that their experiences could be understood in terms of "movement into and between two phenomenological dimensions: the personal/private and interpersonal/social" (Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007, p.826). Within the

personal dimension, adoptive mothers saw themselves as empowered and self-sufficient, acknowledging that motherhood is not bound to 'couplehood'. In contrast, within the interpersonal dimension adoptive mothers were confronted with, and in some instances, internalised cultural norms and assumptions around single parenthood. Adoptive mothers expressed desire to be seen as 'normal' and therefore attempted to minimise difference between themselves and birth mothers. Adoption was also seen as being influenced by fate, which in turn gave the relationship with the child a new 'emotional quality'.

By exploring the experiences of single adoptive mothers, Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik (2007) have provided a unique contribution to the adoption literature. It shows how these mothers construct their realities, and provides insight into the conflict adoptive mothers experience between the personal and social narratives they create. The results also illustrate how experience and meaning making are often influenced by traditional, mainstream societal values and norms regarding the family structure. However, Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik (2007) concede that their findings are based on a homogenous sample of women, and therefore further research is required to explore the generalizability of the mothers' narratives. Additionally, it is unclear whether such narratives are confined to single adoptive mothers or whether they are also experienced by adoptive mothers who have adopted as part of a couple.

More recently, Timm, Mooradian and Hock (2011) conducted research to explore the individual and marital experiences of adoptive mothers in the USA. Unlike Gair's (1996) research, Timm et al. (2011) were guided by the theoretical literature, looking specifically at the degree to which adoptive mothers face eight 'core issues' based on Silverstein and Kaplan's (1982, cited in Silverstein and Kaplan, 1988, p.45) theory of adoption. A mixed methodology was employed, with questions related to the impact each core issue had had for 104 adoptive mothers, and how much it had affected their relationship with their partner.

Overall, Timm et al. (2011) found that although not all participants felt that they had been affected by all eight of the core issues, they were all present within the sample. Issues related to 'Identity' were notably more significant in individual than couple experience, and this was deemed to be due to the internal, individual nature of identity.

However, Daly (1988, p.46) argues that unlike one's overall identity, the identity of parenthood is "usually contingent on a shared construction", and therefore another explanation may be more appropriate. Positively, the results also suggest that, when experienced, core issues can serve to strengthen couple relationships and marriage. In this respect, Timm et al. (2011, p.280) argue that, "the dominant deficit discourse about adoption should be challenged".

The results for the most part give support to Silverstein and Kaplan's (1982) theory of adoption, although the core issues may not be experienced universally by all adoptive mothers as was originally hypothesised. Timm et al. (2011) not only seek to explore the experiences of adoptive mothers, but also the mothers' perceived influence core issues have on marital relationships, which may be advantageous when looking at pre- and post-adoption support. However, one may question whether this is truly an exploratory study of the experiences of adoptive mothers or whether it is simply designed to provide evidence to support an already developed theoretical model. Does the limited scope of the questioning, particularly with regards to the qualitative data, which is focused on eight specific core issues, provide the participants with the opportunity to discuss their true lived experiences? What is needed are further explorative studies, which look at the experiences of adoptive mothers away from a pre-defined theoretical model, and capture the phenomenon of adoption as it is experienced.

### **2.3.2 Experiences of Adoptive Parents**

Baltimore and Crase (2009, p.69) argue that a "commonly cited criticism of adoption research is the failure to allow members of the adoption process to share their experiences without the researchers' preconceived ideas and biases". They therefore completed a qualitative, phenomenological analysis, exploring children's and adult's lived experiences of adoption, thus providing multiple perspectives on this "complex social phenomenon" (Baltimore and Crase, 2009, p.70). Of particular interest are the four themes identified in relation to the overall experiences of being an adoptive parent: positive experiences, faith-based responses, parents' perceived differences from other parents, and parents' perceived similarities from other parents.

The findings demonstrate an overall sense of positivity, with parents describing feelings of gratitude, displaying a belief that they were better prepared than other parents, and

showing increased feelings of appreciation for their children. This again challenges the dominant deficit discourse of adoption. However, Baltimore and Crase (2009, p.77) recognise that the nature of data collection, via self-reports, may have led to “positive portrayals of experience”. Metts, Sprecher and Cupach (1991) discuss four biases that can manifest when using retrospective self-report, one being social desirability, where “respondents attempt to present a positive and socially appropriate self-image”. They also allude to ways of reducing such biases, although it is unclear whether such measures were employed by Baltimore and Crase (2009).

Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) specifically addressed infertile couples’ experiences of adoption, considering the ‘vicissitudes’ and challenges of the adoption process. In their qualitative study, which employed a phenomenological analysis, three themes were identified from the interviews conducted: the couples’ decisions to adopt, the adoption process, and the experiences of becoming parents through adoption. Within each theme, emotions surrounding fear and rejection were coupled with a sense of optimism about the future and becoming parents. Interviewees felt that they had to work “their way through the emotional, legal, and social “land mines” of the adoption landscape” (Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003, p.394). Power and control were also strong under-arching themes that emerged from the interviews, and are presumably important concepts in adoption; taking on different meanings, both throughout the process and once a child has been placed.

Not only does Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell’s (2003) study look at the experiences of adoptive parents, and therefore have some relevance to the current research, it also considers how such work and findings have implications for professionals practicing within the Counselling domain. Of particular importance, Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) highlight how understanding the experiences of adoptive parents helps professionals to understand their needs at varying times throughout the process so that practice and support can be adapted appropriately.

However, one must always consider the context in which research is carried out. Given that Baltimore and Crase (2009) and Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) investigated the experiences of adoptive parents in other countries (America’s Midwest and Canada, respectively) it is unclear whether these findings can be generalised to adoptive parents

in the UK. It may be the case that different policy and practice in these countries alter the way in which adoptive parents construct their adoption experiences, and that the larger dominant societal and cultural context plays a part in these constructions. It can therefore be argued that investigating the experiences of adoptive parents, in particular adoptive mothers, in the UK will add value to the research literature, and an interpretative phenomenological methodology can provide a greater understanding as to whether similar experiences are shared by adoptive parents despite policy and process.

Prynn (2001) conducted a study of 50 sets of adoptive parents within the UK, with a view to informing the 'matching' process within social work practice. Rather than looking to understand how adoptive parents experience adoption, the aim of Prynn's (2001) study was to gain a better understanding of which aspects of the adoptive parents' experiences, both pre- and post-adoption, should be considered when 'matching' parents and children. The interviews conducted covered the early lives of the adoptive parents and the reasons for adoption, their experiences as adoptive parents, and the overall family system. With regards to the overall experiences of adoptive parents, Prynn (2001) found that adopters have an apparent need for a connection with the child, and this may often be based on physical appearance, along with other similarities. Adoptive parents tried hard to identify similarities to their adopted children and had a desire to be seen as 'ordinary' families "because recognition affirms their legitimacy and normality" (Prynn, 2001, p.38). For adoptive mothers, the arrival of the child was seen as a 'defining moment', which had a lasting impact on the mother-child relationship.

These results highlight the dynamic nature of adoption, and the ways in which adoptive parents process the complex adoption experience. In addition, Prynn (2001) provides an understanding of the factors that may influence the outcome of adoption, and which aspects may need to be considered when 'matching' adoptive couples to their children. Prynn (2001) acknowledges her influence on the data and allows the reader to gain an insight in to her own experiences of adoption and the reasons for the research.

Ceballo et al. (2004) also looked at the experiences of adoptive parents, but in contrast to the studies discussed, they compared the psychological implications of becoming a parent through birth, adoption, and marriage. They found that, while the reasons for

becoming parents and the factors that were considered before having a child differed across the groups, “new parents appear to share rather similar experiences” (Ceballo et al., 2004, p.46). Interestingly, Ceballo et al. (2004) found evidence to suggest that becoming a parent through adoption puts less strain on a marriage than becoming a biological parent, presumably because of the protracted preparation period and the elements of the adoption process. Additionally, the results showed that adoptive parents had a slight advantage in their parental role, particularly with regards to the satisfaction felt in their role as parents.

While Ceballo et al. (2004) contend that this is the first study of its kind, in that it compares the experiences of couples who have become parents by very different means, the quantitative data is unable to give clear examples of actual experiences, and is limited in the interpretation and further understanding it can provide. Ceballo et al. (2004) are only able to speculate as to the reasons for the similarities and differences demonstrated by the results, and as they themselves state, the results “warrant caution until future replication...[while] qualitative studies may be useful in helping to elucidate sources of stress and strength as children enter different types of families” (Ceballo et al., 2004, p.47).

Krusiewicz and Wood (2001) look exclusively at one interesting aspect of the experiences of adoptive parents, the moment they meet their child. They argue that the ‘Entrance Stories’ in adoption are important in identity formation, particularly for the adopted child who is trying to find a place within the family. A thematic analysis of the entrance stories of adoptive parents and the process by which the child became part of the family identified five themes: dialectical tensions, destiny, compelling connections, rescue, and legitimacy.

It is interesting that a number of themes seem to complement the findings of other studies, thus suggesting that adoption may be experienced in similar ways by many adoptive parents, and these experiences may be cross-cultural. For example, as with Baltimore and Crase’s (2009) study, Krusiewicz and Wood (2001) found that parents saw the way in which the child came to be part of the family as due to fate or god’s plan, emphasising the ‘rightness’ of the child for their family. Additionally, they found

that many adoptive parents emphasised and looked for a physical resemblance with their adopted children and sought legitimacy as a family, supporting Prynne's (2001) findings.

### **2.3.3 Adoption and Contact**

Historically, secrecy within adoption was considered beneficial for all members of the adoption triangle and adoptions were therefore 'closed' with "complete severance from the child's family of origin" (Logan, 2010, p.315). Adoptions now tend to be 'open', meaning there is open communication with the adopted child about their adoption and birth parents (MacDonald and McSherry, 2011). In the UK, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 recognises this change in adoption practice and highlights the importance of contact, specifying the need for careful exploration of contact issues during the adoption process (Logan, 2010).

Studies around contact tend to explore the impact different types of contact have on adoptive families, with a particular interest in the outcomes for adopted children (Neil, 2009; Grotevant, Wrobel, Korff, Skinner, Newell, Friese and McRoy, 2007). Sykes (2001; 2000) highlights the now widely accepted belief that continued contact with biological families following adoption is beneficial for children's psycho-social development. While this may be true for adopted children, for adoptive parents continued contact with birth parents, be it 'letterbox' or face-to-face, is an issue "that can bring a nightmare of insecurity and fear...[and] one that increasing numbers of adopters are having to face" (Hines, 2010).

Sykes (2001; 2000) looked specifically at contact in adoption, interviewing parents experiencing direct and indirect ('letterbox') contact. Content analysis was completed on the data with themes around contact and relationships being of particular interest. The findings suggest that more positive attitudes towards contact developed over time, particularly when the adoptive parent had more control and influence over the contact arrangements. This links well with the themes identified by Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003), and reinforces the idea that power and control are important factors, which give meaning to the experiences of adoptive parents throughout the adoption process.

Despite interviewing couples together, Sykes (2001; 2000) was able to differentiate between the experiences of adoptive mother and fathers, noting gender differences in responses. Adoptive mothers initially felt criticised and undermined during contact. They experienced conflicting emotions around the ownership and entitlement of their adopted children, often feeling that they were competing with the birth mother for an emotional bond. Interestingly, acknowledgment by the birth mother that the child was in the right place had a key role to play in the empowerment and feelings of competence for adoptive mothers. These findings support the ideas of Watson and Bourguignon (1988, p.7) who postulate that difficulties experienced by adoptive families can be seen in seven related areas, with the first being 'entitlement'. They argue that emotional entitlement develops through a nurturing process, which may be inhibited when the birth family continues to play an active role in the child's life, for example through contact.

In a recent study, MacDonald and McSherry (2011) explored the experiences of different types of contact for 20 sets of adoptive parents living in Ireland. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) they explored adoptive parents' experiences of talking to adopted children about adoption and the post-adoption experiences of contact with the birth family.

The results suggest that all forms of contact present challenges for adoptive parents and contact in general is seen as 'hard' and 'stressful'. Contact was seen by adoptive parents as their responsibility and felt compelled to meet the needs of all parties, including those of the birth relatives, despite the emotional response it evoked in them. Interestingly, adoptive parents expressed empathy towards the birth mother. MacDonald and McSherry (2011) argue that the empathetic response felt by adoptive parents provides the motivation to maintain contact, and therefore may be seen as a positive experience. With regards to talking to their children about adoption, adoptive parents experienced conflicting emotions. The parents wanted to explore adoption sensitively and openly with their children, but acknowledged that this had an emotional cost for them as parents.

This research is useful in that it allows access in to adoptive parents' experiences of contact, and begins to shed light on how adoptive parents understand and experience the

relationship with birth parents. Significantly, MacDonald and McSherry (2011) are able to demonstrate that their findings are grounded in previously understood theoretical conceptions of adoption and contact, namely Brodzinsky's (2005) two dimension of openness in adoption: 'structural' and 'communication' openness. However, as with much of the previous research adoptive parents are the focus of the research, and it is uncertain whether adoptive mothers' experience of contact is unique, as suggested by Sykes (2001; 2000). Additionally, one may question the use of IPA as an analytic tool given the sample and the data analysed. For example, the sample within MacDonald and McSherry's (2011) research covers a broad range of contact arrangements, from face-to-face contact with birth parents and face-to-face contact with extended birth family, to 'letterbox' contact, and extending to no contact with the birth family. In this respect the sample may not represent a 'homogenous' experience, an underlying assumption when using IPA.

Logan (2010) looked specifically at face-to-face contact, exploring adoptive parents' experiences of the preparation and planning process. 61 families were interviewed, and while parents were interviewed separately, findings have been generalised and gender differences in experience are not apparent. Logan (2010) found that adoptive parents did not feel emotionally prepared for coping with the realities of contact. The arrangements made for face-to-face contact tended to focus solely on the child's well-being and were not tailored to meet the future needs of the adoptive family. The focus tended to be placed with 'structural contact' with "little attention being given to preparing adoptive parents for the longer term impact of contact on their daily lives" (Logan, 2010, p.322).

These findings highlight pre-adoption experiences for adoptive parents, and clearly have implications for professional practice. A gap still remains though in looking at how contact is experienced later in the adoption lifecycle. Importantly, unlike the studies discussed, Logan (2010) focuses solely on one form of contact, clearly illustrating the experiences of a more homogenous population of adoptive parents. However, it should be noted that the research itself took place between 1997 and 1999, over a decade ago. While Logan (2010, p.315) argues that the findings "continue to have currency" consideration should be given to their applicability to adoptive parents who have adopted more recently, particularly given the changes in policy and practice since the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

Overall, the contact research demonstrates important implications for professionals who work with adoptive parents, and “should encourage adoption workers to have confidence in the ability of adopters to make use of their experiences to inform their own decisions” (Sykes, 2000, p.30). However, despite shedding some light on the experiences of adoptive parents this research focuses very closely on just one issue in adoption, leaving room for further research, which looks at the wider picture of the adoption process from start to finish. Additionally, the mothers’ voice within this literature is, for the most part, hidden within a joint experience of contact. Sykes (2001; 2000) alludes to the unique experience of the adoptive mother, but as the interviews were conducted with both parents together it may be the case that the findings provide a co-constructed experience

#### **2.3.4 Adoption and Identity**

Within Western society there is a basic assumption that motherhood is a natural progression for all women, particularly following marriage (Shelton and Johnson, 2006; Daly, 1988). There are many ways by which women can become mothers, for example, through birth, step-parenthood, or adoption (Ceballo et al., 2004), with each leading to substantial changes in the individual’s life. Of particular significance is the change in identity that women may experience in the transition to motherhood. Shelton and Johnson (2006) assert that women may experience identity reconstruction in motherhood, with a new identity forming through a process of identity disruption and identity integrations.

For adoptive mothers, it could be argued that there are a number of identity changes taking place. Adoptive mothers may not only experience identity reconstruction as described by Shelton and Johnson (2006), but for those choosing adoption due to infertility they may also need to reshape and redefine their anticipated identity of parenthood (Daly, 1988) and accept their ‘new identity’ as an adoptive parent (Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007).

While much of the literature on motherhood focuses on this important change in identity, the adoption literature is rather sparse, again focusing most of its attention on the identity changes which take place in adoptees and the influence of adoptive parents on this transformation (Korff, Grotevant, Koh and Samek, 2010). Daly (1988)

investigated the transformation of identity from biological parenthood to adoptive parenthood in infertile couples. It was found that dismantling and reconstructing ones identity within the context of parenthood is not shaped by a singular event, but is influenced by the decisions, choices, and issues adults face when confronted with infertility. The construction of a new identity was very much seen as a joint experience in which the identity of adoptive ‘parenthood’ was co-constructed, and in this respect seems to contradict the findings of Timm et al. (2011). Identity in this respect was negotiated and agreed, and the final concrete constructed identity was fundamental to the decision to adopt (Daly, 1988, p.63).

Daly’s (1988) research is of great value in understanding the decisions behind adoption when adults face infertility and the anticipated identity of parenthood is blocked. It also sheds light on how adoptive parenthood identity may take shape and is insightful in its findings that the transformation of this particular identity seems to be a co-constructed experience. However, the applications of Daly’s (1988) findings are limited in that they do not extend past the decision to adopt. What identity transformations, if any, take place during the remainder of the adoption life cycle? Do these transformations continue to be co-constructed, or do adoptive mothers experience a unique change in identity?

Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik’s (2007) research provides some insight into the identity that adoptive mothers construct, although it is limited to a certain degree as it focuses explicitly on single adoptive mothers. The results suggest that adoptive mothers experience a personal and public identity, which are constructed by the “differential interpretation of selected stories...[and the] exclusion of difficult and conflicting elements from the adoptive narrative” (Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007, p.830). This suggests that adoptive mothers do not define their identity based on the single event of adopting a child, but construct it in the moment as elements of adoptive motherhood are lived.

### **2.3.5 Adoption and Mental Health**

Lewis and Nicolson, (1998, p.178) argue that, “the rhetoric of motherhood reflects the belief that the birth of the baby is a ‘happy event’ and that motherhood itself is a universally fulfilling experience for women”. However, the disparities between this ideological stance and the realities of motherhood are well documented within the

feminist literature, and it is recognised that the experience of mothering may in fact give rise to complex emotional responses (Gair, 1999). While adoptive mothers face unique experiences and issues, Gair (1999, p.58) also argues “these mothers could also encounter many of the joyful and the distressing facets of new motherhood that most new mothers face”.

Gair (1999) reports findings from her 1996 large-scale study of the experiences of adoptive mothers, focusing exclusively on the emotional responses of adoptive mothers shortly after adoption. Results from interview data and the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale showed that adoptive mothers experience a wide range of emotional responses. Many of the adoptive mothers coped well with the transition to adoptive motherhood. Others however experienced unexpected and ‘severe’ distress on the arrival of their child, with some suffering from what may be considered similar to postnatal depression in birth mothers. Factors implicated in the emotional responses experienced by adoptive mothers included the child’s temperament and behaviour, difficulties in adjusting to the role of motherhood, feelings of loss with regards to identity, and the pressure to perform as a ‘perfect mother’ (Gair, 1999, p.63).

These results suggest that adoptive mother’s experience, and are vulnerable to, the same pressures, stresses and even depression as many birth mothers. However the research focuses solely on mothers who adopted children between the ages of 3 days and 9 months, and therefore the question could be asked, are these emotional responses also experienced by mothers who adopt older children?

## **2.4 Theoretical Perspectives and Adoption**

“Theory and research go hand in hand” (Kirk, 1964, p.52), and along with the research documenting the experiences of adoptive parents, a number of theoretical perspectives have been developed which are salient for looking at and understanding the experiences of adoptive mothers.

### **2.4.1 Kirk’s Social-Role Theory**

Kirk (1964) is widely hailed as a pioneer in adoption research and theory, particularly that which focuses on adoptive parents (Neil, 2009; Hoksbergen and Laak, 2005). Based on his studies of adoption, Kirk (1964) challenged the view that adoptions should

remain secret and developed an important theoretical model, which emphasises the unique challenges that adoptive parents face and the coping patterns that parents adopt. Kirk (1964, p.50) describes a number of dilemmas faced by adoptive parents, which can result in what he terms 'role handicap' and often occur in response to the "cultural disadvantage of adoptive parenthood" (Wegar, 2000, p.366). The dilemmas include how adoptive parents see themselves in relation to other parents, how adoptive parents relate themselves to the child, and whether adoptive parents record and recall background information about their child (Kirk, 1964, p.51).

With these dilemmas and 'role handicap' in mind, according to Kirk's (1964) model, adoptive parents demonstrate two patterns of coping, through "acknowledgement-of-difference" and "rejection-of-difference". In this respect, and as the names suggest, to manage the stress they experience adoptive parents either try to deny the difference in adoptive family life or accept the reality that adoption is inherently different in terms of the way the family is formed. While "acknowledgement-of-difference" is understood to lead to better adjustment in adoptive families (Hoksbergen and Laak, 2005; Brodzinsky, 1987) the two patterns of coping are not seen to be mutually exclusive and adoptive parents vary in their use of the two patterns (Brodzinsky, 1987).

Although developed in the 1960's Hoksbergen and Laak (2005, p.28) argue that Kirk's (1964) social role theory still holds true and continues to be relevant in today's society. This is evidenced in the recent research which demonstrates that parents continue to 'down play' difference between themselves and the adoptive child, for example using physical resemblance as a means of creating likeness, thus denying difference (Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Krusiewicz and Wood, 2001; Prynne, 2001). However, Brodzinsky (1987) recognizes that experiences within adoptive families may be more complex than Kirk's (1964) model suggests, and that patterns of coping appear along a continuum and may be influenced by various factors. In addition to this, Brodzinsky (1987, p.42) criticises Kirk's model for being 'static' and not acknowledging the family life-cycle changes within adoption, which may in turn change patterns of coping.

#### **2.4.2 Brodzinsky's Psychosocial Model**

Brodzinsky (1987) psychosocial model of adoption takes a developmental perspective and links the ideas of Erikson's (1963) Psychosocial Crises to a unique set of

psychosocial conflicts or tasks that adoptive families face. The general thesis is that at each developmental stage children are faced with a psychosocial crisis (Erickson, 1963) and the adoptive family are faced with a number of difficult tasks, which need to be adequately resolved if an adoptive family is to “move forward to more mature, advanced levels of adoption adjustment” (Brodzinsky, 1987, p.30). In this sense, throughout the adoption life cycle and at each developmental stage, children strive to develop a sense of identity and understand what it means to be adopted, while parents are faced with developing ways of overcoming and coping with their own psychosocial crises.

Although slightly dated, the research literature seems to support Brodzinsky’s ideas, particularly the findings of Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell’s (2003) who identify a number of the tasks and challenges adoptive parents face in their overall themes. More importantly, Brodzinsky (1987) relates each factor back to the adjustment and wellbeing of children, thus placing the child at the centre, much like the Children and Adoption Act (2002). Brodzinsky (1987) himself however concedes that the theoretical model is simply based on his clinical experience and is therefore not necessarily grounded in empirical findings.

### **2.4.3 Attachment Theory**

Schweiger and O’Brien (2005, p.514) assert that, “attachment is widely considered to be a crucial issue in adoptive families”, and as such is seen as a powerful framework when considering the experiences of adoptive families. Attachment theory, based in the ideas of John Bowlby, holds that attachment develops through experience between the attachment figure and the child. Bretherton (1992, p.766) describes the development of attachment between an infant and the primary caregiver as a complementary relationship between infant initiative and sensitive maternal responding. Infants direct ‘proximity-promoting’ signals to all caregivers, and these then become progressively more focused on the primary caregiver who is responsive to these signals and engages in social interactions. Once attached, this primary caregiver acts as a secure base, thus allowing the infant to explore the world in the knowledge that they can return to this ‘safe haven’ (Bretherton, 1992). Through these experiences humans develop ‘Internal Working Models’, which provide a schema or template, guiding our behaviour, how we see ourselves in relation to other people, and how we make sense of the world around

us. In this sense attachment “performs a natural, healthy function even in adult life” (Bretherton, 1992, p.763).

Johnson and Fein (1991, p.397) suggest that attachment is often central to the motivation and desire to adopt, and parents often cite difficulties with attachment as the reason for adoption breakdown. They identify a number of attachment concepts, including security and connection to the family, which are likely to be salient within adoptive mothers’ experiences. Additionally, they discuss conceptual issues within attachment which have a bearing on adoption and the various perspectives with which one can view attachment. For example, taking a Family Systems perspective of attachment, Johnson and Fein (1991, p.405) argue that we can move away from traditional views of mother-child relationships and look at attachment to the family unit and individuals as supporting a child’s integration into their adoptive family. In this sense, attachment is seen as an interactive phenomenon and a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics can be achieved.

Attachment can also be viewed from a developmental perspective. This is seen by Johnson and Fein (1991) to be the most useful application of Bowlby’s theory, with attachment changing and evolving over time according to experience. In this respect, it can be postulated that adults have schemas which are shaped by their experiences across their life, and parents will therefore have Internal Working Models of themselves as caregivers. Prynne (2001) within her research into the experiences of adoptive parents explored the effect that Internal Working Models and attachment histories had on how parents experienced their role within an adoptive family. Interestingly, Prynne (2001) found that these concepts were helpful in trying to understand why parents experienced adoption in different ways. For example, those who had what Prynne (2001) termed a ‘comfortable’ experience had Internal Working Models that “showed positive familial relationships could exist beyond the nuclear family and biological relationships”, and this had allowed them to develop “helpful ways of thinking about adoption and managing adoptive parenthood” (Prynne, 2001, p.36).

Not only can attachment theory help us to understand the experiences of adoptive parents, but it can also be seen to have many applications within the adoption process. Bifulco, Jacobs, Bunn, Thomas and Irving (2008) assert that Bowlby’s ideas are highly

relevant to evidence-based practice within adoption and fostering, and provide a structure and potential rationale for the selection of adoptive parents and assessment of potential support needs. It has also been acknowledged that “a comprehensive understanding of the impact of trauma [and] the nature of attachment difficulties”, for example, of Ainsworth’s (1978, as cited in Bretherton, 1992) three Attachment Patterns, can positively affect the experiences of adoptive parents “in order that they might better engage in the complex task of parenting” (Family Futures, 2006).

## **2.5 Motherhood Literature**

A wealth of material on motherhood has been published over the past decades (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991), and given that Gair’s (1996) findings suggest that the experiences of adoptive mothers may have some parallels to the experiences of birth mothers, it is important here to provide a brief exploration of the motherhood literature.

The majority of the motherhood research is taken from a feminist perspective, in which the ideology of motherhood is seen to be socially constructed as a “critical aspect of femininity” (Choi, Henshaw, Baker and Tree, 2005, p.167). In this respect, motherhood is seen as a natural progression in a woman’s life and is the ultimate goal in a woman’s quest for a complete feminine identity (Arendell, 2000). Choi et al. (2005) undertook a qualitative study to investigate how mothers understood their experience of becoming a mother in relation to this feminine ideology. They found that despite a nine-month pregnancy the women remained unprepared and overwhelmed by the realities of motherhood, and experienced a realization that their expectations had been based on the “myths of motherhood” (Choi et al., 2005, p.167).

As with the adoption literature, the motherhood literature demonstrates the significant impact that becoming a mother can have on a woman’s identity. Barclay, Everitt, Rogan, Schmied and Wyllie (1997) investigated the experiences of new mothers using Grounded Theory. They found that the core category ‘Becoming a Mother’ “encapsulates the process of change experienced by women” (Barclay et al., 1997, p.719) as the new mothers experienced an intense reconstruction of themselves as women following the birth of their child. Darvill, Skirton, and Farrand (2010) also explored maternal transitions for first-time mothers using Grounded Theory and found a

core category of 'changes in the woman's self-concept'. These findings suggest that for birth mothers the changes in one's feelings of 'self' are of particular significance.

Smith (1999a; 1999b) used the qualitative methodology Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore identity and how the sense of 'self' changes in the transition to motherhood. Smith (1999a; 1999b) found that pregnancy acts as a strong psychological preparation for mothering, as the women's focus during pregnancy changes from public world, for example, of work, to the more private world of the family and their new role. Women may look to others for guidance, and their relationship with key people, particularly their family, "can facilitate the women's preparation for taking on the new role of mother" (Smith, 1999b, p.409).

However, these studies suggest that the transformative nature of motherhood begins in the early stages of pregnancy and it is therefore unclear how applicable these findings are to the experiences of adoptive mothers. At what stage in the adoption process do adoptive mothers begin to experience a change in 'self', and what aspects of their existing life help in their preparation for their new role as mother?

## **2.6 This Research**

The literature review highlights that previous research has explored the experiences of adoptive mothers. However, an exploration of this phenomenon as a complete experience has not yet been conducted in the UK, and in this sense the experience of adoptive mothers is missing from the UK literature. In addition to this, while qualitative research methods have been employed in previous research, it is argued that the interpretative phenomenological stance taken within this research provides a unique insight, and a deeper understanding, of the experiences of adoptive mothers.

While the wider adoption literature discussed sheds light on the complexity of the adoption process, and aspects and themes that appear to be important for parents, given the limited prominence of the voice of adoptive mothers, it is unclear which aspects adoptive mothers experience specifically and uniquely. In addition, previous adoption research has generally been conducted within a Social Work or Counselling paradigm. This study provides an exploration of the experiences of adoptive mothers from a new perspective, that of an Educational Psychologist.

The motherhood literature highlights the use of qualitative research methods in exploring and understanding the experiences of women as they transition to motherhood, suggesting this may also be an appropriate research method when exploring the experiences of adoptive mothers. With regards to the adoption literature, the differences in design, sampling and country of origin, along with the dated nature of a number of studies, particularly Gair (1996), mean it is difficult to generalize the results, and as such scope remains for an up-to-date exploration of the experiences of adoptive mothers in the UK.

This study therefore seeks to expand on the findings of the adoption literature, particularly those pertaining specifically to the experiences of adoptive mothers, providing a richer, up-to-date understanding of the phenomenon of adoption, and how it is 'lived' and experienced by women who have become adoptive mothers.

## **CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION**

### **3.1 Overview**

This chapter firstly outlines the aims and purpose of this research as discussed in Chapter 1. It will then go on to discuss the research design, providing justification for the method chosen, and the procedures undertaken. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the specific method of data analysis will be outlined, with careful consideration being given to validity issues pertinent to psychological and qualitative research to finish the chapter.

### **3.2 Research Aims and Purpose**

As outlined in Chapter 1, the aim and purpose of this research study is to explore, and gain a greater insight into, the 'lived' experiences of adoptive mothers and examine how these parents make sense of what one assumes to be an important, yet stressful, landmark in their life. Given that the academic and political literature suggests that very little research has been completed in this particular area, it is hoped that this research will go some way to illuminating how adoption is experienced by adoptive mothers.

### **3.3 Research Design**

#### **3.3.1 Rationale for a Qualitative Research Design**

Given the aims of this research and the suggestions from the research discussed in Chapter 2, a qualitative, exploratory research method was considered suitable. This form of enquiry is seen to be useful when looking to "find out what is happening, particularly in little-understood situations...seek new insights...[and] assess phenomena in a new light" (Robson, 2002, p.59).

Furthermore, as this research is being completed in partial fulfilment of a Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, it was important to place the design within the context of previous research in this domain. Within Educational Psychology research, qualitative methodologies have tended to take a back seat to quantitative research methods as the academic literature has tended to demonstrate a preoccupation with measurement and hypothesis testing (Miller, Billington, Lewis and DeSouza, 2008). It is argued that this preoccupation stems from the historic nature of the profession and attempts in the nineteenth century for educational psychology as a discipline to be seen

as a 'science', which therefore employed "quantitative methods which had acquired greater authority" (Miller et al., 2008, p.474). Over the past few decades, Educational Psychologists have slowly moved away from a positivist, deficit/medical model (Kelly, 2008) and qualitative methods have become more prominent in the literature, particularly in applied areas of sociological concern and as education professionals have begun to recognise the importance of listening to the voice of all their 'clients' (Miller et al., 2008). In this respect, given that the current research seeks to explore the experience of adoptive mothers, giving them a voice within the research literature, a qualitative methodology was again deemed appropriate.

In their simplest forms, quantitative research methods are concerned with theory testing, measurements, and numerical data (Creswell, 2003), whereas the aim of qualitative research is to "understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage, and live through situations" (Elliot, Fischer and Rennie, 1999, p.216). With its focus on quantifiable variables and the production of statistical data, quantitative research does not allow for the exploration of personal meaning and cannot provide a true insight into the 'lived' experiences of participants.

Coyle (2007b, p.12) argues that within qualitative research, epistemology is much more at the fore of the researchers thinking. It is argued that within quantitative, experimental approaches epistemology is often taken for granted, and more often than not the epistemological stance taken is positivist-empiricist, two interrelated domains. Qualitative research in contrast, can be seen as covering a wide range of methods with a range of epistemologies (Coyle, 2007b; Madill, Jordan and Shirley, 2000), and "involves alternative conceptions of social knowledge, of meaning, reality and truth" (Kvale, 1996, p.11).

### **3.3.2 Choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

When designing this research, a number of qualitative methods were explored. These included a purely phenomenological approach, grounded theory, and discourse analysis. However Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with a focus on lived experiences at its centre, stood out as the most appropriate methodology. Reflecting the aim and purpose of this research, the main premise of IPA is to explore 'embodied' experiences and how people make sense and give meaning to their experiences

(Chapman and Smith, 2002). Additionally, and importantly for this particular piece of psychological research, Chapman and Smith (2002, p.126) assert that IPA has developed “as a distinctive approach to conducting empirical research in psychology, offering a theoretical underpinning, a set of methodological procedures and a corpus of studies”.

A brief outline of each alternative methodology and the reasons they were rejected is provided below to afford the reader a clearer understanding and a justification of the researcher’s decisions.

The descriptive pre-transcendental Husserlian phenomenological research method, as outlined by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008, p.170), is based on Husserlian phenomenological philosophical teachings. It differs from IPA in terms of the different emphasis both place on description and interpretation, with description being seen as primary in Giorgi and Giorgi’s (2008) methodology and interpretation being seen as primary in IPA. This leads to a difference in the research question being answered and the outcome of the analysis. In Husserlian phenomenological research the question, and therefore outcome, tends to focus around the structure of the experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), thus providing a thick description of the experience. More fittingly for this research, IPA, with its focus on interpretation of the phenomenon, allows the research to look at how the participants make sense of their experience through the idiographic data collected (Smith et al., 2009; Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008).

Grounded theory, in contrast to IPA, aims to develop theory that is grounded in the qualitative data collected from participants with a view to “generating a focused understanding of the research problem and an (ultimately) coherent account addressing it” (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1997, p.256). This may involve developing explanations for participant’s accounts (Smith et al., 2009), which is not an aim of this research, and does not emphasise the lived experience to a great enough degree as required. It is for these reasons that it was decided that the emphasis within IPA was more appropriate, and Grounded Theory was not employed.

Discourse analysis can be divided in to two approaches, discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis, with both emphasising the importance of language

(Billig, 1997). Discursive psychology is interested in the way in which linguistic resources are used in social interactions, and what means they serve within these interactions, in other words, language is seen as a form of social action (Smith et al., 2009; Coyle, 2007a; Smith and Dunworth, 2003). Foucauldian discourse analysis, on the other hand, looks at the role discourse plays in facilitating and constraining what is said, and explores the power relations and dominant discourses which underpin how people talk (Coyle, 2007a).

While perhaps providing insight in to the way in which language is used within adoption or the dominant discourses that prevail within the adoption experience, it was decided that again these methods of qualitative research did not fit with the aims of the research and would not allow the researcher to give credence to the detailed experiential account of adoption for mothers. It would also take the focus of the study away from the individual and their meaning-making, and conceptualise adoption in a very different way, for example, according to its discursive structures if Foucauldian discourse analysis was used, and according to the various constructions of adoption in discourse analysis.

Additionally, Smith et al. (2009) argue that epistemology should play an important role when making methodological decisions in qualitative research. As can be seen in section 3.3.4, based on beliefs and values, the researcher adopted a critical realist position, a position consistent with the use of IPA. The two methods within Discourse Analysis, along with Grounded Theory, take a strong social constructionist position (Smith et al. 2009) and again IPA was therefore deemed the most appropriate process to undertake.

### **3.3.3 Overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Developed by Jonathan Smith in the 1990's, IPA has been used extensively within a number of psychological disciplines, most notably Health Psychology. Seen as a way of gaining access and insight into "personal experiences which would be unreachable using traditional quantitative techniques" (Hayes, 1997a, p.181), IPA looks to reconnect and revive the traditional psychological concerns of William James and Gordon Allport (Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Eatough, 2007). IPA is also influenced by many phenomenological philosophers, and is theoretically underpinned by three key

principles: phenomenology (the study of experiences), hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation), and idiography (the idea of being concerned with the particular).

Phenomenology is concerned with exploring individual human experiences from “the inside” (Hayes, 1997a, p.181) and recognises that there are many factors, such as desires, wishes and motivations, which affect people’s perceptions of reality, and therefore the phenomenon and overall experience (Eatough and Smith, 2008; Smith and Dunworth, 2003). The phenomenological teachings of the philosopher Husserl are an important starting point for IPA. His ideas, which lay in the use of descriptive phenomenology, were later developed by Heidegger (1927), who emphasised the interpretative nature of meaning-making in phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is therefore grounded in a phenomenological epistemology, in that the focus is on “people’s understanding of their experiences” (Smith et al., 2009, p.47), which can only be accessed through interpretation of these experiences.

IPA is also underpinned and influenced by hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. The interpretation involved in IPA is seen as a dynamic process, in which the researcher takes an ‘active role’ (Smith and Eatough, 2007, p.36), and employs a “range of skills, including intuition” (Smith, 2007, p.4). Within IPA interpretations are made based on a ‘double hermeneutic’ process, in that “The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (Smith, 2004, p.40). In this respect, the double hermeneutic process can be seen as ‘second order’ sense-making, which is complicated by the researcher’s existing conceptions, presuppositions, and previous experiences (Smith and Eatough, 2007).

Within this theoretical idea of hermeneutics, there are a number of interpretative stances that can be taken. Smith and Eatough (2007) look specifically at the empathetic hermeneutic and the critical hermeneutic. It is argued that during the process of interpretation, these hermeneutics, which can be employed in tandem, not only allow the researcher to understand the experience from the participants view point, but also allow the researcher to ask curious and critical questions that go further in to the experience. By employing a number of hermeneutic stances, the researcher can develop

a richer analysis and more fully understand the lived experience of each individual participant.

Smith (2007, p.5) argues that “the hermeneutic circle is perhaps the most resonant idea in hermeneutic theory”. The idea of the hermeneutic circle holds that within the analytic process there is a dynamic relationship between the whole and its parts, where to understand the whole you have to look at the parts and to understand the parts you have to look at the whole. Smith (2007, p.5) argues that the relationships between the whole and the parts can be “multifarious”, ranging from the relationship between a single word and a sentence, to the relationship between an extract from the transcript and the transcript as a whole. The hermeneutic circle feeds in to the iterative nature of IPA, and can be seen with each analytic iteration in which the researcher looks to interpret and understand the meaning of parts of the text in relation to the text as a whole and the participant as an individual.

Hayes (1997b) discusses the issue of comparability within qualitative research, and it is argued that:

On the one hand, we want to compare people’s experiences, in order to find out what they have in common. Yet, on the other hand, we want to find a method which allows us to appreciate and acknowledge each person’s own experience, and to recognise different viewpoints (Hayes, 1997b, p.98).

IPA is strongly grounded in an idiographic approach, which focuses on exploring the richness of experience by seeing each participant as “standing for, or representing, herself or himself” (Smith, 1997, p.189). This therefore satisfies Hayes’ (1997b) second point. Smith and Eatough (2007) highlight the importance of keeping each individual participant in the foreground of the analysis as, based on its idiographic nature, IPA is firstly and foremost “about the narrative life world of the particular participants who have told their story” (Smith and Eatough, 2007, p.37). Yet, Hayes’ (1997b) first point can also often, but not always, be addressed in IPA. Through the complex analytic process it can be possible to develop an understanding of superordinate themes, which to a certain extent represent the common, almost nomothetic, lived experience of all the participants interviewed. This is not however to say that the themes identified are representative of the experiences of a population wider than the participants taking part in the research.

It should also be noted here that IPA is an inductive approach, which, while making interpretations regarding people's experiences, maintains "an awareness of the contextual and cultural ground against which data are generated" (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005, p.20). It is also recognised that, while IPA allows us to explore and gain a greater insight in to individual accounts of significant life experiences, analytic accounts derived from the complex analytic process will only be partial, and as researchers, "we cannot imagine that it could ever be the final word on the topic" (Smith and Eatough, 2007, p.37).

### **3.3.4 Epistemology**

All research is "bound up with particular sets of assumptions about the bases or possibilities for knowledge, in other words, **epistemology**" (Coyle, 2007b, p.11, bold in original). If we as researchers are to look at people's experiences and the meaning that these experiences have, and more importantly try to understand them, it is essential that we do not take for granted our understandings of the nature of knowledge and are explicit in our thinking.

It is understood that the epistemological emphasis within IPA is relatively flexible, and seems to fall somewhere between social constructionism and critical realism. A social constructionist perspective holds that the social world, and therefore human experience, is "socially manufactured through human interaction and language" (Houston, 2001, p.846) and "reality, is an invention or artefact of a particular culture or society" (Kelly, 2008, p.21). Critical realism in contrast holds that human beings are bound to a reality that is independent of our consciousness and thoughts (Eatough and Smith, 2008; Houston, 2001), but that "all meaning to be made of that reality is socially constructed" (Oliver, 2012, p.372). Oliver (2012, p.372) argues that critical realism goes some way to bridging the gap between positivist ideas of quantitative research, which insists that we can search for evidence of a concrete and testable reality, and social constructionist ideas which insist that reality is merely constructed as a social phenomenon.

The epistemological stance taken within this study is consistent with a post-positivist, critical realist approach and is based on the perspective which best fits the researchers own belief; that there is a reality which exists outside of our thoughts but that the meaning we make of this reality is influenced by our social experiences. Kelly (2008,

p.24) also argues that critical realism is seen to be particularly relevant to the Trainee Educational Psychologist as its premises help to “clarify and articulate the various processes underlying educational psychologists’ values, concepts and practices in effecting change”.

It is important however, that the epistemological stance taken, while reflecting the researcher, is also consistent with the methodology chosen for the research. IPA acknowledges the subjectivity of meaning-making for the participant during the interview process and the inter-subjective nature of the interpretative process, during which the researcher makes sense of the participants experiences (Smith, 2007). In line with this, critical realism “admits an inherent subjectivity in the production of knowledge” (Madill et al., 2000, p.3), and therefore such a stance appears consistent with IPA as a methodological approach.

It should also be noted within a discussion about epistemology that IPA has a strong phenomenological emphasis and draws ideas from a phenomenological epistemology. Such an epistemological position holds that “While experience is always the product of interpretation and, therefore, constructed (and flexible) rather than determined (and fixed), it is nevertheless ‘real’ to the person who is having the experience” (Willig, 2008, p.13). As a researcher, it is therefore acknowledged that, while the resultant analysis, through the interpretative process will reflect to some degree an underlying truth or ‘reality’ (Coyle, 2007b, p.16), this understanding will only ever be partial and we can never fully access that ‘real’ experience.

Finally, much of the literature (Shelton and Johnson, 2006; Choi, Henshaw, Baker and Tree, 2005) takes a feminist perspective when investigating women’s transition to motherhood. It should therefore be noted here that this research is not undertaken from a feminist perspective. The aim of this study is not necessarily to give priority to the voices of women; it is about giving a voice to adoptive parents, but due to time limitations, the scope of the research, and the means of analysis, the focus lies solely on adoptive mothers. The experiences of adoptive fathers are acknowledged and the importance of future research in that area is recognised.

### **3.4 Research Procedures**

An outline of the procedures undertaken by the researcher throughout the research process, from initial ethical confirmation to data analysis, can be found in Appendix 6. A paper trail can be found in Appendix 7, which outlines the process of gaining Local Authority confirmation to proceed with the research. The following sections will discuss these procedures in more detail.

#### **3.4.1 Participants and Sampling**

Initial thought, prior to undertaking this research, was given to exploring the experiences of adoptive parents. However, Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003, p.81) argue that, “factors such as power differences, social desirability, and relationship dynamics within each couple could affect the degree of open and honest disclosure during the interviews”. In addition to this, and perhaps more importantly, the complex nature of the analytic process involved in IPA was considered. The hermeneutic circle within IPA creates, what Smith (2007, p.6) describes as a “complex dynamic process”, which one imagines would be complicated further by the introduction of a second participant in the interview. Smith and Eatough (2007) also discuss the use of group interviews in IPA, concluding that with more than one individual being interviewed it is difficult to track individual meaning-making, thus negating the idiographic nature of this particular research method. Due to the nature of IPA and its theoretical underpinnings, a decision was therefore made to focus solely on the experiences of adoptive mothers. This is not to say that the role and experiences of adoptive fathers within the adoption process have been disregarded, and given the need for this research, there is also a strong need in the future to explore how adoptive fathers experience adoption and give meaning to the process.

As IPA is informed by an idiographic research method, a small sample size of 9 participants was recruited, and effort was made to ensure that this was a ‘homogeneous’ group of participants. Smith et al. (2009, p.52) suggest that between four and ten interviews is sufficient for professional doctorate research, with larger sample sizes often inhibiting essential aspects of IPA analysis, such as the time needed to reflect upon and interpret the data. To ensure that the sampling technique was theoretically consistent, a purposive sampling method was used to select participants. An initial plan was made to recruit participants from three different geographical locations who were

accessing a particular 'consortium' adoption support group. However, it was decided that recruiting participants who had adopted solely through the Local Authority in which the research was taking place, would be an easier sample to access, and would presumably provide a much more homogeneous experience. Having adopted from the same Local Authority, the mothers would have gone through a very similar assessment and adoption process, would have attended the same adoption panel, and will have worked with the same Adoption Team, although it was acknowledged that professionals may have changed over time.

The sample was therefore drawn from the Local Authority Adoption and Fostering Agency's post-adoption mailing list, and in this respect, an opportunistic sampling technique was also employed to recruit participants. Contact was made with the Local Authority Adoption and Fostering Agency who assisted in disseminating the Information Sheet (Appendix 8) and Consent Form (Appendix 9) via their mailing list, with responses being made to the researcher directly. Ten responses were received, but one participant chose to withdraw from the process prior to the interview taking place.

The participants for this research were therefore nine women, aged between 32 and 52. All the women had been through the adoption process and had been placed with a child, and in this respect become an adoptive mother, within the last 7 years. It was initially planned that the participants would have adopted within the last 5 years so as to ensure the process was as consistently experienced as possible, but due to low levels of recruitment, this was expanded. This did not decrease the homogeneity of the group, as all nine adoptions took place following the Adoption and Children Act (2002).

Demographic details collected from each participant can be found in Table 3.4.1 below.

Table 3.4.1: Table to Illustrate Participant Demographics

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Year of Adoption</u>	<u>Number of Adoptees</u>	<u>Sex of Adoptees</u>
Patricia	52	White British	July 2009	3	3 boys
Clare	44	White British	2004	2	2 girls
Sandra	43	Zimbabwean	2009 (in Zimbabwe) 2011 (in UK)	1	1 girl
Lucy	43	White British	May 2011	1	1 boy
Deborah	32	Hispanic	Dec 2010	1	1 girl
Helen	39	White British	June 2008	2	1 boy 1 girl
Kat	43	White British	July 2010	1	1 boy
Emily	51	White British	2007	1	1 girl
Denise	49	White British	January 2010	1	1 boy

### 3.4.2 Data Capture

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, devised by the researcher, were employed to collect data. The interviews were conducted by the researcher at a place and time that was most convenient to the participant. Eight participants stated that the most convenient place to meet would be at their home, while one participant asked to meet in a private location away from the home. A private meeting room was booked in the researcher's office and the participant was happy to be interviewed there. The interviews did not have a definitive time limit and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. The entire interview was digitally recorded, and all participants were aware and made to feel comfortable about this aspect of the interview. After each interview, the researcher reflected on aspects such as, the interview process, her own role in the interview, and the way in which the participant reacted to the questions, using either the digital recorder or a piece of paper.

As the most recognised technique when conducting IPA (Smith et al., 2009) the semi-structured interview is “an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life

world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1996, p.5). Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with the flexibility to explore ‘unexpected turns’ in the conversation and to “capture the multitude of subjects’ views of a theme” (Kvale, 1996, p.7).

An initial interview schedule was drafted based on the process suggested by Smith et al. (2009, p.61), (See Appendix 10). Firstly, the broad area of interest was identified, along with the range of topic areas that were perceived to be important and should be covered during the interview. To aid discussions, and prevent confusion regarding possible abstract questions, prompts were constructed for each question. These were designed to be open, and to present the participant with a more concrete understanding of the original question.

The initial research schedule was discussed with the leaders of the IPA support group on the 13<sup>th</sup> July 2011. This group is part of a nationally recognised support forum set up by Birkbeck University of London, and is held at the University of East London on a regular basis. It has been a much-needed forum in which to discuss and develop research ideas throughout the research process. The group facilitators suggested that the interview is all about the ‘phenomenon’ and therefore one broad question about experiences would help to tap in to the ‘essence’ of that experience. Additionally, Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) warn against interview questions imparting some of the researcher’s ideas about the research topic, which can therefore lead to the researcher inadvertently “structuring the analysis before the process of data collection begins” (Brocki and Wearden, 2006, p.91). The initial interview schedule was therefore refined.

The second interview schedule (Appendix 11) was used to guide the interview with the first participant (Patricia) and the data was transcribed before additional interviews took place. On initial, very basic analysis of the data it could be seen that, based on the main interview question, the interviewee followed a very sequential timeline of her experiences, rather than focusing on important aspects for her. This was discussed at a tutorial on 21<sup>st</sup> July, and again the interview schedule was re-drafted to focus specifically on the phenomena being explored, the experience of adoption as an adoptive mother. This third re-drafting (Appendix 12) guided the interview with the

second participant (Clare), and based on initial analysis, appeared to channel the participant to their 'lived' experience.

### **3.4.3 Ethics**

Ethical considerations are fundamental when carrying out psychological research, and as such consideration was given to the ethical guidelines set out by the Code of Ethics and Conduct (British Psychological Society, 2009) and the University of East London. The Ethical Approval confirmation provided by the University of East London Ethics Committee can be found in Appendix 13.

Participants were provided with a detailed Information Sheet (Appendix 8), which introduced the research and the researcher, and outlined the reason for the study, any relevant background information, and topics that may be covered during the interviews. The information sheet also discussed what happens to the data once collected, ensuring that participants understood the process of data analysis and the likelihood of verbatim, but anonymised extracts being included in published reports. Attached to the Information Sheet was a Consent Form (Appendix 9), which the participants were asked to fill in, sign and return to the researcher directly. The Consent Form covered right to withdraw, anonymity and confidentiality, the recording of the interview, and future publication. The Consent Form was revisited prior to the interview to ensure the participant had complete understanding.

All participants were informed in the Consent Form and prior to the interview that they were not in any way obliged to take part in the research and were free to withdraw at any time from the interview. Had a participant chosen to withdraw from the interview, any data that had been given would have been destroyed and not used in the research. All participants agreed to take part in the interview once the Consent Form had been revisited, and all agreed to the interview being recorded. Participants also gave permission for anonymous data to be displayed as verbatim extracts in this thesis, and were made aware that the anonymised transcripts may need to be submitted as part of the researcher's thesis.

All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and only the researcher had access to the unedited interview data. Recordings were transferred on to a computer, and the

recordings on the Dictaphone were destroyed. When transcribed, all information was made anonymous, with all names, places, and any other identifiable material, such as places of work, being changed.

Having an awareness of the effect talking about sensitive issues during interviews may have on participants is paramount to considering the psychological risk that research may pose. At any sign of distress the participant was asked if they would like to pause or end the interview. Participants were debriefed at the end of the interview process, the researcher checked to make sure that the participant had not found the interview process too difficult, and any further questions were answered. Once the doctoral programme is successfully completed all data will be destroyed using the Local Authority secure system for destroying confidential information. If the research is to be published the anonymised processed data will be securely kept for a maximum of five years from the date of publication.

A number of participants requested access to the findings of the thesis once completed as they were interested in the experiences of other adoptive mothers, and were curious to see whether they all shared a common experience. This however, poses an ethical dilemma. As the data gathered is their experience and the interpretations provided in Chapter 4 are grounded in this data, it seems right that the participants should have access to this. However, this will require a high level of supervision from the tutors at the University of East London as there is an awareness that the interpretations made are influenced by the researcher and may not be those that the participants would have made based on their own self-awareness. If the participants are able to identify themselves, or others, from the extracts embedded within the analysis will they feel that their experience has been accurately represented and how will they feel if the interpretations are difficult to read? As this is such a delicate issue, feedback provided will focus on generalised findings and implications, and will not include extracts. An explanation of the analytic process and the nature of IPA will need to be included with the summary, along with details of any relevant resources they could access if they feel they need additional support.

### **3.4.4 Transcription**

As IPA is interested in what people say, and the meaning that can be taken from what is said, transcription of the interviews focused mainly on their content, and were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, with the interviewer's questions and comments included. Each participant was given an alias, and children and spouses were also given a new name. Specific places and other identifiable pieces of information have been excluded from the transcripts and are simply labelled as [place] or [job title] etc. An example of Helen's unanalysed transcript can be seen in Appendix 14.

Having transcribed the interviews, a certain amount of immersion in the data had taken place, and the transcription process had helped in hearing and understanding better the participants' experiences. A familiarisation with the data was developed that may not have been apparent had the transcription process been completed by an outside agency. It provided an opportunity to 'relive' the interview process and take note of the thoughts and feelings that had originally been evoked and were evoked again on listening to it a second time outside of the interview process. Smith and Dunworth (2003, p.609) argue that, "mentally hearing the voice of the participant during subsequent readings of the transcript assists with more complete analysis", and this was felt to be the case during the initial analysis and subsequent steps in the analytic process due to the transcription process.

Each transcript was typed in a landscape format on word, with double spacing and very wide margins to allow for note taking during the analysis. The pages were numbered for ease of reference and lines were numbered by hand later in the process.

## **3.5 Data Analysis**

This next section will discuss the analytic process in detail.

### **3.5.1 Rationale for the Analytic Process Undertaken**

While Smith et al. (2009) provide a step-by-step description of an IPA analytic process, Coyle (2007b, p.27) argues that following such a prescriptive methodology can lead the researcher to become what he describes as "analytically immobilized". He goes on to argue that this can produce a limited analysis, which lacks creativity, and can prevent the researcher from following 'unexpected paths' that can add depth to the analysis.

Step-by-step methodologies should therefore be used as a useful ‘road map’ (Coyle, 2007b). Smith and Osborn (2003) also advocate the use of methodological creativity, arguing that IPA provides an adaptable analytic process, which offers “something like an adaptable praxis” (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008, p.169).

Taking a creative stance however has to be balanced with ensuring that the final analysis provides a legitimate example of the overall qualitative method adopted (Coyle, 2007b). As a researcher, who had not previously used a qualitative methodology, and being conscious of the need to provide a valid example of IPA to complete the Doctoral Thesis, the analysis undertaken employed ideas from Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Eatough (2007). Maintaining flexibility within the analytic process was kept in mind.

### **3.5.2 Individual Case Analysis**

Smith et al. (2009, p.100) argue that based on the idiographic nature of IPA each transcript should be treated in its own terms to “do justice to its individuality”. Initial analysis therefore focused on each individual participant, starting with Helen. This particular transcript was chosen as a starting point as it was one of the shortest transcripts and therefore did not feel too overwhelming in nature. The transcript was printed for ease of access, and read a number of times to begin the analytic process. Hand written notes regarding interesting comments were made in the right hand column of the transcript and words that were seen to be pertinent to Helen’s experience were underlined, and reasons for their importance noted with the exploratory, initial notes.

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that these comments may have three different foci: description, linguistics, and concepts, and this was kept in mind while making initial notes, but was not strictly adhered to as, when tried, it seemed as though the analysis was being dictated by outside forces. Convergences and contradictions in Helen’s interview were also noted at this stage and, whilst trying to understand the experience from the viewpoint of the participant, empathetic and critical hermeneutics were employed (see section 3.3.3 for more detail). It was decided that this would provide a deeper understanding and therefore a richer analysis and interpretation of each participant’s experience. Any questions or comments that came to mind while wearing these different hermeneutic hats were recorded on the transcript in the right hand margin

as part of the initial notation. An example of these initial notes can be found in the Appendix 15.

Once initial notation had been completed, 'emergent themes' were identified and developed. At this step in the analysis the main aim is to capture, reflect and understand the participants' original words, transforming the initial exploratory notes in to something more specific, which 'speak' the psychological quality within both the initial notes and the participants' own words (Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Eatough, 2007). It is argued that it is at this stage that "the themes reflect not only the participant's original words and thoughts but also the analyst's interpretation" (Smith et al., 2009, p.92).

It is here that the hermeneutic circle, a key idea within hermeneutic theory, comes to bear. The transcripts were reread as the emergent themes were developed to ensure that these themes were embedded in the text and continued to represent the participant's experience. This also helped to ensure that the voice of the participant was not lost as the interpretation began to go deeper. The themes that emerged at this stage were recorded in the left hand column of the transcript (see Appendix 15), but were not assumed to be fixed, as an awareness was maintained that the themes could change with further analysis.

Smith and Eatough (2007, p.48) describe a "measure of gestalt" indicating a satisfaction with the level of analysis. Once a 'gestalt' had been reached for Helen at this stage of analysis, the process was completed for the other eight participants. During the analytic process it was recognised that as each participant was analysed, what had been found when analysing previous participant transcripts may have had an influence. If it was deemed that assumptions were being made or pre-suppositions were emerging these were noted on the back of the transcript. For example, when initially analysing Deborah's transcript, it became apparent that her views on having children, and that "*humans need to leave that legacy*" (Deborah, page 20, line 317-318), contrasted to those of the researcher views, and the surprise and any feelings were noted, along with the perceived reason for this contrast.

Once all transcripts had been analysed in this way, the emergent themes for each transcript were transferred to an initial computerised table of themes, an example of

which can be found in Appendix 16. The themes were typed in chronological order into the left hand column of the table, with the corresponding quote for the original text in the right hand column, and page and line numbers of the quote in a central column, ready for the next stage of analysis. This additional stage, which occurred as a result of the researcher completing the initial stage of analysis by hand, inadvertently allowed an extra stage of checking to ensure that participant experience was not lost in the interpretation which was developing through the emergent themes. Some of the initial emergent themes were developed and others left out as they were not embedded within participant experience and text extracts.

The next step involved mapping, linking, and clustering the emergent themes to produce a 'structure' of connecting aspects of the individual participant's account. Again the first list of themes to be grouped was Helen's. The initial list of emergent themes were studied and grouped based on any connections and patterns that could be seen, for example, for Helen there appeared to be a series of themes based around the emotional impact of the adoption process and each of these were highlighted in yellow. The list of emergent themes were colour coded according to the theme group they seemed to represent and then transferred to theme tables in a new word document, with each theme group being displayed in a separate table and being given a tentative 'superordinate' title. To maintain close links to the original data the text related to each theme was included within this table.

This stage of the analytic process was initially fairly difficult and proved harder than expected, as it was difficult to ascertain whether the true essence of the participant's experience had been captured within theme tables. Following the initial grouping of Helen's themes, an interpretative summary was written to help look for themes that may be emerging and check the interpretation within the themes grouping. This seemed to support the analytic process and allowed for further development of Helen's themes. Once clustering had been completed for Helen, this process, including an interpretative summary, was completed for each of the other eight participants. The colour codes used for Helen were used for subsequent participants, with colours being added as new themes emerged. The use of colour codes demonstrated where commonalities and divergences lay in the participants' experiences, and proved to be a useful first step in the cross-case analysis described below. An example of an interpretative summary can

be found in Appendix 17 and an example of an emergent theme groups for one participant can be found in Appendix 18.

### **3.5.3 Cross Case Analysis**

Once all nine transcripts had been analysed in the manner outlined above, the next step was to look for patterns across the cases, creating ‘master’ themes, which “reflect the experiences of the group of participants as a whole” and capture “the quality of the participants’ shared experience of the phenomenon under investigation” (Willig, 2008, p.61-62). All ‘superordinate’ themes from all nine participants were transferred to a new word document and grouped according to their colour codes allowing for an initial visual representation of the theme clusters. All themes were then printed and separated so they could be manipulated and connections between participants could be further identified. Tentative connections were made and superordinate titles given to each subtheme created. These subthemes were then revisited in relation to the participant transcripts and interpretative summaries, and regrouped if it was deemed necessary. At least eight different versions of the theme groups were developed at this stage, with changes to the theme structure or theme titles being undertaken. For example, an initial theme regarding the emotional experience of the process was initially given a superordinate title ‘The Pendulum of Emotion’ but it was not felt that this captured the essence of the subthemes. Following a restructuring of the subthemes this then became ‘Insecurity in Adoption’, but as the analytic write up began this theme and its subthemes did not seem to ‘flow’, indicating that the analytic process was not quite complete.

At this point, the groupings in relation to the transcripts were discussed in a tutorial to check that the superordinate themes and subthemes could be linked back to the text. This resulted in a deeper analytic process as, through the discussion, the researcher was taken back to the essence of the individual participants and was able to deliberate over specific aspects of the analysis, thus refining the interpretations. The final regrouping which followed this tutorial can be seen in Chapter 4. Interestingly, despite there being a total of ten versions of the superordinate and subthemes, the ‘essence’ of the themes seems to remain the same throughout; motherhood, the emotional experience, and the social phenomenon of adoption.

The superordinate and subthemes were transferred to a final word document which included superordinate themes, subthemes, emergent themes related to the subthemes, and the quotes which were referenced to these emergent themes. This was vital to maintain validity and ensure the superordinate themes were embedded in the data. An example of this for the theme ‘Becoming ‘Mum’’ can be found in Appendix 19.

### **3.6 Quality Issues in Qualitative Research**

Madill et al. (2000, p.1) argue that “qualitative approaches can be criticized for the space they afford the subjectivity of the researcher”. Qualitative research methods, such as IPA are, in a sense, at odds with traditional psychological approaches which focus on the reliability, objectivity and validity of findings. In this sense, “writers in the phenomenological tradition do not normally discuss how the reliability and validity of their findings can be measured in an orthodox sense, nor can they say how representative they are” (Lemon and Taylor, 1997, p.242). Instead, the focus in qualitative methodologies tends to be on the quality and rigour within the research.

Stiles (1993) addresses the issue of quality and rigour within qualitative research, and sees reliability and validity within this research paradigm as being concerned with ‘trustworthiness’. He argues that a distinction should be made between what he terms ‘procedural trustworthiness’ and “criteria for judging the trustworthiness of interpretation” (Stiles, 1993, p.601), and outlines procedures, which he suggests demonstrate ‘good practice’ when undertaking qualitative research.

Yardley (2000) argues that difficulties in establishing quality and validity in qualitative research arise from the numerous methodologies, and the different epistemological stances that then underpin these approaches. It is reasoned that, unlike quantitative research, which, due to its nature, has set criteria by which reliability and validity can be measured, qualitative research requires ‘open-ended’ and flexible guidelines. Yardley (2000) therefore outlines a number of principles, which help the researcher to assess validity and good quality research, while Meyrick (2006) provides “a simple, practitioner-focused framework for assessing the rigour of qualitative research that attempts to be inclusive of a range of epistemological and ontological standpoints” (Meyrick, 2006, p.799).

To ensure that the interpretations and conclusions drawn in this research are what Stiles (1993) terms ‘trustworthy’, and that quality was maintained during the research, issues of validity, quality and rigour were addressed throughout the decision-making and analytic process. Particular attention was also paid to Meyrick’s (2006) model and to the ideas of Yardley (2000). Four key areas are particularly pertinent to this research, testimonial validity, transparency, reflexive validity, and impact and importance, are discussed below.

Testimonial validity refers to the accuracy of the researchers interpretations, and is often known as credibility. It is often the case that researcher’s refer back to their participants once themes have been developed and interpretations drawn to check that the meaning they have taken from the data matches that of the participants. However, Meyrick (2006, p.806) argues that this can move the analysis away from the “researchers’ interpretations of the data”, thus compromising the qualitative approach being employed, which is particularly true for IPA. For this study, testimonial validity has been addressed in the analysis and narratives presented in Chapter 4 through the use of verbatim extracts from the interviews. Smith et al. (2009) advocate the use of this method, as it allows the reader to check the researcher’s interpretation and demonstrates that the conclusions drawn are grounded in the raw data.

Transparency relates to the “disclosure of all relevant research processes” (Meyrick, 2006, p.803), and this has been addressed in each subsection of Chapters 3 and 4. A thorough and clear description of all processes undertaken has been provided, from the sampling and recruitment of participants through to the analytic process. Meyrick (2006, p.806) describes the use of a ‘transparent pathway’ or audit trail as a means of demonstrating rigour in the research process. Complete audit trails of ethical approval, at both a university and Local Authority level, and of the analytic process can be found in the Appendices.

Stiles (1993, p.602) argues that it is good practice for researcher’s to be transparent and explicit about their “personal orientation, context, and internal processes during the investigation”. Given the strong reflexive premises embedded within IPA methodology the researcher has attempted to take a reflexive stance, both professionally and personally, throughout the process of the research. These reflections are often, but not

always, written in the first person and have been included within the chapters of this thesis. They try to shed light on the experiences of the research process, while also pondering how pre-conceptions, values and experiences may have biased and/or shaped interpretations of the data, an action that Meyrick (2006, p.804) sees as key to ensuring good quality research. In addition, they aim to “better contextualise any understandings” that are elicited through the research (Finlay, 2003, p.111).

Reflexive validity refers to the way in which the researcher’s way of thinking is changed by the data (Stiles, 1993). Stiles (1993, p.613) argues that through the hermeneutic circle negotiated during the analysis, the researchers understanding and interpretations should change, develop and be elaborated. This teaches the researcher to become cautious when an interpretation loses power, and emphasises the need for the researcher to engage with the data and the iterative process of IPA. By noting reflections and thoughts regarding the research as and when they came up, and by having a clear audit trail of the analytic process, reflexive validity has been kept in mind throughout the process. As Moustakas (1990, p.9) states, “The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge”.

Yardley (2000, p.223) argues that, “the decisive criterion by which any piece of research must be judged is, arguably, its impact and utility”. The impact may be made on theoretical understanding, socio-cultural understanding, and/or practical use for the community, policy-makers and other professionals. As stated in the introduction, it is anticipated that the rich analysis undertaken will provide a better understanding of how the process of adoption itself is experienced by mothers. It is hoped that this may shed some light on the facilitating factors within this life event, and will therefore help in some way to support policy development to assist all professionals working for or with Adoption Services to work more effectively together to improve the experiences of adoptive parents. In this respect, it is felt that this particular piece of research could have both a theoretical and practical impact within Educational Psychology practice and more generally within Adoption Services. This is discussed further in Section 5.4.

## **CHAPTER 4 - ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Overview**

This chapter aims to provide a rich picture of the experiences of adoptive mothers by presenting the emergent themes drawn out during the analytic process. The narratives presented draw solely on the interpretative analytic process described in Chapter 3, and aim to capture the quality of the participants 'shared' experience.

Three superordinate themes were identified during the analysis, and are presented in an interpretative narrative in Section 4.3. Attention was continuously paid to the range of the participant's experience throughout the analytic process, and it is for this reason that contrasting experiences are addressed within the themes.

While the analysis for the most part focuses its attention on the 'essence' of the participants experience and presents the experiences of the group of adoptive mothers, the researcher has also sought to preserve the idiographic nature of IPA. In this respect, a descriptive summary of each participant, based on the demographic information collected prior to the interviews and information disclosed during the interviews, is presented in the initial section.

### **4.2 The Participants – A Descriptive Summary**

Table 3.4.1 in Chapter 3 provides a brief overview of the demographics of each participant, while this section aims to further introduce the participants to the reader and demonstrate each participant as "standing for, or representing, herself" (Smith, 1997, p.189). It should be noted that these summaries are not interpretative and did not form part of the analysis, they merely seek to add transparency and context for the reader.

#### **Patricia**

Patricia adopted a sibling group of three boys in 2009. She is adopted herself and was unable to have birth children. Patricia is married and has two adult step children. When Patricia decided to adopt she initially wanted to adopt five children, but with her husband, decided that three was a more 'realistic' number of children to adopt at one time. Patricia used the 'Be My Parent' magazine, which is produced by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), as a family-finding service.

### Clare

Clare adopted two girls, aged 5 and 6, in 2004. She is married and they chose to adopt, turning down fertility treatment in favour of making a “difference to the life of two children who are already alive and need, desperately need, stable, caring parents” (Page 6, Line 107-108). Clare has had quite a difficult experience as an adoptive mother and her oldest child had been in foster care for one year at the time of the interview.

### Sandra

Sandra is originally from Zimbabwe and has a birth son. Sandra’s experience is a little different to the other participants as she did not adopt outside of her family, adopting her niece from Zimbabwe. Her sister had Jasmine, Sandra’s adoptive daughter, out of wedlock and, based on the Zimbabwean culture, Sandra brought Jasmine up as her own child. Sadly, Sandra’s sister passed away and Sandra unofficially adopted Jasmine. However, Sandra decided to make the adoption official in Zimbabwe as she was concerned about what might happen to Jasmine if she passed away. When Sandra moved to the UK she also made Jasmine’s adoption official in this country, and therefore went through the UK adoption system to do so.

### Lucy

Lucy became an adoptive mother at the beginning of 2011 when Tom, a one year old boy, was placed with her. Lucy and her husband were waiting to legally finalise the adoption in the final court hearing at the time of the interview. They began the adoption process in one Local Authority, but due to dissatisfaction they moved Authorities and began the process again, and it was in this Local Authority that they adopted. Lucy’s husband John had previously had cancer and Lucy had had a number of miscarriages, which led to the decision to adopt.

### Deborah

Deborah adopted one girl, Cat, at the age of 18 months in December 2010. Deborah met her husband at school. She chose to adopt at quite a young age as she could not have birth children. The process for Deborah took a number of years due to stress and illness. Having been approved at Adoption Panel and following a number of matches falling through, a decision was made by Deborah to temporarily stop the process, and come back to it once her health had improved.

### Helen

Helen adopted a sibling pair, one boy and one girl, in 2008. Her children are very close in age with just 4 days under a year between them, and at the point of adopting John and Jenny, Helen was asked if she would adopt the child their birth mother was carrying at the time. Helen and her husband made a decision not to adopt the third child as she felt that having three children “all in one go might have been a bit much” (Page 3, Line 42).

### Kat

Kat adopted one boy, Luke, under the age of one, in 2010. She chose to adopt as a single mother, but had quite a difficult experience with the foster carers who had developed a bond with Luke and did not want to release him for adoption.

### Emily

Emily adopted one girl, Sarah, now aged 8, in 2007. She is married, and has two adult step sons, who Sarah sees as uncles. Emily is unable to have birth children, and went through a number of rounds of IVF and investigations before deciding to adopt.

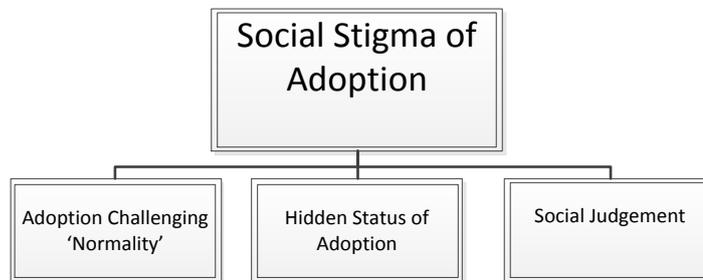
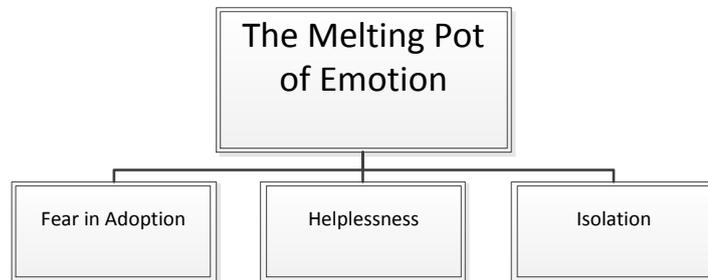
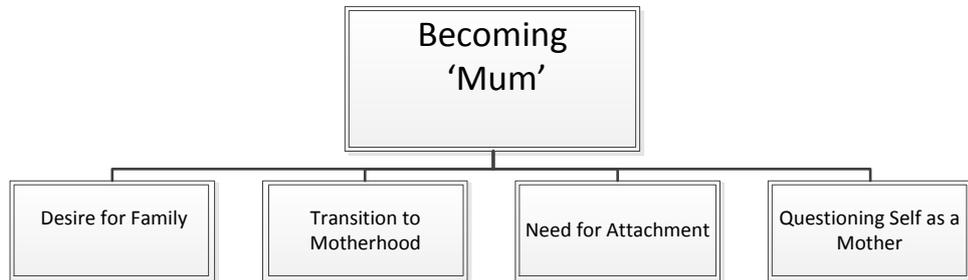
### Denise

Denise has one adoptive son, Charlie, who was placed with the family at the beginning of 2010. She is married with one birth child, Tom, who is slightly older than Charlie. Denise’s marriage was affected by the adoption, and as a result the legal side of the adoption took longer than she expected. Denise was in the process of finalising the adoption via the final court process at the time of the interview.

## **4.3 Superordinate Themes**

The three superordinate themes presented below were constructed during the IPA analytic process, which is described in Chapter 3. They aim to provide a clear representation of the patterns and connections between the emergent subthemes, and the common experience of the adoptive mother. A visual representation of the themes is presented in Figure 4.3. Each theme is then discussed in an interpretative narrative, using extracts from participant interviews as supportive evidence.

Figure 4.3: A Diagrammatic Representation of Superordinate and Subthemes



### 4.3.1 Becoming ‘Mum’

Towards the beginning of her interview Clare states, “*I desperately wanted to be a mother*” (Clare Page 6, Line 104), and for the majority of the women it seems that first and foremost their experience was about becoming a mother and creating the family that they craved. Deborah’s comment sums this up for the majority of the group. She states that,

*“You simply, as they would [birth mothers], want to be a mum, you have the ability and capability to do, umm, the different style of parenting that they [adopted children] require. And that’s all there is to it” (Deborah, Page 20, Line 313-315).*

The desire to become a mother, for many of the participants was felt as a natural instinct that needed to be fulfilled in some way, with adoption being an obvious choice. Lucy (Page 4, Line 49) for example, talks about her “*deep rooted maternal instinct*” which manifests itself in an overwhelming need to nurture. There is a sense that adoption has provided an opportunity for the participants to fulfil their destiny as women, and that the maternal instinct is a universal trait experienced by all women, not just those who have adopted children. Sandra, who is originally from Zimbabwe, encapsulates this in her response to a question related to the culture of motherhood.

*“Interviewer: It sounds very different...the 2 cultures are very different.  
Sandra: Very. Very different. But if you are a mother, you are a mother, that’s it.” (Sandra, Page 10, Line 157-159).*

While Deborah’s experience is very similar, she also talks of becoming a mother to leave a ‘legacy’, a mark on the world. This idea seems to stem from her ideas regarding nature and nurture, and the different ways in which children can be ‘created’.

*“I created her in my mind for 5 years, I have shown her her morals, she has my mannerisms, she has my values, she has my way of living. I am teaching her her life skills. You cannot create any more than that. You can’t. It’s impossible!” (Deborah, Page 17-18, Line 276-279).*

While becoming a mother was key to the women’s experience, what emerged from the data, and is discussed below, is the complexity of the process of becoming a mother through adoption. For a number of women there seemed to be a gentle balance between

the desire for a family and the unmet desire for a birth child, and the way in which this affected their experience. The women also described the change in identity and role that occurred, sometimes unexpectedly, during the transition to motherhood. With motherhood came the need for a reciprocal attachment with the child, creating a bond through their love and nurturing. This need however, was stronger for some women than others, and manifested itself in various ways and for various reasons. Through striving for motherhood, and often a sense of completion, many of the mothers began to question themselves and their ability to mother, looking to external sources for support and validation. Four themes are discussed below, and although presented independently, there is much overlap between these subthemes, with an overarching theme of motherhood running throughout.

### Desire for a Family

The women's accounts seem to reveal that through the adoption process their intense desire to become a mother and create a family has been met. Patricia describes this aspect with great happiness and conveys a sense of completeness at having created her family, stating, "*Being part of a unit, it's a lovely feeling, it's a lovely warm feeling being part of the family*" (Patricia, Page 54, Line 770-772).

The adoption process allowed some the opportunity to create their family in the vision they had always had in their mind, and a number of women discussed the factors that made their adoptive children what Denise describes as her "*designer baby*". This seemed to serve a dual purpose for the adoptive mothers. Not only helping to assimilate the child into the family, but also helping to identify traits that the child may have inherited had they been the woman's birth child. For Denise this is particularly important, perhaps because she is adopting an older child. She says:

*"I wanted him quite sporty, to be...because we do lots of sports and things, quite active, quite outgoing"* (Denise, Page 31, Line 564-565).

Although the creation of a family, and being part of that family, is important for Patricia, as she talks of her decision to adopt, she seems less sure than Denise of the characteristics she felt the children should possess. It seems that for Patricia, her motherly instinct knew which children she was meant to be matched with, and she

shows frustration at the social worker and the matching process as a whole for not understanding the need for the children to feel ‘right’.

*“well I just need to see probably at least five children’s reports before I can be absolutely sure that we’re going for the right ones’. And she [the social worker] said ‘well how do you know that they’re the right ones?’. And this was a ridiculous answer ‘but I will just know’ (laughs) ‘but I’m not just going to go for any first group of children that have been thrown at us’” (Patricia, Page 24, Line 329-334).*

Further exploration of the women’s accounts reveal that the desire for a family, and the feelings of creating a family through adoption, lie in a delicate balance with the women’s unmet desire for a birth child. Emily’s discussion of her IVF treatment indicates that at that time her desire to have birth children outweighed her desire to be a mother, but that the balance changed over a period of time as her questions as to why she couldn’t have birth children were answered, and adoption became a clearer choice

*“well we’d been through lots of IVF treatment, and then I did want to know answers about why it wasn’t happening so I could keep going on, and on, and on, whereas I think Ken would have been happy to have gone to adoption earlier. We did sort of make some enquiries, but I did feel the need to try and find out answers about why I wasn’t...why it wasn’t working, which really in the end we felt we did get. After lots and lots of tests and things, and more treatment...” (Emily, Page 10, Line 159-165).*

The desire to have a birth child does however still seem to be pertinent for Emily as she questions what would have happened had she had a birth child, stating that *“I think if she was a birth child I might have a little angel”*(Emily, Page 7, Line 120).

For Lucy, her desire for a birth child is played out in her thoughts and feelings regarding the birth mother of her son. She shows envy towards the birth mother for her ability to have more than one child, when her wish is just to be able to have one.

*“in life you think, it’s so unfair, you know, they [birth mothers] have these children and just keep churning them out, and we just want one and you can’t get one” (Lucy, Page 5, Line 73-75).*

In contrast, Helen's interview indicates that she is struggling with the delicate balance between her desires, with acceptance of the adoption and loss of the birth child she desired being key to a feeling of equilibrium. *"That's how it is, and you know, just...I guess accept that...I need to accept what they are. And I do accept"* (Helen, Page 14, Line 230-232). Helen seems confused about her feelings towards the adoption, and there is a sense that she feels guilty for this and is finding her feelings difficult to cope with, stating *"I'm digging myself into a hole"* as she considers what she has said.

Deborah reflects on her desire to have given birth, linking this desire to her adopted daughter, explaining that *"The only thing I wish is that if I could have given birth, I would have wanted to have given birth to her"* (Deborah, Page 12, Line 178-179). While birth still appears to be important to Deborah, the impact of having adopted her daughter, and experiencing motherhood in a different way, appears to have changed her perceptions. Birth for Deborah now appears to be a means of confirming the ownership of her daughter, rather than a means of creating a child. However, Deborah also talks about telling her daughter the 'story' of her adoption. This story like element may serve to move her away from her experience in a way that perhaps helps her to work through unresolved issues in not having a birth child, and reinforces the idea that she has got the 'happy ending' she wanted.

#### Transition to Motherhood

The women's interviews reveal the shift in identity that they experienced and the way in which their role changed as they went *"from one day being a single...well not a single...a couple...a childless couple, to a...being a parent"* (Patricia, Page 52, Line 752-753). For many of the women, the transition was about moving away from their old identity, for example, as a professional, to their new identity as a mother, and how these two identities are often intrinsically intertwined. There appears to be an internal battle about how this change should look and how far the change will take them. Deborah captures the complexity of this when she says:

*"you become, you no longer become, you become an entity of who you were, but you have to try and keep...it's really complicated...but yeah (laughs). There's a little part of you you want to keep"* (Deborah, Page 3, Line 33-36).

For a number of the mothers, the decision to maintain aspects of their old identity, for example, by returning to work, was very difficult, and was often influenced by the practicalities of life. Kat talks about her decision to go back to work in terms of having to pay her mortgage, while Patricia talks of how her desire to go back to work changed during the adoption process. For Patricia, she initially felt the need to return to work, but then states that later on in the adoption she realised that *“you don’t particularly want to go back to work unless you have to”* (Patricia, Page 16, Line 222-223).

In terms of the impact of this identity change there seems to be a spectrum of experience based on whether the shift was anticipated. For the women who anticipated that their identity and role would change as they became a mother, they were able to prepare themselves, which then seemed to ease the transition. For example, Denise talks about how she prepared herself for the change that was going to happen by thinking about how her daily routine might change so that *“he [her adopted son] had a place before he arrived”* (Denise, Page 2, line 24), and by preparing herself for *“so much worse”* (Denise, Page 2, Line 18). Denise’s transition to adoptive motherhood seems to have been mediated in some ways by her having an older son as she already had an identity as a mother and therefore sees her new role in much the same way. However, she sees the mental preparation she went through before the adoption, rather than her existent identity, as key to the smooth transition, explaining her husband’s reaction and difficulty in developing his new identity as being based in the fact that he *“didn’t plan in his head”* (Denise, Page 3, Line 36).

At the other end of the spectrum, the change in identity and role came as a shock for some women, particularly when their children were placed very quickly and they had to leave their job with very little notice. For these women the sudden nature of the placement appears to be overwhelming and exploration of Helen’s interview reveals the impact that this shock had on her feelings as a mother. She talks of the *“massive shock”* she experienced, and then later relates this suddenness to her feelings of motherhood and the difficulty she had in realising her identity as a mother.

*“All of a sudden, here you are and you have 2 children, or however many children. I did feel that it ta-...it probably took me the first 2 or 3 years to catch up with being a mother”* (Helen, Page 8, Line 122-124).

### Need for Attachment

Central to many of the adoptive mothers' experience seems to be the need for a reciprocal attachment with their children, and there appears to be a dichotomy of feelings about how one attaches and what factors mediate the bond between mother and child.

For Emily and Lucy in particular, while they are confident in their bond with their children, concern was expressed about the nature of the child's relationship with them. As Emily says, "*it was my one really big concern about the attachment issues and that she wouldn't attach, or a child wouldn't attach*" (Emily, Page 4, Line 47-49), and there is a sense she feels that the child's inability to attach would have been in some way a reflection of her as a mother. Although Emily feels she has formed a bond, her interview suggests that she envies the bond her daughter continues to have with her birth mother, and despite the love and nurturing she has given her feels that there is an implicit competition between herself and her daughter's birth mother. This competition has then had a subsequent impact on her identity as a mother, and she seems to question her sense of true motherhood.

*"she still seems to have that bond with birth mum, which obviously wasn't a very good bond really because she was a very neglectful mum, but nevertheless it's still there. And however hard I try I feel...umm...you know, you can't replace her, and almost I will be second mum really"* (Emily, Page 32, Line 576-580).

Lucy sees the way in which she became a mother as mediating her attachment and bond with her son, explaining that,

*"not being able to have a child, you know, I feel you would attach to...well, this our experience, it may be...whatever child I would have got I would have got attached to very quickly"* (Lucy, Page 1, Line 9-11).

For Lucy, it appears as though infertility, and not being able to have a birth child, has altered her feelings about how one attaches to a child, and that attachment for her is not a choice or something you strive for, it is something that occurs naturally as a mother. Sandra reinforces this idea, and speaks of the "*desire of having your own child*" (Sandra, Page 12, Line 208) as supporting the emotional attachment and love that a mother feels for their child

In contrast, Helen appears to see the gestation period as integral to the attachment one forms with their child, and due to the nature of adoption seems to feel she has missed out on an opportunity to bond with her children. In this sense, she seems to feel that she is still waiting for a bond to develop between herself and her two adopted children and there is a sense that she is uncertain as to how to develop a ‘natural’ bond in her different situation.

*“It isn’t like having a natural child where that child is growing inside you, your kind of bonding with the child I guess, umm...as your pregnancy develops” (Helen, Page 8, Line 120-122).*

### Questioning Self as a Mother

During the transition to motherhood, many of the women seemed to begin to question themselves, particularly their ability to mother their children. Many tended to look to external sources for support and validation of their skills, searching for knowledge in books and from others as they did not always trust the maternal instincts they talked about in their interviews. As Clare says,

*“We read it all, we digested it, got the books. You know, the videos. We went to the post-adoption support group. We did everything. You know, we joined the parent support group of adopted children” (Clare, Page 44, Line 803-806).*

This element of doubting oneself was particularly pertinent for Clare as what she describes as her ‘*family breakdown*’ (Clare, Page 16, Line 284-288) led her to question herself as a mother from the very early stages of the adoption. Clare talks of how she and her husband felt that they knew “*how to be good parents*” (Clare, Page 3, Line 47), and decided before they began the adoption process how they would be as parents, learning from their friend’s mistakes, their own experiences, and the natural parental instincts they possessed. However, her daughters’ behaviour was experienced with great confusion and she turned to professionals and books for support and guidance, feeling that her parenting skills were not enough. Clare though seems to feel let down by the professionals around her as they were not able to guide her in her parenting, and also by her daughters who have not accepted her as a mother and have ‘forgotten’ “*every bit of love and affection that we had available*” (Clare, Page 35, Line 365).

Helen talks of how she continues to doubt herself and places great pressures on herself as a mother to “*do everything I can to make sure they have a good life and a good childhood*” (Helen, Page 11, Line 182-183), while Emily questions her ability to cope with certain aspects of adoptive motherhood and does not seem to trust her own knowledge. Interestingly, Emily seems to compare her mothering skills to that of the skills of a professional, indicating she feels an allegiance between the two roles, but does not feel that her skills as a mother are as powerful as the skills of a professional. Emily says,

*“Reading books you think...I do try and read the books and do the right thing and say the right things to her, but I’m not a professional...so I have found that hard”* (Emily, Page 6, Line 94-96).

This pressure and self-doubt is also felt in Kat’s transcript, however for her these feelings seem to be exacerbated by her status as a single mother. For Kat it seems that when she doubts her ability or is unsure of how to approach a new situation she does not feel she has anyone to turn to and ask, whereas she feels that those people that adopt as part of a couple, while one may be working during the day, they are always there later to ask and support you as a mother.

*“it’s hard doing it on your own...most people are single parents all through the day because someone’s working, but yeah it’s hard not having someone to ask questions of or help you think”* (Kat, Page 21, Line 375-379).

Kat also illustrates her self-doubt with specific examples, suggesting that the times when she has truly questioned her ability to mother are still clear within her mind. She feels she cannot ring people to ask for help, but turning to books does not always provide her with the answer she is looking for. The impact of the relationships with her son’s foster carers on Kat’s feelings as a mother is evident within her interview. Kat seems to have had quite a difficult time with the foster carers as she felt they had formed a very close bond with her son and were reluctant to give him up for adoption, and she talks of the barriers she felt they put in place to make the process quite difficult for her. In this respect, she says “*I’d say it was up there with one of the worst things I’ve been through, because it made me feel like I couldn’t do it*” (Kat, Page 11, Line 184-185).

### 4.3.2 The Melting Pot of Emotion

For the majority of the women, adoption was experienced as a highly emotional journey, which challenged their ability to cope, particularly in the isolated situation in which they sometimes found themselves. Helen talks about how the highs and lows of her emotions go “*in waves*” (Page 4, Line 62), while Kat describes how she went “*through this whole emotional spin*” (Kat, Page 4, Line 66) during the adoption process, and Sandra defines her experience as “*emotional*”, adding, “*yes, it’s rewarding. Sometimes it’s scary*” (Sandra, Page 1, Line 7). For the majority of the women, it seems as though they went through a whole range of emotions, from excitement and happiness, to guilt and anger, both during the adoption process and once they had been placed with their children.

There is a sense from the interviews that the emotions felt throughout the adoption experience and as an adoptive mother were overwhelming, and required the women to quickly develop coping strategies. For Helen, her emotions were put into what she describes as a “*melting pot*” (Helen, Page 15, Line 240) giving a sense that her past and present feelings are mixed together, and that her feelings are kept inwardly and perhaps mulled over, and this then allows her to cope outwardly.

Sandra likens her experience to a movie, which suggests that she often feels that she is looking in on something that is happening, but is displaced from the experience itself and the related emotions. Someone else is playing her part, and she is watching the narrative of her world and life unfold before her, and she does not quite yet feel that her experience is real despite her having lived it.

*“when your story is a real story it is just like watching a movie which is related to an actual event that happened” (Sandra, Page 7, Line 104-105).*

While for many of the women the whole experience was emotionally overwhelming, for both Patricia and Deborah the matching process appeared to evoke the strongest emotional reaction. This seemed to be about the feelings of loss and disappointment that occurred when a match did not succeed, and is described as “*the most incredibly balloon popping thing.*” (Patricia, Page 11, Line 150). However, there is also an element of the physical and embodied nature of this loss, as Patricia alludes to a sense of something breaking. Deborah also captures the embodied nature of this moment

vividly in the following quote, and it is as if she is identifying with the emotions experienced by a birth mother who loses a child.

*“it’s a miscarriage. It’s exactly the same feeling. Like having a miscarriage” (Deborah, Page 7, Line 108-109).*

The emotional element of adoption is clearly salient throughout the mother’s experience, and while sometimes felt and dealt with in very different ways, and at different times in the process, there appear to be common themes within the ‘Melting Pot’ of emotions. The three subthemes discussed in the narratives below will explore elements of the emotions experienced by the adoptive mothers interviewed. Many of the women appeared to feel great fear within their experience, particularly fear of the future and the responsibility they felt they had taken on. For a number of mothers the feeling of helplessness and the need to gain control was lived in their battle for power, not only with various professionals, but also over their own emotions. The isolation experienced by a number of mothers was discussed in relation to their perceived need for support, often following the adoption of their child, as they learnt how to be a mother.

### Fear in Adoption

Fear was an emotion which often appeared within the women’s accounts and seemed quite salient within their experience. Not only did the women experience fear of the future, but there is a sense that many of the women feared the responsibility they had been given through the adoption, as Kat explains, *“It’s such a massive thing that you’re taking on”* (Kat, Page 11, Line 184).

For some of the women, the fear experienced was rooted in their thoughts and feelings about the ‘adoption cycle’, fearing that in the future their children would get in to *“the same kind of cycle as...umm...as the birth mother and her birth parents as well, and both of their fathers as well”* (Helen, Page 11, Line 174-175). There is a sense that the fear of this imagined future is a great burden for Helen. She feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility and is fearful that she will not be able to fulfil it, ‘break’ the cycle of adoption, *“make sure they have a good life and a good childhood”* (Helen, Page 11 Line 183), and ultimately *“get it right”* (Helen, Page 11, Line 168-171).

Clare also expresses fear of the future and again this seems to be embedded within her feelings about the cycle of adoption. Clare (Page 29) talks of her concern that her children will follow in the footsteps of their birth family and fall in to a similar routine of drug abuse and prison, and says that this fear is *“always there”*.

Like Helen, Emily seems fearful of looking to the future, explaining she takes *“each day a day at a time, because I can’t look ahead because you don’t know what problems there will be”* (Emily, Page 33, Line 597-599). In contrast to Helen and Clare however, Emily’s fear for the future relates to her feelings regarding her daughter’s attachment to her birth mother and the thought of her seeking contact via social media. It seems that Emily’s fears of the future may be associated with a fear of the unknown, as she cannot control the information her daughter may receive from her birth mother and feels powerless in controlling the communication her daughter may have with her birth mother. The uncontrollable nature of contact via social media, for Emily, brings a fear of issues she does not yet feel ready to cope with.

*“I think if anything there will be more issues as she gets older because there’s going to be Facebook and you know goodness knows what that’s going to open up. You know, she’ll be on the computer so probably won’t be 18 before she sees...”* (Emily, Page 33, Line 590-593).

In contrast to some of the other adoptive mothers, Sandra does not express fear of a negative adoption cycle. Instead she seems confident in the idea that adoption creates a positive cycle, in which the child, through the home a mother provides, is given the opportunity to break away from their previous negative lives and *“If they are OK they will even go back to help others”* (Sandra, Page 13, Line 227). Based on her personal experience, Sandra seems to identify with mothers who have adopted children from abroad, particularly those who have been in the public spotlight, and sees this positive adoption cycle as embedded within such stories.

### Helplessness

The women’s accounts reveal that during the adoption process, and prior to the final court hearing, many of the women experienced a feeling of helplessness as they did not feel in control of their lives. Deborah describes the anger she experienced at the *“absolute sense of not being in control”* (Deborah, Page 11, Line 165). To regain a

sense of control the women entered into a battle for power with professionals and foster carers, and also their own emotions.

Patricia and Lucy's strong ideas about the children they wanted to adopt appear to serve two purposes. Firstly, and as discussed in section 4.3.1, these ideas helped the mothers to create the family they imagined they would always have. Secondly, the ideas, and the way in which they are expressed in the interviews, seemed to help the women to feel as though they were in some way in control of the process. While for Patricia the sense of control seems to have been realised as she was in a way able to choose the children she wanted to adopt, for Lucy there is a sense of disappointment that these ideas were not realised and in a way her control was negated by the way in which the adoption process tends to be worked.

*"we thought naively they were gonna come round and show us a book with all these children, almost like a catalogue, and say 'are you drawn to a child here?' 'Is there any child that you look at and feel drawn to?'" (Lucy, Page 12, Line 187-189).*

*"I think initially we felt a bit disappointed that we didn't have any input on what we wanted to choose or what we felt we would of liked. I think that was a bit disappointing" (Lucy, Page 12, Line 196-198).*

For Kat, her battle for control seemed to be about gaining a sense of ownership over her son during the time of introductions, prior to the start of his adoptive placement with her. There is a sense that at this time in the process Kat felt helpless in beginning to develop a relationship with her son and that the way in which the foster carer acted during the introductions made her feel powerless to do anything about her feelings. Kat's battle for power was about trying to maintain an empathetic stance for the foster carer while trying to regain a sense of control and a feeling that the child was going to be her son. She says that while being introduced to her son at the foster carers

*"I didn't feel...I just felt like I was looking at somebody else's child...not my own child...which is a really strange thing, because you think you'll just be overwhelmed with love" (Kat, Page 4, Line 51-54).*

From further exploration of this part of her interview it appears that Kat felt an overwhelming sense of motherly rivalry, which again left her feeling helpless as she

was able to identify with the foster carer who felt like the child's mother as she had cared for him from birth. Kat's desperation to take control of the situation and learn how to be her son's mother before the adoptive placement started is played out in the following quote:

*"so I said you know 'I need to put him down'. So she said 'well...'. I can't remember exactly what she said, but basically she wasn't very happy with me doing it. And I said 'well I'm doing it'. Tomorrow, sort of forever...o no it was the day after tomorrow...I still had one more day to go...and I said 'I'm doing it'. You know I need to be able to do it"* (Kat, Page 7, Line 108-113).

During the matching process, a time that was particularly emotional for Deborah, she seems to have entered in to an internal battle to gain control over her emotions. For Deborah, the need to control her emotions appears to be an attempt to hide her feelings of helplessness, and in a sense mask her vulnerability so she is able to cope in her life outside of the adoption process.

*"But even though you know that it doesn't help, you can't control that emotion. But I tended to ignore, in between links, in between links, I just tried to forget about it actually if I could"* (Deborah, Page 10, Line 153-157).

For Sandra, there seems to be a sense of powerlessness over the decisions that are being made about her adoption, as she talks of having to wait for certificates to prove her eligibility to adopt and of the Adoption Panel where she *"felt so small to be there, even to talk to them"* (Sandra, Page 6, Line 102-104). As with Deborah, at times in her experience Sandra seems to have entered into a battle for control over her emotions, saying *"I think there is a point where you just have to be immune to emotion"* (Sandra, Page 12, Line 201-204), and seems to be a method used to avoid feelings of helplessness and allow her to develop action plans within the adoption process, thus taking back some personal control.

### Isolation

The women's accounts reveal the isolating nature of the adoption experience, with peer and professional support being seen as quite difficult to access. For many of the women,

the period following the adoption placement was experienced as particularly isolating, and Helen seems to capture this feeling when she talks of her experience of finishing her job and being placed with her two children, saying suddenly she had

*“no contact with London [where she worked] and the kind of the outside world...umm...so at that point our social worker had already left the team, she’d emigrated overseas...and we didn’t actually see anybody from social services team for 8 weeks after the children came home to us, and that’s something I still to this day find difficult to deal with” (Helen, Page 3, Line 49-53).*

Kat seems to encapsulate the feeling of isolation in adoption, likening the feelings she has to those of a person who is suffering from an illness in silence, and does not seem to feel that she has anyone to share her feelings with. With no obvious support around her and due to the battles she has had to face throughout the adoption, she seems to feel she has to mask her feelings of isolation, performing to the outside world while she copes with her inner turmoil alone.

*“I guess it’s like IVF. And if you go through it alone...or cancer...it’s only happening to you. You can be OK on the outside and talk to your family, but actually it’s only happening to you”.* (Kat, Page 22, Line 402-405).

Many of the women talked of the lack of professional support they received following the adoption, with some feeling they could not ask for help as it was not readily available and it therefore *“feels like you have to fight for anything”* (Emily, Page 5, Line 72). For Patricia the lack of support following the adoption, while isolating, is *“like the carpet’s been pulled out from under you”* (Patricia, Page 40, Line 573). When support which may have been expected is taken away or not given it seems to create a sense of instability, and the fear of having to learn to be a mother without this support is overwhelming.

In contrast, Sandra talks of the collaborative journey she lived with her social worker during the adoption process, and how the emotional elements within her story helped to develop this relationship. There is a sense of gratitude for this level of support as she explains, *“So we built that relationship. She knew who I was and what I was going through in terms of this adoption process. So it was quite an emotional journey which*

*she actually shared with me, because I could see her wiping tears sometimes”* (Sandra, Page 6, Line 98-101).

For some, there seemed to be a desire to break the isolation through peer support, but many were unsure where this source of support would come from as they felt that their peers with birth children were not always in a position to understand and support them in their journey to motherhood. Lucy (Page 28, Line 462-465) explains that *“you can talk to other mothers with the same age children, but they’ve had them from birth and we’ve come in at a completely different stage of the child’s life...umm... and it is different”*. Helen expresses a wish that she had developed a stronger support network during the pre-adoption training, as not having this support network reinforces her feeling of being cut off from the ‘outside world’. For Patricia, the importance of her peer network established during the pre-adoption training is clear within her interview. She says that *“we still are a group and we still meet each other regularly”* (Patricia, Page 3, Line 29-30) suggesting that despite her isolation from professional support, she feels a sense of support through the people she shares a common experience with.

#### **4.3.3 Social Stigma of Adoption**

As a personal experience, many of the women talked about their feelings and experience of adoption outside of their family. Clare talks of her experience of the acceptance of adoption in the context of the wider society, explaining that *“people look from the outside looking in, you know, and I think it was then that I first realised what an uphill struggle my children were going to have trying to fit into a society that has no tolerance for them”* (Clare, Page 9, Line 148-150).

The three subthemes discussed below traverse the complexity and internal battle many of the adoptive mothers experience in displaying their adoptive status to others in society. Adoption was seen by some women as a sudden challenge not only to their ‘old’ life, but also to what they and others in society tend to see as ‘normality’. Although they wanted to embrace the difference in their situation, they also seemed to look to deny or indeed reject this difference. For many, the adoption itself was something which was very private and attempts were made to actively hide it from those around them. There seemed to be an internal battle between being open about the adoption or hiding it to reduce the social stigma they thought that they may experience.

The social judgement many of the women experienced was very pertinent and their need to educate others in a bid for greater understanding and acceptance seemed to influence the way they interacted with society.

#### Adoption Challenging 'Normality'

As discussed in the subtheme 'Transition to Motherhood', the speed and very nature of adoption was seen by some women as a sudden challenge to their 'old life' and was often experienced with some difficulty. In addition to being a challenge to their changing life, adoption was also often experienced as a challenge to what society sees as 'normal' and in this sense, this added an additional layer to the women's experience.

For Kat this challenge seems to revolve around the unnatural nature of the relationships that develop throughout the adoption process, both for herself and for her son. She talks of having to "manufacture" relationships, particularly for her son, and seems to see this process as quite different from what would normally happen when one has children. In addition, she highlights the difference she sees between her son and other children, but does not seem to feel the need to deny this difference, instead seeing the eclectic nature of his friendships as a positive.

*"So now he's got adopted friends and normal, I don't want to call them normal, but you know...usual friends. So yeah that's all...a bit different"*  
(Kat, Page 21, Line 370-374).

For Emily the fact that she did not give birth to her daughter is a challenge to 'normality' in and of itself, and it is for this reason that she feels different to other mothers.

*"P: Umm...because you do feel...umm different to mum's really I think..."*

*I: In what way?*

*P: umm...well you haven't given birth, and you do feel...you know, you haven't had that 9 month bonding in the womb, and you meet this child, and they're yours" (Emily, Page 13, Line 219-224).*

While Emily acknowledges her feelings of difference, she seems to try to deny it for her daughter, seemingly as a protective measure with the aim of her adoption not challenging her daughters 'normality'. She talks of how despite her daughter's early experiences with her foster carers and their efforts to promote her difference within the

nursery environment, she now tries to reject this difference, explaining that *“it made it difficult when she came here because we didn’t want her being really different”* (Emily, Page 8, Line 132-133). In line with this, Emily also seems to look to bring ‘normality’ to the adoption through social comparisons with her friend’s birth children, stating that *“sometimes it is nice when my friends who’ve got birth children are moaning about them and they’re saying about this naughty behaviour and that, and I can’t help sometimes thinking ‘O yes!’ because you think wow, they’re being really naughty and they’re birth children”* (Emily, Page 24, Line 415-419).

Interestingly, Denise talks of how her adoptive experience has actually challenged the normality within adoption and how this has led to her feeling a sense of stigmatism, which distinguishes her from the norm, both within the context of adoption and motherhood. Having had a birth child and then adopted an older child Denise is left feeling lost within these two worlds, and while able to identify and embrace her differences, feels they work against her when she needs support and understanding. This feeling is epitomised when she says:

*“it’s as if the whole thing is geared around people with no children who have taken the leave, you know because you’re allowed to take so much leave, taken it all then, they’re available all the time, they have no children of their own already and you’re handing over a preschool child...which is fair enough, but it isn’t, and it very often isn’t that the...your...we didn’t fit the part. And I know that most children when they get to school age don’t get adopted, but some do and when they do you have to kind of go ‘O OK that makes things a bit different’”* (Denise, Page 11, Line 195-203).

### Hidden Status of Adoption

Linked to adoption challenging normality, exploration of the transcripts revealed that for many of the women interviewed the status of adoption was one of secrecy, and they actively sought to hide it from society. This seems to be related to the women’s perceptions that there is a social stigma attached to adoption and that if people know that their child is adopted they will be seen differently within a society that links motherhood to the birth of a child.

For Emily, Lucy and Denise, there is a sense that they are particularly apprehensive about their status as an adoptive mother being known within the school environment, perhaps because this is where they come across the most parents. Emily discusses her explicitness in not telling other mothers at school about her daughter's adoption, but seems to find the secrecy quite difficult to cope with, saying *"I don't go around telling anybody that Sarah is adopted. Only a few mums at the school know. So...I think that's what I find quite hard..."* (Emily, Page 2, Line 17-19). However, for Emily it seems that she is caught in a dilemma between telling people about the adoption and recognising the difference in her situation, and hiding the adoption from society. She says, *"Sometimes you think, you do want to say to a few people 'she is adopted and has had a difficult past', but you don't really want to tell people"* (Emily, Page 8, Line 126-128).

The hidden nature of the adoption at school is explained in terms of protecting their children

*"because I don't want her being treated differently"* (Emily, Page 9, Line 139).

*"I didn't want him to be singled out in that school. That is a terrible position to put him in"* (Denise, Page 19, Line 336).

However, there is a sense that, particularly for Emily, the mothers are worried about being seen differently by other mother's and having to answer their questions about the adoption. Within her interview Emily talks of her feelings of being like a *'second mum'* and it may be the case that she is concerned that people who know about the adoption, particularly other mothers, will reinforce this as her status. For Lucy the anxiety experienced about the openness of adoption was expressed in terms of how open her son would be about his adoption when he went to school and what issues this will present. She says *"if other children find out then there can be, and I don't know if it is still the same now, there can be a stigma with that"* (Lucy, Page 13, Line 212-214).

From the interviews, there is also a sense that some of the women struggle with talking to their children about the adoption and what it means for them, and in some ways the adoption seems to be *'hidden'* to a certain degree within the family as well as society. Many of the women reflected on how their children spontaneously talk to them about the adoption, asking questions about their birth parents and recalling events from when they had contact with their birth family. However, there is a sense that the adoptive

mothers find these conversations particularly difficult, and while they are happy to answer their children's questions, would not choose to have such talks. Emily (Page 18, Line 321-324), for example, talks about how *"we do openly if she wants to we talk about her being adopted, it's not a secret, but it's not something you want to keep harping on about, because at the same time you want her to settle in here and feel part of our family and extended family"*

### Social Judgement

Helen (Page 12, Line 202) says that *"it's hard to find people who don't judge you, just accept your children for what they are and don't get too upset by what they do"*. The sense of social judgement experienced as an adoptive mother came through in many of the women's interviews, and it seems that the women feel judged by both people they know and people they come across in their day-to-day lives. In many instances the adoptive mothers feel a great need to educate those people they feel have judged them in order to promote a greater understanding and acceptance not only of themselves as mothers, but also of their children. As Deborah (Page 18, Line 291) explains *"that's what I find myself doing. I educate (talks to child). So that's what I find myself educating people more"*.

For many of the women the sense of social judgement is experienced when people ask questions about their children and various aspects of the adoption. In the way that they talk about these questions, the women express how the questions often take them by surprise as they seem shocked by other people's conceptions of adoption and the difficulties that they may face as adoptive mothers. The assumptions that people make about the women's experience, which are evident within the questions that they recall in their interviews, seem to be rooted in society's pre-conceptions about 'real' motherhood, and clearly strike a chord for the adoptive mothers. For some it seems that they feel that others do not see them as equals to birth mothers and therefore their response to such questioning is to reinforce their belief that they are the child's real mother. This is evident within Deborah's recollection of a specific event where a friend asked her about the way she disciplines her child. She says,

*"some people ask stupid questions really...o my god, I had a friend say to me 'Do you think that you discipline her so effectively because you're not her real mother?'. I am her real mother! And she was like 'yeah but you*

*didn't give birth to her so you're not actually her mother'. No, I really am (laughs)" (Deborah, Page 17, Line 268-272).*

However, for others there seems to be much more passivity to their responses to questions about them as mothers. This perhaps comes from an understanding of why people might ask certain questions, or perhaps comes from an acceptance of their personal situation which they do not feel is threatened by the judgement they experience. Although Lucy talks about people questioning her ability to attach to her son on two occasions, there is a sense that she is at ease with these questions, and her response seems to link back to the subtheme 'Need for Attachment' in which she appears to see the way in which she became a mother as mediating her attachment and bond with her son. Lucy explains that

*a lot of people say that to us, you know 'how can you attach?'. Because some people can't get their heads round it. Some people go...you know, 'how can you attach to...it's not your child. How can you take that child in knowing it's not yours?'...and, well, when you can't have your own, and you don't have any options, I think it's very easy" (Lucy, Page 31, Line 518-522).*

Clare talks of how she felt judged as a mother as soon as she was placed with her children, and that this social judgement has followed her through her adoption experience as *"people make a lot of assumptions about how you are as a parent"* (Clare, Page 10, Line 167) based on what she feels to be naïve evidence. For Clare it seems as though the lack of understanding from those around her, including the professionals, is the hardest element to cope with. She says *"what I didn't expect was to be...was to find the attitudes and the lack of understanding, or the patchy understanding, from the professionals"* (Clare, Page 2, Line 20-24). However, unlike many of the other women it seems that Clare does not feel in a position to educate others, perhaps because she is also trying to understand her situation.

*"And its hard enough that we don't really understand it. Even though we understand on one level, but we don't really understand, without trying to explain it to everyone else who understand it even less than we do, and doesn't live the experience that we're living. You know and that's tough" (Clare, Page 56, Line 1030-1034).*

#### **4.4 Less Common Themes**

Three less common themes were also identified during the interpretative analytic process. It was felt that, although they did not represent an experience that was common to the whole group of adoptive mothers, they represented key aspects of the experience for some of the mothers. In this respect, these themes demonstrate the complexity and diversity of the experience of adoptive motherhood.

##### **4.4.1 Fragility of Adoption**

Despite the difficult nature of their experience the majority of the women seemed to express a sense of security within the adoption and did not seem to express concern regarding the possibility of adoption breakdown in the future. In this sense, although they had, and continued to, experience highs and lows, they appeared comfortable in the overall robustness of their adoption. As Lucy (Page 5, Line 79) explains “*So, you know, and that’s it, you know he’s ours*”. However, for Clare and Denise their feelings regarding the fragility of the adoption process were evident within their transcripts, with concern being expressed about adoption breakdown. In a sense, this less common theme shares elements with the theme ‘Fear in Adoption’ as the two women seem to be fearful of the potential of this happening. However, there appears to be a difference within this theme in that the instability experienced relates to the adoption not working, rather than a fear for the child’s outcomes for their future.

Clare’s oldest child had been in foster care for a year at the time of the interview, and for Clare this outcome seems to exemplify the fragility of adoption. She describes adoption as having a set ‘shape’ and you get a sense that this shape has always been quite delicate, and that Clare is lost as to how to make the future of their adoption more robust. She is fearful of making her situation worse in the future, and expresses fear that the adoption will in a sense blow up around her.

*“It’s like a powder keg in our house. And it could be either of them or either of us that lights the touch paper and I can just see it all going badly wrong yet again. You know, and I’m afraid of it going wrong. You know, I do have a lot of thoughts that you could describe as catastrophising” (Clare, Page 20, Line 357-360)*

Denise alludes to placement breakdown on a number of occasions, placing the source of the stress on the adoption within the professionals she sees as her antagonists. Unlike Clare, for Denise the fragility of her adoption has been mediated by her own personality, particularly her self-belief, and her previous experience of motherhood.

*But I think if I hadn't had a son already and I wasn't as bolshie as I am they could make this adop-, this placement would have failed. It would have failed (Denise, Page 19, Line 344-346).*

However, Denise's self-confidence may be an attempt to mask her continued concern about the fallibility of her experience as she is yet to officially adopt the child she sees as her son. Her insecurity about the foreverness of the adoption is played out in her discussion regarding contact with her son's father, in which she says she would like her son to meet his father to "make sure he understands that he does live here and not with his dad" (Denise, Page 22, Line 404-405).

#### **4.4.2 The Reward of Adoption**

The women's transcripts reveal an overriding sense that adoption is an emotional process, which while providing them with the opportunity to fulfil their desire to become a mother, is a difficult experience to enter in to and one which has provided them with a number of challenges. For Sandra, however, the positive, rewarding nature of her experience is explicit within her transcript and is symbolised in her physical response to the adoption. Sandra (Page 1, Line 13-16) explains how the relief of finalising the adoption is a reward for her, and

*"since that child has come here I have put on weight because my mind is at rest, and I've gone from 68kg to 80kg. I went to the Doctor. And all my friends are saying you are putting weight on because of Jasmine".*

In contrast to Sandra, Clare does not seem to have experienced such rewards of adoption, but continues to crave the psychological rewards that she thought she would gain from adoption. She says,

*"I did expect to get something back in return. I didn't expect a lot in return, but I did expect something. At least some cooperation and acknowledgement that we are trying to help and support them" (Clare, Page 2, Line 15-18)*

For Clare, the love and effort that she has put in to the adoption has not always been reciprocated by her daughters, and there is a sense of disappointment in her experience.

#### 4.4.3 The Child Mediating the Experience

Exploration of the transcripts revealed that for some women the child themselves mediated their experience as an adoptive mother, either in the way they reacted to the adoption or in their temperament. This seemed to be experienced more strongly for some women than others, and therefore appears within the less common themes.

For Lucy and Denise in particular, the temperament and positive reaction of their children to the adoption have aided their transition to adoptive motherhood. Lucy, for example, talks of how her son is an 'easy' child, describing him as '*a breeze*' (Lucy, Page 32, Line 527), and there is a sense that she feels that it is this that has made her post-adoption experience all the more positive. This is also true for Deborah, although the elements of the child she sees as mediating her experience seem to relate more to what could be described as 'imagined' biological connections. Deborah discusses how she feels her daughter looks like her family as "*she's got the same jaw line as my mum*" (Page 12, Line 183) and has developed her mannerisms in a very short space of time. In this respect the characteristics of her daughter, either learnt or genetic, seemed to have allowed Deborah to develop a feeling of complete ownership of her daughter, so much so that she explains "*I don't see it as part of an adoption*" (Page 12, Line 191).

## **CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Overview**

In this chapter aspects within the analysis are presented in relation to existing literature and theory, along with more novel findings, and are discussed with a view to developing a rich understanding of the experiences of adoptive mothers. The chapter then goes on to critically evaluate the methodological approach adopted, and implications for adoption professionals and Educational Psychologists are presented, with particular reference to the aims of the research. The chapter closes with a final reflexive commentary.

### **5.2 The Findings and Existing Research**

In Chapter 4 the analysis describes the complexity of the experiences of adoptive mothers and the often overwhelming nature of these experiences. The interpretative nature of IPA, particularly the critical and empathetic hermeneutics employed during the analytic process, afforded the researcher the opportunity to explore in detail the highs and lows of this experience, and the meaning of the women's experiences as they are socially shared and individually experienced (Finlay, 2008). However, based on the phenomenological underpinnings of IPA "any one analysis is, inevitably, incomplete, partial, tentative, emergent, open and uncertain" (Finlay, 2008, p.6). In line with this, it is argued that the analytic narrative in Chapter 4, and the discussion which follows, represent one version of the experiences of adoptive mothers (Finlay, 2002), and given the subjective nature of the analytic process the narrative has invariably been influenced by the pre-conceptions and experiences of the researcher. It is not however the intention of this study to provide the 'final word' on the experience of adoption for adoptive mothers (Smith and Eatough, 2007), and as such, it is acknowledged that other researcher's may have interpreted the findings slightly differently while using the same research method, and the interpretations for the reader may not always ring true.

The discussion below highlights some of the findings and explores their relation to existing research. These elements have been chosen as they are of particular interest to the researcher and are noteworthy when considering the aims of the research. Of particular note for the researcher was the superordinate theme 'Becoming 'Mum'', the subtheme surrounding the changing identity of the adoptive mothers, the subtheme

'Need for Attachment', the emotional experience of adoption for the women, and the social stigma that the women felt as adoptive mothers. Again, it is acknowledged that there might be other aspects of the analysis that the reader may have wished to explore, but due to word limitations within this thesis it was not possible to discuss every theme individually.

### **5.2.1 Becoming 'Mum'**

Reflected in the mothers' transcripts is the overwhelming sense that the whole experience for them is about becoming a mother, thus creating a family, and fulfilling their natural instinct which has pulled them towards motherhood. As Deborah (Page 20, Line 318-320) explains, "*you have this innate, umm, need to have and procreate and have your own child. And that is precisely what it is*". The findings support those of Ulrich and Weatherall (2000) who found that women suffering from infertility drew on discourses of motherhood as a 'natural instinct' and as a 'social expectation' when discussing their reasons for wanting children.

Within this theme, there seems to be a parallel between the findings and the motherhood literature, which for the most part is taken from a feminist perspective. Motherhood for the women interviewed was seen as a universal trait and a way of completing their destiny as a woman, placing their ideas of motherhood within this feminist construct/discourse of the motherhood literature, which sees motherhood as synonymous with womanhood (Arendell, 2000; Ulrich and Weatherall, 2000). In addition, the women talked of their desire to nurture which, Arendell (2000) argues is a theme and discourse intrinsically linked to the definition of mothering and femininity.

The way in which motherhood is socially constructed within the feminist discourse of society is significant within the motherhood literature (Arendell, 2000; Lewis and Nicolson, 1998), and appears to be significant for the mothers interviewed. There is an apparent dichotomy of ideas about whether as an adoptive mother you are indeed a 'real' mother, and as such some of the women challenge the predominant social construct of motherhood as biologically determined, in which true motherhood is based in the birth of a child. Deborah, for example, seems to question the biological determination of motherhood and it seems clear from her interview that she experiences adoptive motherhood as 'real' motherhood.

Ulrich and Weatherall (2000) question the biological determination of motherhood, suggesting as an alternative, that motherhood can be seen as an outcome of a decision making process, which promotes women's agency within their life choices, and may therefore be experienced as empowering rather than instinctive. While the women chose to become mothers through adoption and in a sense entered in to a complex decision making process, for some, their experience does not seem to fully support Ulrich and Weatherall's (2000) alternative construct of motherhood. The overarching belief that came out through the transcripts was that motherhood is indeed a natural instinct and in a sense for many women is biologically determined, often through infertility. It is however unclear why there is a divergence between the women's constructs of motherhood and perceptions of themselves as mothers, and this perhaps highlights an area for future research.

### **5.2.2 Identity**

The findings reveal how the adoptive mothers experienced a change in identity as they transitioned from being childless to being placed with a child, thus becoming mothers. They are of interest as they provide a rich understanding of the process adoptive mothers experience in developing their new identity, and may be of use when considering how one might support women through the adoption process. This finding reflects both the adoption and motherhood literature, which has shown identity change to be a particularly significant event within the transition to motherhood. Barclay et al. (1997) and Shelton and Johnson (2006) for example, found that first time mothers experienced a profound reconstruction of their identity, with the enormity of this change often challenging them in ways they had not expected. It also reflects much of the IPA literature, in which identity often emerges as a central concern despite the topic under exploration (Smith et al., 2009).

For the mother's interviewed, the transition to motherhood seemed to be quite a personal experience and was not necessarily discussed in relation to their partner, although Deborah does talk of how her change in identity has impacted on how she interacts with her husband, saying "*I've become more serious...so where as before I was jokey*" (Deborah, Page 3, Line 40-49). These findings give support to those of Timm et al. (2011) who found that issues in identity for adoptive mothers were

experienced as an individual rather than as part of a couple, as identity is internal to each person and constructed on an individual basis.

The individual nature of identity change within this research, along with the findings of Timm et al. (2011), contest the findings of Daly (1988) who found that the reconstruction of identity took place within the context of parenthood and was in this respect co-constructed. However, it should be noted that the research differs in that Daly's (1988) participants were adoptive couples, and therefore the findings of the two pieces of research may be a product of the sample chosen.

Shelton and Johnson (2006) found that identity change for women who chose to 'delay' motherhood occurred through a process of identity disruption and integration, and was often about giving up previous aspects of themselves when they felt ready for motherhood, a particularly challenging task. In some respects this is supported within the findings when the adoptive mothers talk about having to make decisions about previous aspects of their lives, for example, work. Shelton and Johnson (2006, p.328) also assert that the mothers within their research showed movement towards an "integrated maternal identity". However, within the findings of this research, it seems that while giving up aspects of their previous lives and working towards a goal of maternal identity, adoptive mothers also made purposeful attempts to hold on to certain aspects of the life, suggesting that their identity was not as 'progressive' as the mothers within Shelton and Johnson's (2006) research. As Deborah (Page 3, Line 36) explains "*there's a little part of you you want to keep*". Finlay (2002, p.3) talks of the "existential angst" one of her participants experienced in "confronting who she is, what is important, where she's going", and it seems for many of the women in this study they too are grappling with an understanding of who they were and who they will be in the future, and how to cope with the confusion of this change.

In addition to the intertwined nature of 'old' and 'new' identities, and what Finlay (2002) may describe as the confusion of the participant's existential experience, the adoptive mothers in this research appear to experience a tension between their personal and public identities. Their public identity is being constructed within the apprehension of making their identity as an adoptive mother known to others, and in this sense, the findings support the idea that adoptive mothers construct their public identity through

the exclusion of information regarding their adoption narrative (Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007). Identity change for adoptive mothers therefore does not appear to be about simply moving from one identity to another, but is instead about the intertwined nature of a number of identities that change and are constructed within a temporal and spatial context (Finlay, 2002).

Identity change seemed to have a differential impact on the adoptive mothers according to whether it was anticipated or not. For those who anticipated the change and were able to prepare for it, for example, Denise, the transition to adoptive motherhood was experienced positively. On the other hand, for those who were shocked by the sudden nature of adoptive motherhood, reconstruction of their identity was a difficult experience. It is possible that, for those women who were placed with children very quickly, they had limited time to anticipate and prepare for motherhood, and therefore based their expectations on what Choi et al. (2005, p.167) term the “various myths of motherhood”. The findings of Choi et al. (2005) seem to illustrate a link between the subthemes ‘Transition to Motherhood’ and ‘Questioning Self as a Mother’ within this research. They discuss how the ‘myth versus reality discrepancy’ impacts on a mother’s identity, and how for the women they interviewed, led to a sense of inadequacy and a greater effort to reconstruct their identity as a good mother. It may be these unmet expectations and subsequent perceived inadequacies that caused the mothers to question their ability, and to place increased pressure on themselves. The pressure may also have a role to play in trying to decrease the feelings of being unprepared and the overwhelming nature of new motherhood.

The findings discussed above are of particular interest given that the motherhood literature suggests that the change in identity and a new sense of ‘self’ is experienced as early as the beginning of the pregnancy (Darvill et al., 2010; Barclay et al., 1997), and is not simply experienced as a function of the physical moment in which a woman becomes a mother, i.e. at the point of birth. While the findings of this study point to how changes to self-concept and identity are experienced by adoptive mothers, it is not clear when this transition begins. The findings related to anticipation of identity change suggest that the experience of becoming a mother and developing a coexisting identity is developmental in nature and may follow a “chronology related to increasing maternal

confidence” (Barclay et al., 1997), but this may be an interesting focus for future research.

### **5.2.3 Attachment**

Brodzinsky’s (1987, p.31) psychosocial model of adoption highlights how developing attachments is a key adoptive task mothers have to negotiate, particularly when children are still in infancy, and also in cases of delayed placement. Attachment was clearly a pertinent issue for the adoptive mothers within this research, not only with regard to forming attachments to their children, but also, and perhaps more importantly, with regards to their children forming attachments to them. A number of mothers talked of their fear that their children would not reciprocate the mother-child attachment despite them feeling that they had formed an attachment to their children. Some were clear that they felt certain factors had mediated the formation of appropriate attachments, for example, Lucy talked of how she felt her child’s temperament and the fact that she couldn’t have birth children had made the attachment processes much easier. Other women were less clear on how attachments might form given that they had not had the opportunity to develop a ‘natural’ bond during pregnancy or that their child already had an attachment to their birth mother.

For many of the women, while they use the terminology of Attachment Theory, their understanding and application of this complex psychological theory does not necessarily represent a full and comprehensive understanding of attachment as Bowlby conceived it, but rather represents Attachment Theory as they have come to interpret it (see section 2.4.3 for a brief discussion of Bowlby’s attachment theory). In some cases, the anxiety and fear the women feel regarding their child’s attachment seems to arise because of their understanding of attachment theory. For example, Emily (Page 4, Line 47-49) says, *“it was my one really big concern about the attachment issues and that she wouldn’t attach, or a child wouldn’t attach”*.

There appears to be limited research on the impact that adoptive parents’ knowledge of attachment theory has on the way in which they approach the adoption placement and their subsequent relationship with their child. There does however seem to be a general consensus within the literature that providing information on attachment can be useful for parents, particularly in relation to the educational needs of their children (Phillips,

2007), and during therapeutic interventions (Golding, 2003). The knowledge of the adoptive mothers here often seemed to be quite superficial with very little understanding of what it actually means for them in their adoptive relationship. Clare for example (Page 34, Line 624) tells of how she “*read every book going about attachment disorders*”, but seems less sure of the practical application of this knowledge thus causing her increased anxiety. For the women in this study, the way in which they interpret attachment theory seems to cause them some distress as they are unsure how to support their children with their perceived attachment difficulties, and this leaves one to consider whether providing adoptive mothers with a knowledge of psychological theories, such as Attachment Theory, is of benefit to them. While the anxiety and fear is clearly experienced as a very real concern for the women, these findings beg the question, is the preoccupation with attachment and the fear experienced constructed from their interpretations of this complex theory, and therefore, would this have emerged as a pertinent theme if the women did not know of attachment theory or if they had a more complete understanding?

Bowlby’s theory of attachment concedes that the attachment process comes from the child in that infants develop feelings of attachment based on parental response to their needs (Bretherton, 1992). However, the adoptive mothers within the research also demonstrated a preoccupation with what they saw as their need to attach to their children. While not theoretically consistent with Bowlby’s conception of attachment, by adopting the theoretical perspective of Baumeister and Leary (1995) the women’s preoccupation and need for attachment can perhaps be explained in terms of their need for belongingness. It is argued that the need to belong is a “powerful, fundamental and extremely pervasive motivation” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p.497) and as humans we are naturally driven to establish and maintain a sense of belongingness through the relationships we develop.

Although Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) theory has a different emphasis to Attachment Theory and talks more of a social bond than attachment, believing in the commonality of the overarching need to belong rather than individual differences in attachment styles, it could be argued that this social bond is what the adoptive mothers see as attachment. Johnson and Fein (1991, p.397) for example highlight how the terms attachment and bonding are used interchangeably, and in this respect, the adoptive

mothers may be motivated to develop a reciprocated bond with their children to provide them with a sense that they belong as a mother to their children. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that a person's sense of a belonging has emotional implications in that changes, either real or imagined, to their belongingness 'status' can cause either positive or negative affect. When an adoptive mother perceives that their child is not 'attaching' to them as they expected, this may threaten their bond and sense of belonging, therefore leading to negative effect in the form of anxiety, and a tendency to question their ability as a mother.

#### **5.2.4 Emotional Experience**

Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell's (2003) found that when faced with the decision to adopt, adoptive parents experienced 'intense fear', and it seems that for the women in this study this fear stayed with them throughout the adoption process. The findings of this study suggest that adoptive mothers were confronted with feelings of fear within two dimensions of their experience: responsibility and the future. Interestingly, the fear of responsibility does not simply seem to relate to becoming a mother, but is specifically related to becoming an *adoptive* mother, presumably because the women see the role of adoptive mother as presenting them with significantly more challenges than would the role of birth mother. While perhaps based on their own biases and beliefs (Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003), could this fear also be borne out of what is taught on the adoption course? Lucy (Page 11, Line 173-176) for example says "*when you're doing this course, you think, o god what if, what if we end up with a real whinger, problematic child, how are we gonna cope with that? Umm...as a couple. And you do get a bit scared, a bit frightened. Because they do show you the worse case scenario*"

The women's accounts also reveal how many of them seem to experience a deep battle for control, both internally and within the social realm of their lived experience. As with Darvill et al.'s (2010) research the mother's experienced a sense of helplessness, feeling that in some ways they had lost control of their lives. Throughout the adoption process the women seemed to feel that the power lay with the professionals who make the decisions, initially about whether they are able to adopt, but ultimately about which child they will adopt and when. In this sense, power seems to be seen by the women as a psychological tool, which provides them with an opportunity to take ownership of their experience and is perhaps used as a means of masking their vulnerability. There is

also a sense of power being lived as an embodied experience, particularly for Deborah, who relates her feelings of helplessness during the matching process to a physical experience within her body, that of miscarriage.

It is unclear from the women's accounts whether this need for power is satiated and adoptive mothers regain a sense of control of their lives once the adoption process is complete. Emily (Page 5, Line 72) for example, continues to express a lack of control, despite having completed the adoption process in 2007, explaining how she has tried to access support, but continues to feel "*like you have to fight for anything*". Darvill et al.'s (2010) research demonstrates how women feel that to ease the feelings of helplessness they need high levels of support in their transition to motherhood, and in this respect demonstrates a significant link between the themes 'Helplessness' and 'Isolation' which emerged from the analysis of this study.

However, for the women within this research they often did not feel that support was available, and in line with Brodzinsky's (1987) psychosocial model of adoption they seemed to experience a crisis during the early stages of the adoption in that they felt the need to find 'appropriate' role models. This finding is of particular importance as the women's accounts highlight the dilemma they face in deciding what makes an 'appropriate' role model. The women don't want to be seen as different to birth mothers, but at the same time recognise the disparity in their experiences, as Lucy (Page 28, Line 465) explains very simply "*it is different. It's not the same as having a birth child*", and adoptive mothers may therefore need a different type of support network.

### **5.2.5 Social Stigma in Adoption**

The findings highlight the complex nature of adoption as both a private/individual and social phenomenon. Fisher (2003, p.355) suggests that, "Despite the warm sentiment surrounding adoption...it would still appear to be a stigmatized institution", and this does appear to hold true when considering the findings of this research. For many of the adoptive mothers they seemed to experience an internal battle in displaying their adoptive status to others in society, and in this respect it became apparent that the women perceived there to be a social stigma in adoption. This seems to support Brodzinsky's (1987) theory, which highlights the crisis women face when having to cope with the social stigma of adoption as they negotiate their role as adoptive mothers.

Within the superordinate theme ‘The Social Stigma in Adoption’ there is a general sense of a battle between the women’s use of the two patterns of coping identified in Kirk’s (1964) model: “acknowledgement-of-difference” and “rejection-of-difference”. While the women seem to acknowledge their differences to birth mothers, with not having given birth as the key difference, they also seem to reject the differences within their personal situations. For some, this rejection of difference seems to manifest itself in an attempt to protect their children from what Lucy (Page 13, Line 214) feels is “*social stigma*”, particularly at school. However, it may be that the rejection of difference is also an attempt at self-protection, bringing themselves towards a feeling of ‘normality’ and ‘real’ motherhood. These findings demonstrates that while dated, Kirk’s (1964) theory may still hold true, and also supports the idea that the two coping patterns are not mutually exclusive and adoptive mothers do use them inter-dependently. No conclusions however can be drawn as to which is more adaptive, and the findings perhaps go against Kirk’s (1964) idea that employing such strategies help to manage stress. As Emily (Page 19, Line 325-326) explains “*you sort of have to accept that she is adopted and we will always have...you know, be a bit different because of that. So you know, it’s really hard*”.

The findings support Hoksbergen and Laak (2005) in that social stigma still appears to be a pertinent issue for adoptive mothers in today’s society despite adoption being seen as much more open. Many of the women talked of how society thinks of birth mothers as ‘real’ mothers and in this sense they do not always see themselves as fitting in with society as society would expect them to. For example, Emily appears to have internalised a feminist social construct, and tells of how she often feels like a ‘second mum’ to her daughter. There is also a sense that she feels this is how society, in particular other mothers, will see her if they find out she is an adoptive mother, and this may be an important aspect to consider when engaging and working with adoptive mothers in a professional capacity.

Miall’s (1987) research asserts that an awareness of community attitudes towards adoption contributes to adoptive mothers understanding of social stigma, which in turn can influence their feelings of their families as ‘real’, and this seems to hold true for many of the adoptive mothers. The societal beliefs of the adoptive mothers within Miall’s (1987) research in many ways seem to match those of the mothers within this

study, in that both sets of findings suggest that adoptive mothers believe that society values adoptive motherhood as ‘second best’ and that the bond and love in adoption are also ‘second best’ (Miall, 1987, p.34). This is a very interesting finding, particularly as the two pieces of research were conducted 25 years apart, but one that is not particularly surprising when one considers some of the other existing research (Fisher, 2003; Wegar, 2000), which demonstrates societal beliefs regarding the status of adoption. If one, however, assumes that, given the move towards openness in adoption, and the fact that adoption is now high on the agenda for the UK Government, modern society may be more tolerant and accepting of different family structures, the findings become surprising. It may be interesting in the future to look at how society sees adoption and the status of adoptive mothers, and compare this to the perceptions of adoptive mothers regarding social stigma.

### **5.3 Critical Evaluation of the Methodology**

While providing a representation of a common experience in the themes presented in Chapter 4, the idiographic nature of IPA also allowed the researcher to highlight and acknowledge each person’s unique experience as an adoptive mother (Hayes, 1997b). This was seen as a significant advantage of employing this qualitative research method. Smith et al. (2009, p.108) argue that there is no one-way of constructing an analytic narrative, and it is hoped that the way in which Chapter 4 has been constructed captures the nomothetic nature of the experience of the whole group, while at the same time illuminating the individual experience of the participants, thus demonstrating commonalties and divergences. Certain themes seemed to be ‘lived’ more strongly for some of the women than for others, and in this respect the findings support those of Gair (1996) who found an unexpected diversity within the participants experience.

Sandra for example, demonstrates quite a divergent experience to the other adoptive mothers and while her experience is represented within the themes of Chapter 4, they often emerged as being on the opposite end of the continuum to many of the other women. For example, rather than expressing fear of the adoption cycle as Helen and Emily do, Sandra shows confidence in the positive cycle of adoption for her child and many other children. While these contrasts were not necessarily unexpected, they provide an insight in to how the context of the lifeworld, i.e. the way in which the women came to adoption, impacts on experience. Reid et al. (2005) highlight that

during the analytic process interpretations should be made with an awareness of context and culture, and in this respect the context of Sandra's previous experiences may help to explain the divergence within her experience. While Sandra adopted through the same Local Authority Adoption Agency and therefore experienced a similar adoption process, unlike the other women, she was related to her adoptive daughter and had raised her as her own child from birth. For her the adoption was seen as a legal bind that would protect her daughter if anything happened to her rather than first and foremost being a means of creating a family and becoming a mother as it was for many of the other women. Additionally, Sandra is from Zimbabwe and she herself highlights the cultural similarities and differences between the country in which she was born and the UK, with the most significant similarity being that of motherhood and how it is experienced.

Based in the phenomenological epistemology of IPA, which is interested in the phenomena as it is experienced by the participant (Willig, 2008) a single, relatively broad interview question was designed to explore the experiences of adoptive mothers. With IPA the researcher must step back from the literature, and when employing a semi-structured interview schedule participants will often tend to naturally talk about what is important to them, and the researcher can visit areas of interest that have not been covered once the participant has "expressed their interpretation of their lived experience" (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011, p.756). Brocki and Wearden (2006, p.91) argue that the questions posed during an interview are crucial to the replies obtained, and this certainly seemed to be the case within this particular piece of research. For most participants the magnitude of their experience emerged as soon as the main question was asked, and this often affected the way they approached the start of the interview and seemed to take them by surprise. Both Clare and Helen greeted the question with the word 'wow', exclaiming a strong feeling of surprise and overwhelm at being asked to think about which aspects of their experience to discuss. Clare (Page 1, Line 7) takes this surprise further, stating "*wow...(laughter)...where to begin?*". This response could reflect the overwhelming nature and indefinability of the experience, but it would be interesting to investigate whether this is a common occurrence within phenomenological research, or whether it is particular to the experience in question within this research.

Due to the idiographic nature of IPA a small homogenous sample of adoptive mothers was recruited for the research. All participants adopted via the same Local Authority Adoption Service, and while the Adoption and Children Act 2002 provides a statutory guidance for Adoption Agencies, they are also encouraged to develop services to reflect the needs of the population (Loughton, 2011). Linked to this, it is difficult to ascertain whether the sample within this research is representative of the wider population of adoptive mothers across the UK in terms of more general demographics. Data regarding the demographics of adoptive mothers within the UK are not widely available and the Adoption and Fostering Agency was unable to provide data on the demographics of the adoptive mothers on their mailing list. In this respect, the findings are limited in the extent to which they can be generalised to the wider population of adoptive mothers.

Although this may be seen as a limitation, firstly, the sampling technique used within the study was theoretically consistent with the use of IPA. Secondly, Smith (2004, p.43) argues that focusing on the particular and the detail of individual experience can bring us as researchers “closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity”. Given its idiographic nature therefore, the study’s strength lies in the depth of the analysis and the insight it provides in to the ‘essence’ of the phenomena being explored. Thirdly, it should be noted here that it is not necessarily the intention that the results of this research be generalised to the population of adoptive mother’s across the UK. Rather the research looks to gain a better understanding of how adoption is ‘lived’ by adoptive mothers, providing a context in which implications and ideas for further research can be developed.

From the large numbers of letters sent, the women who responded were the women who participated in the research, and the participants in a sense were therefore self-selected. It could be argued that these women were women who had a story to tell and whose experience had been particularly pertinent in their lives, both for positive and negative reasons. While their willingness to participate seems to contradict the theme ‘The Hidden Status of Adoption’, participation may have been perceived as a safe way to discuss their experience without making their status known. Clare for example, following the interview, talked of how she had found the experience of participating within the research cathartic. This is not to say that this is a limitation of the research, it

is simply a factor to consider when looking at the themes that emerged during the analytic process.

Through the conversations had with the participants both prior to and following the interviews, and from the information disclosed in the interviews, it also became apparent that many of the women saw their participation as a way of providing feedback to professionals in a safe anonymous way. For example, Lucy (Page 28, Line 466-467) says *“if I could say anything to social services that would be an important, I think an important...bit of information I think”*. It could be argued that this may have influenced their willingness to participate and the information they gave in the interview, and while the role of an Educational Psychologist was explained, may have been a result of a confusion about where the role of an Educational Psychologist ‘sits’ within a professional capacity with Social Workers and the Local Authority Adoption Agency. In this respect when carrying out future research it may be important to understand participant expectations prior to the interview and clarify roles in relation to other professionals more clearly.

## **5.4 Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

### **5.4.1 For Adoption Professionals**

On a local level, one of the aims of this study was to help support policy and practice to assist all professionals working for or with Adoption Services to work more effectively together to improve the experiences of adoptive parents. Given the findings of the research, it seems that there are important implications to be drawn, which could support the experiences of future adoptive parents. The findings suggest that for many of the adoptive mothers they felt a sense of extreme isolation in their experience, despite support from family members and peers. They seemed to crave a support network of people who shared their experience, but were unsure where they could find this support, particularly given the social judgement they feared and the perceived need to hide the adoption from people who did not understand their unique position. It could be suggested therefore that support groups need to be more accessible and held on a more regular basis and that peer mentoring may be a useful resource for adoptive parents to access within a Local Authority context. Lucy (Page 28) for example, suggests that she would appreciate being told of other adoptive parents in her area, as due to the nature of

adoption she feels there could be a hidden resource within her area that she does not know about.

The findings also suggest that while adoptive mothers appreciate the information provided by adoption professionals, particularly regarding Attachment Theory, a small, incomplete amount of knowledge is not always a good thing. The fear and insecurity adoptive mothers experience with regards to their children's attachments seems to be quite closely related to how they have interpreted the knowledge they gained in their initial training. While it may be useful for adoptive mothers to gain a better understanding of attachment and possible difficulties from experts, possibly preventing them from turning to books for this knowledge and thus not always having a clear understanding of its practical application, this needs to be closely balanced with the emotional impact this may have. One would therefore argue that this is something which is important to consider when designing the adoption training that prospective adoptive parents attend at the start of the process.

Given the recent Governmental interest in adoption, and the current drive to raise the profile of adoption, improve the adoption process, and encourage prospective adopters to come forward (Department for Education, 2011c), there is clearly a need for increased research in this area. It is argued that this research goes some way to illuminating areas which need further research and should be targeted when developing and improving adoption services for prospective adoptive parents. This is particularly true in areas such as pre- and post-adoption support, ensuring that parents do not feel isolated in their experience. It is also important for policy developers and individuals working with adoptive parents to look at the beliefs adoptive mothers perceive there to be within society about their status as mothers. The findings suggest that the perceptions of social stigma may in fact reflect the women's own underlying beliefs, and it is therefore important to recognise this and support adoptive mothers in working through these difficulties. It may also be important to research society's views regarding adoption, rather than relying solely on reports from adoptive mothers.

The Department for Education (2011c; 2011d) have recently recognised the disempowering nature of the adoption process for adoptive parents, and the fact that this can cause them to leave the adoption process before they are approved. This research

recognises the battle for power adoptive mothers enter in to during the adoption process as they try to decrease their feelings of helplessness and increase their feelings of autonomy and control. In this respect, it reinforces the ideas of the Department for Education (2001a; 2011d) and highlights the need for professionals within adoption agencies to recognise the power differentials within the adoption process, and perhaps develop ways of addressing these issues in the way in which the process is designed.

#### **5.4.2 For Educational Psychologists**

Midgen's (2011) research report highlights that within the academic literature very little has been written about how Educational Psychologists can support adopted children and their families. A brief review of the key roles Educational Psychologists may take in this area is given, which while focusing predominantly on working with children and young people who have been adopted, suggests that there may be a key role for supporting adoptive parents, specifically parent training (Midgen, 2011). With their therapeutic skills Educational Psychologists are well placed to provide parents with an environment in which to develop their skills, share knowledge and expertise, and better understand the difficulties their children may face and ways in which they can better cope with these. It is clear from this research that adoptive mothers would very much appreciate a support group of this kind, and there are important messages to be taken as to what may be important to include within such parent training. For example, Educational Psychologists need to recognise the impact passing on psychological knowledge to adoptive mothers may have.

Additionally, Squires, Farrell, Woods, Lewis, Rooney and O'Connor (2007) assert that based on the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) parents should be considered equal partners in the work completed with their children at school, particularly during assessment and intervention decisions. In this respect, Educational Psychologists should be aware of the concerns that adoptive parents may bring to this work, particularly with regards to feelings of helplessness and isolation, and should be aware of the support that they may be able to offer adoptive parents as well as adopted children and schools.

It can also be argued that the superordinate theme 'Becoming 'Mum'' provides a rich understanding not only of adoptive motherhood, but also of motherhood in general. The parallels between the findings of this study and the motherhood literature highlight how

women often tend to come to motherhood embroiled in the feminist construct of women as natural mothers, and how this can often lead to confusion and disappointment when the expectations of motherhood are not met. This information may be of particular use for Educational Psychologists when working with mothers, as it provides a knowledge and understanding of their possible experiences, and gives an insight in to potential family dynamics.

### **5.4.3 Future Research**

A number of suggestions for future research have been mentioned in previous sections, with some being linked to specific themes, such as ‘The Social Stigma in Adoption’. Other areas for future research can be linked to modifications with the sample, which may provide additional information on specific aspects of the experience. In this vein, additional suggestions for future research are outlined here.

Given that the age range in participants was 20 years, it may be interesting to look at the experiences of women who adopt at different stages in their lives, investigating the diversity and commonality within their experience. Many of the adoptive mothers in this research were at different stages in their adoption, with some having adopted 7 years ago, and others having adopted a few months prior to the interview. It may have been the case that those women who had adopted more recently, while having experienced a similar adoption process, at the time of the interview may not have had a sufficient amount of time to reflect on their new role as an adoptive mother and may have still been experiencing the changes associated with becoming an adoptive mother. It may therefore be interesting to look at the experiences of adoptive mothers starting at the decision to adopt, thus bringing the adoption literature in line with the motherhood literature which focuses predominantly on the transition to motherhood. Smith (1999b, p.421) argues for the value of longitudinal research designs when looking at the experiences of women as they transition to motherhood as they afford the researcher the ability to follow, in detail, the ways in which various processes involved in the transition “play out for each woman”.

Despite the feminist constructs which emerged from the data, this study was not completed within a feminist perspective, and as such does not necessarily give priority to the voice of women, thus recognising the voice of fathers within the parental dyad. In

this respect it would be interesting for future research to explore the experiences of adoptive fathers in a similar manner to this research. It would be particularly interesting to see if the emergent themes demonstrate similar concerns and priorities for fathers. Is the process for them about becoming a father, what is their emotional journey, and do they feel a social stigma as an adoptive father?

### **5.5 Final Reflections**

The reader was briefly introduced to me as a researcher, and the nature of my interest in adoptive motherhood as a research topic, at the end of Chapter 1. In this section, I will discuss the assumptions and preoccupations, or as Smith et al. (2009, p.42) calls them “the ‘fore-structure’ of your knowledge”, that I came to this research with, how these may be implicated within the research, and how they have been challenged and changed in the process of the research.

Personally, I came to this research as a young newly married woman with no children, but plans for children in the future. Adoption has always been seen by my husband and I as an opportunity to expand our family, and is openly discussed when looking at our future together. Although I had thought about adoption in a personal sense, at the beginning of the research process I simply assumed that adoption would be a stressful yet rewarding process, and I suppose naively, assumed that for adoptive mothers it would be like their ‘dream come true’ as they had the child and the family they had craved and entered the process for. While I understood the process was very long, I had not anticipated the emotional journey that the women would have gone on, which does not just end when a child is placed with them. I had also not considered that adoption may become a negative experience for the women, and had not contemplated that I would interview women who had experienced what tends to be termed in the literature as ‘adoption disruption’.

Shaw (2010, p.235) argues that,

Through making ourselves aware of our own feelings about and expectations of the research, we can begin to fully appreciate the nature of our investigation, its relationship to us personally and professionally, and our relationship as a researcher and experiencer in the world.

It was only as the research progressed and I interviewed more women, and began to analyse their transcripts, that I realised the naivety of my own assumptions. As I

reflected on my experiences within the research, and became more aware of my feelings, I began to wonder whether these assumptions while conscious, masked an unconscious desire or hope. In hindsight, I believe that my initial assumptions, that the experiences of the women I was going to interview were going to be positive, were in a sense self-protective in their nature as they supported my assumptions that adoption would be a positive experience when I choose to enter the process at a later point in my life. This moment of realisation for me was very interesting, as I was shocked at my own naivety.

Moustakas (1990, p.9) talks of a “growing self-awareness” that occurs while undertaking qualitative research. One of the most powerful realisations that occurred during the process of completing the research was that my ultimate goal is to become a mother and start a family. This realisation occurred during the write up stage of the study, and perhaps did not occur to me as I started the research, as it has been moving to the forefront of my mind since my marriage and as the conclusion of my degree draws closer. This has also led me to question my own fertility and has led me to contemplate how I might react if I was to experience infertility. Although adoption is something my husband and I would like to do later in our marriage, it has not necessarily been considered in the light of infertility, and I realise that perhaps I take for granted my own fertility.

In section 1.8 I reflect on my struggle to decide whether adoption should be increased and sped up, and this is something I am yet to decide. It is clear that the adoption process as it stands is an overwhelming experience for adoptive mothers, and the findings of the study highlight the need for careful consideration within both a local and a Governmental context on the impact changes to the process will have on adoptive parents. Given the difficulty some women experienced in the change to their identity, and the isolation and helplessness they felt during and after the adoption, would speeding up the adoption process help or exacerbate these difficulties? It will be interesting to see how the changes within adoption policy and practice progress, and if future research is completed to explore the impact that changes to policy have on the experiences of not only adoptive mothers, but also adoptive fathers.

The overall process of carrying out this research has been illuminating and rewarding, but has challenged me as a psychologist, a student, and an education professional. I have developed an enjoyment from an often philosophically challenging qualitative research method, which is surprising given that I was convinced when I started my Doctorate, that I would complete quantitative research that was steeped in statistics and a positivist epistemology.

At times the research has been daunting, particularly when I consider the richness of the data, which is based in the honesty of the participants. The methodology was often something I had to grapple with, and often led to the question, 'Am I being interpretative enough?'. Having never completed a semi-structured interview in the context of research, I was concerned in the first interview that the women might not engage. However, this process became easier as the interviews progressed, and the process was made easier by the openness of the participants. The interview process did however test my skills as a researcher and shed some light on myself as a practitioner working with vulnerable adults and children. For example, during her interview Clare became particularly distressed and I found myself wanting to 'save' her from her pain through the questions I asked her. While I had understood that the interview might bring up topics that were difficult to talk about, I hadn't anticipated this level of pain from my participants, and therefore don't feel I had prepared myself fully. Moreover, following the interview, I found myself questioning whether my need to 'save' Clare is reflected in my wider practice as an Educational Psychologist, and is something I will consider in the future.

Within my professional practice I have not worked with an adoptive family, but as a result of the themes that emerged from the analytic process of this research, I feel better equipped for future casework in this field. I have a better understanding of this family formation and the issues that may be arising, not only for adoptive mothers, but for all members of their family.

## CONCLUSION

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 highlights how the current research in the area of adoption is limited in that adoptive parents seem to be an underrepresented population, and relatively little is known about their experiences. It also demonstrates how an exploration of adoption as a complete experience has not yet been conducted in the UK, and in this sense the experience of adoptive mothers is missing from the UK literature. The motherhood literature not only demonstrates how there may be some parallels between the experiences of birth mothers and adoptive mothers, but also demonstrates the usefulness of qualitative research methods in exploring the experiences of women's transition to motherhood. Qualitative research, with its focus on developing in-depth understanding of real life phenomena, was therefore considered an appropriate method for this study.

This study explored the lived experiences of a small group of adoptive mothers living in a small unitary Local Authority, and aimed to gain a greater insight into how these parents make sense of this important life experience. Based on its philosophical underpinnings and focus on lived experience, IPA was adopted as the most fitting research method to address the research aims, and the participants were asked to talk about their experiences as adoptive mothers, through the use of semi-structured interviews.

Three superordinate themes emerged during the analytic process, along with three less common themes, demonstrating the richness and complexity of the experience being explored. The three superordinate themes show a common experience shared by the majority of the participants: 'Becoming 'Mum'', 'The Melting Pot of Emotion', and 'Social Stigma of Adoption'. First and foremost the experience for these women seemed to be about becoming a mother, but the experience was also a highly emotional journey which at times was filled with feelings of isolation and powerlessness. Interestingly, it seems that despite apparent changes within society's views of adoption, adoptive mothers continue to feel that there is a social stigma attached to their situation and experience.

It is argued that these findings are of particular value for both Educational Psychologists and professionals working within adoption services, and may be useful in informing and

supporting new ways of working with adoptive parents. Of particular interest is the possibility of developing support services, which focus on the difficulties adoptive mothers experience throughout the adoption process, and the need for continued post-adoption support is highlighted. The study also highlights the need for professionals to consider the way in which psychological theory, such as Attachment Theory, is used in the 'education' of adoptive parents.

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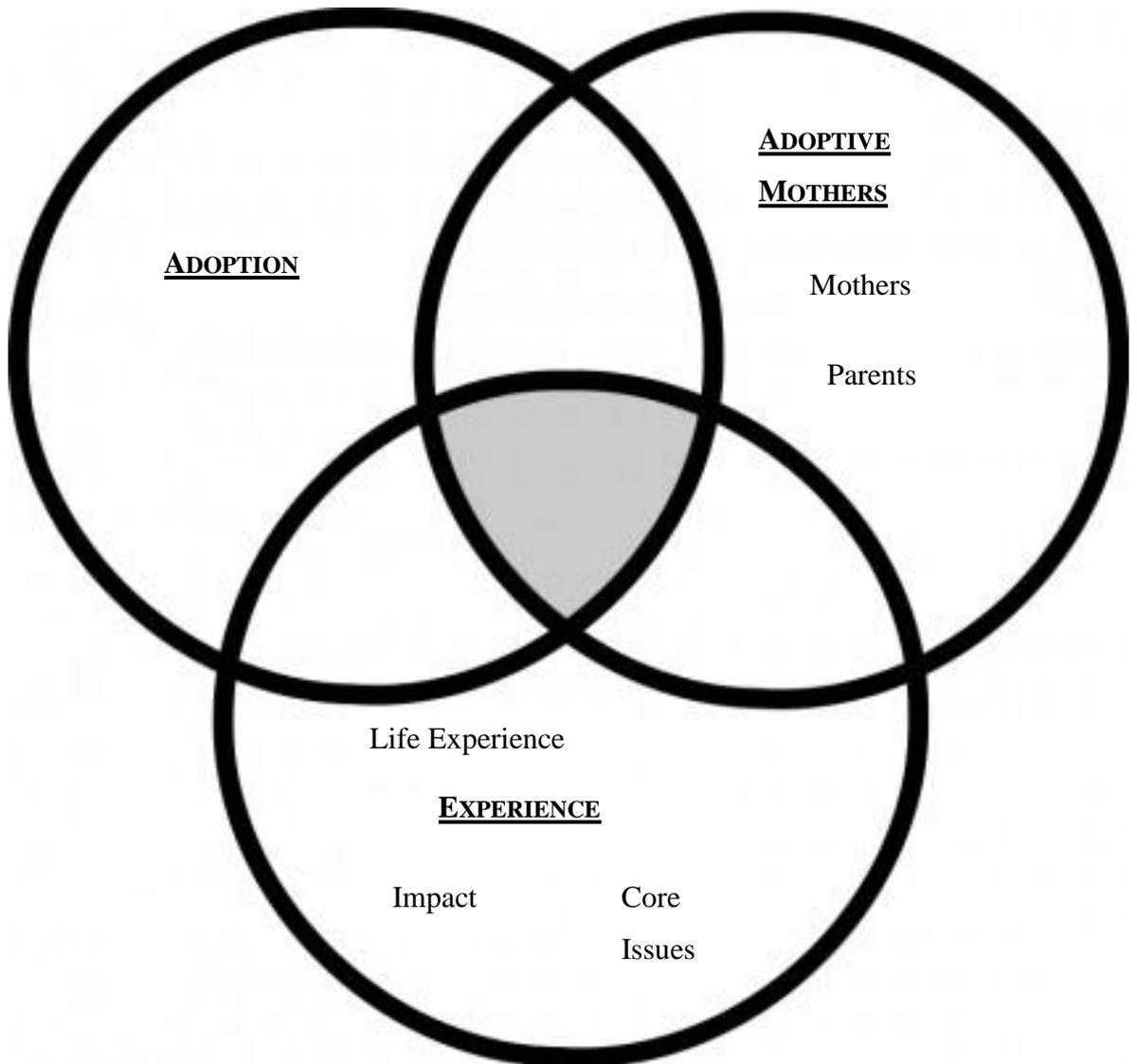
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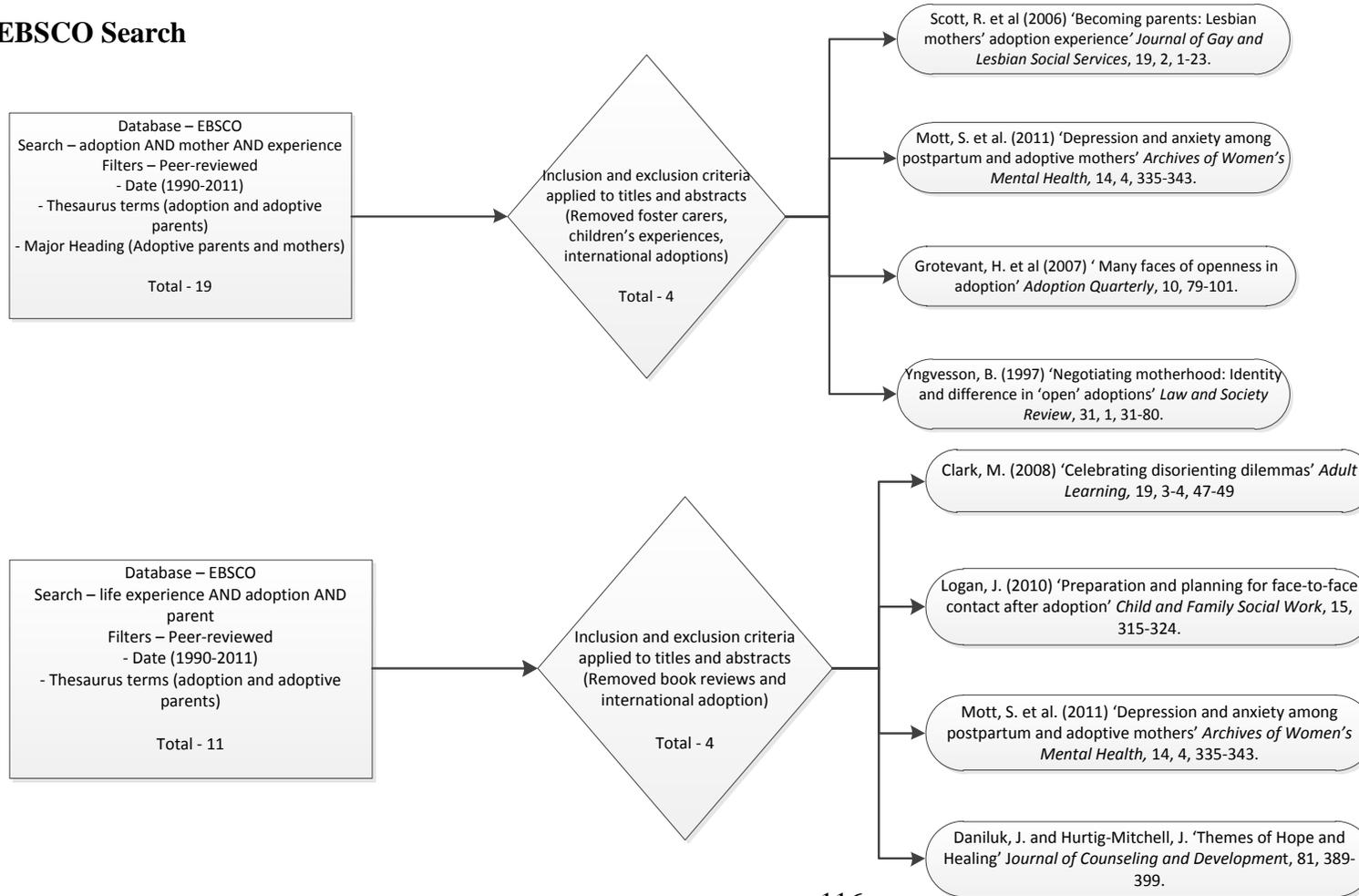
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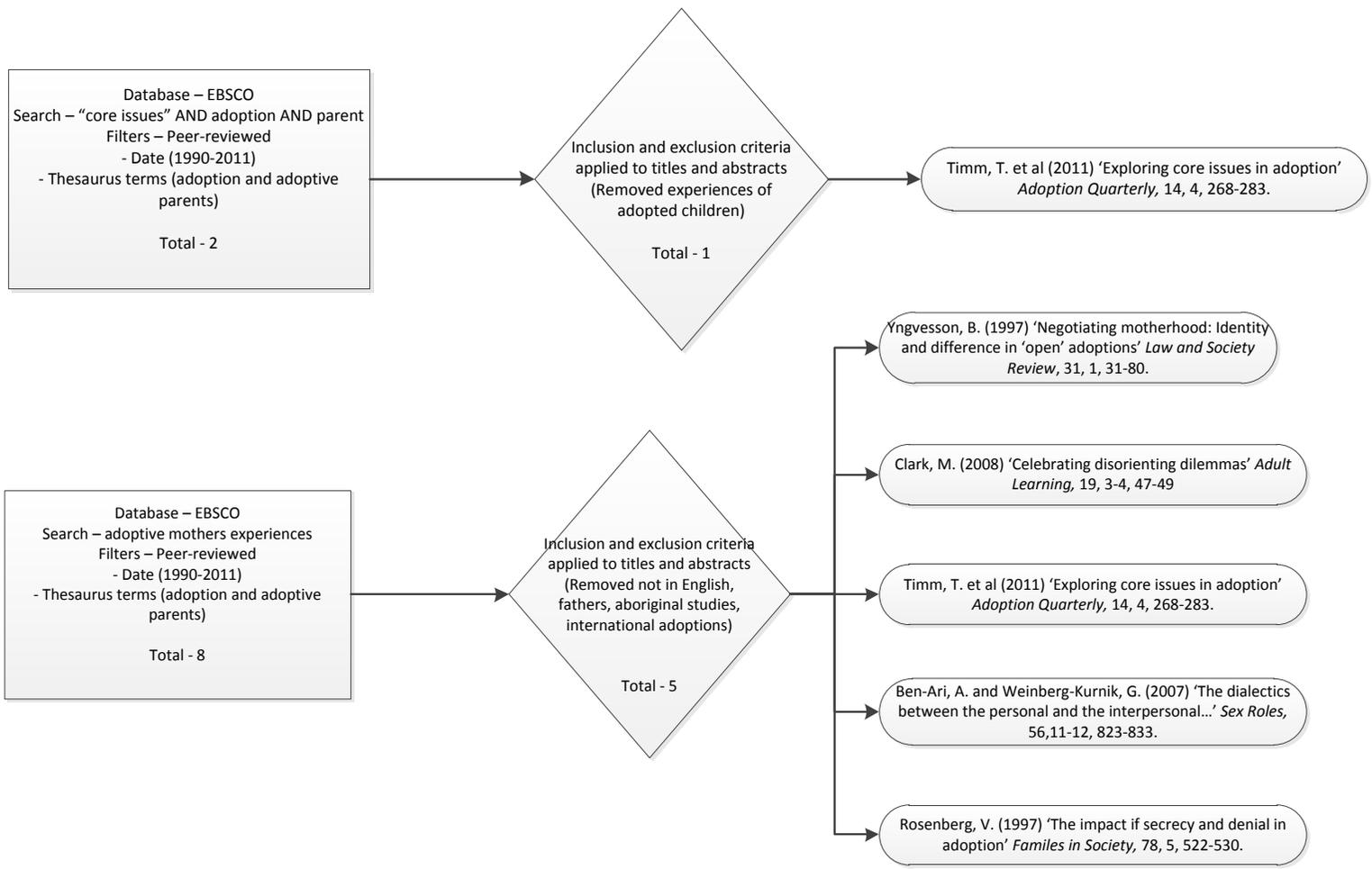
APPENDIX 1 – VENN DIAGRAM OUTLINING SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE SEARCH

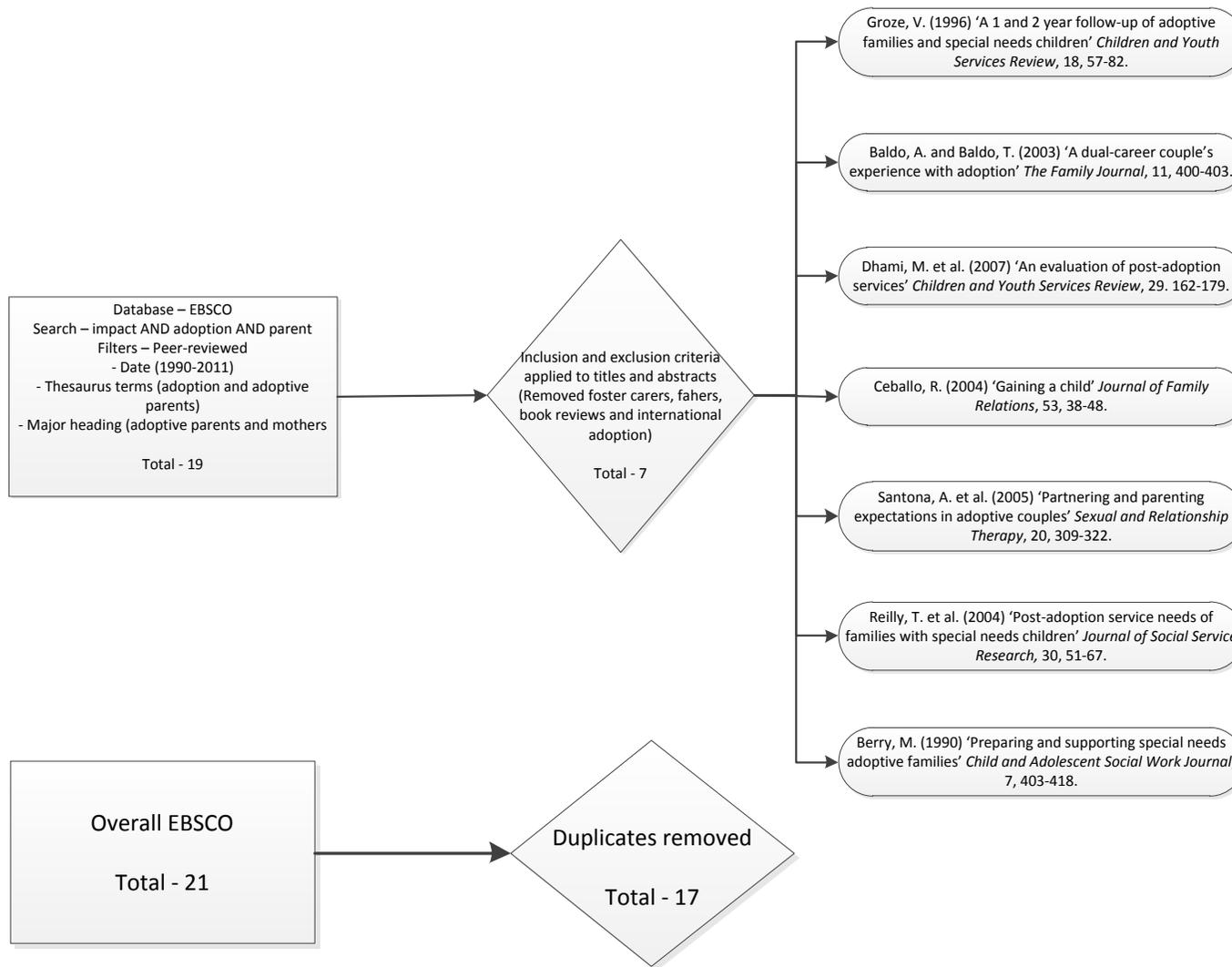


**APPENDIX 2 – DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE SEARCH UNDERTAKEN**

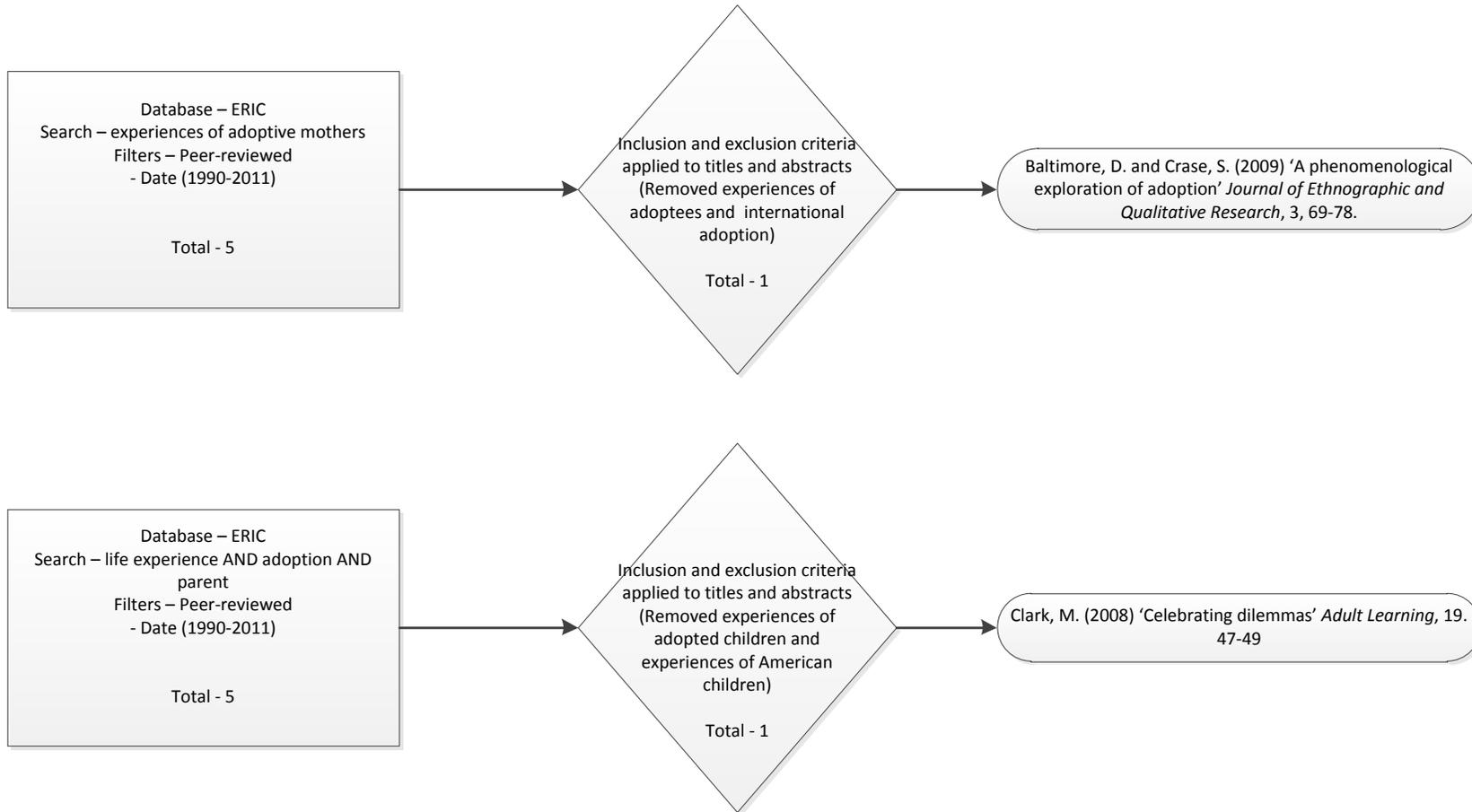
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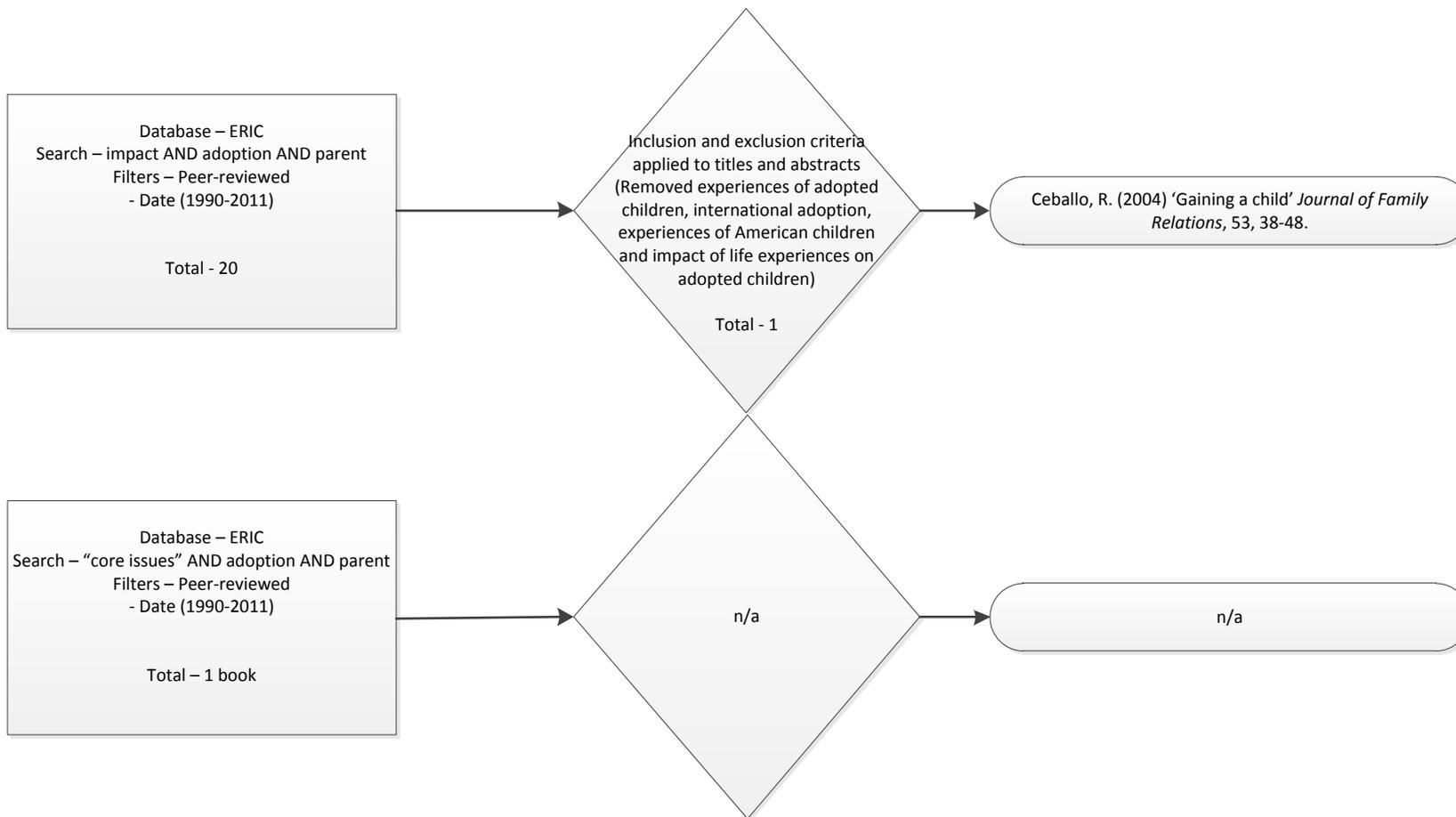


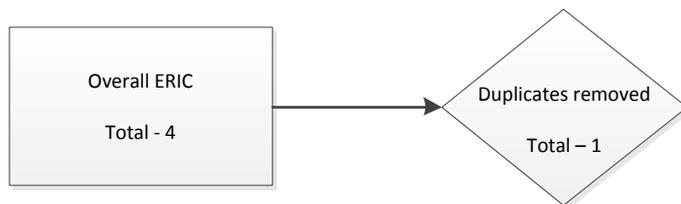
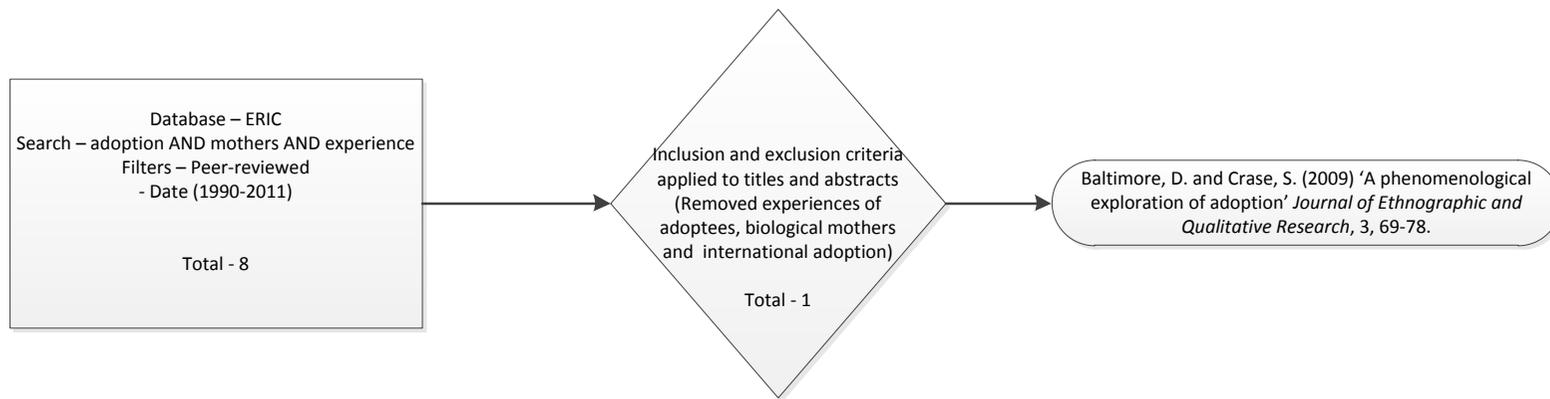




## ERIC Search

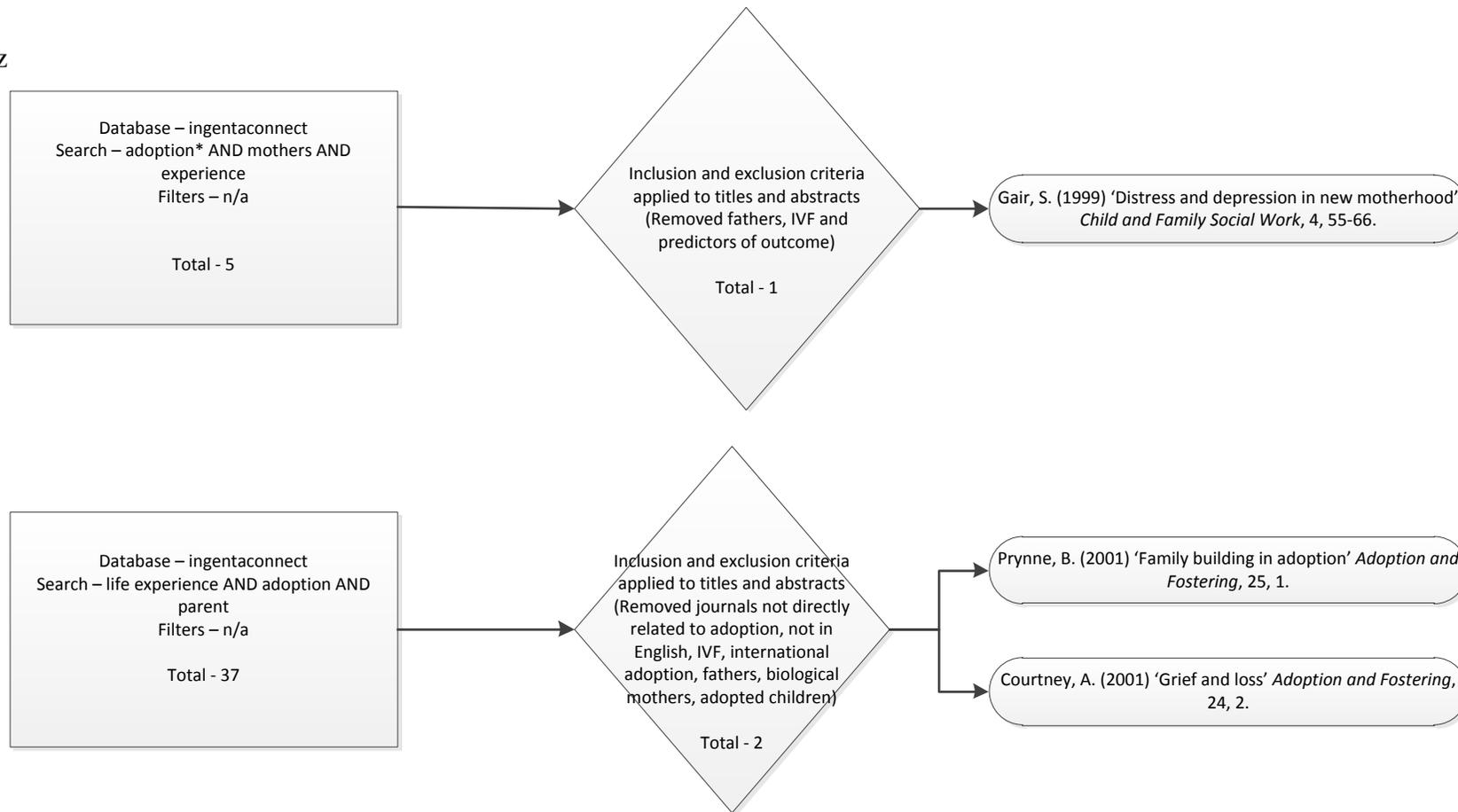


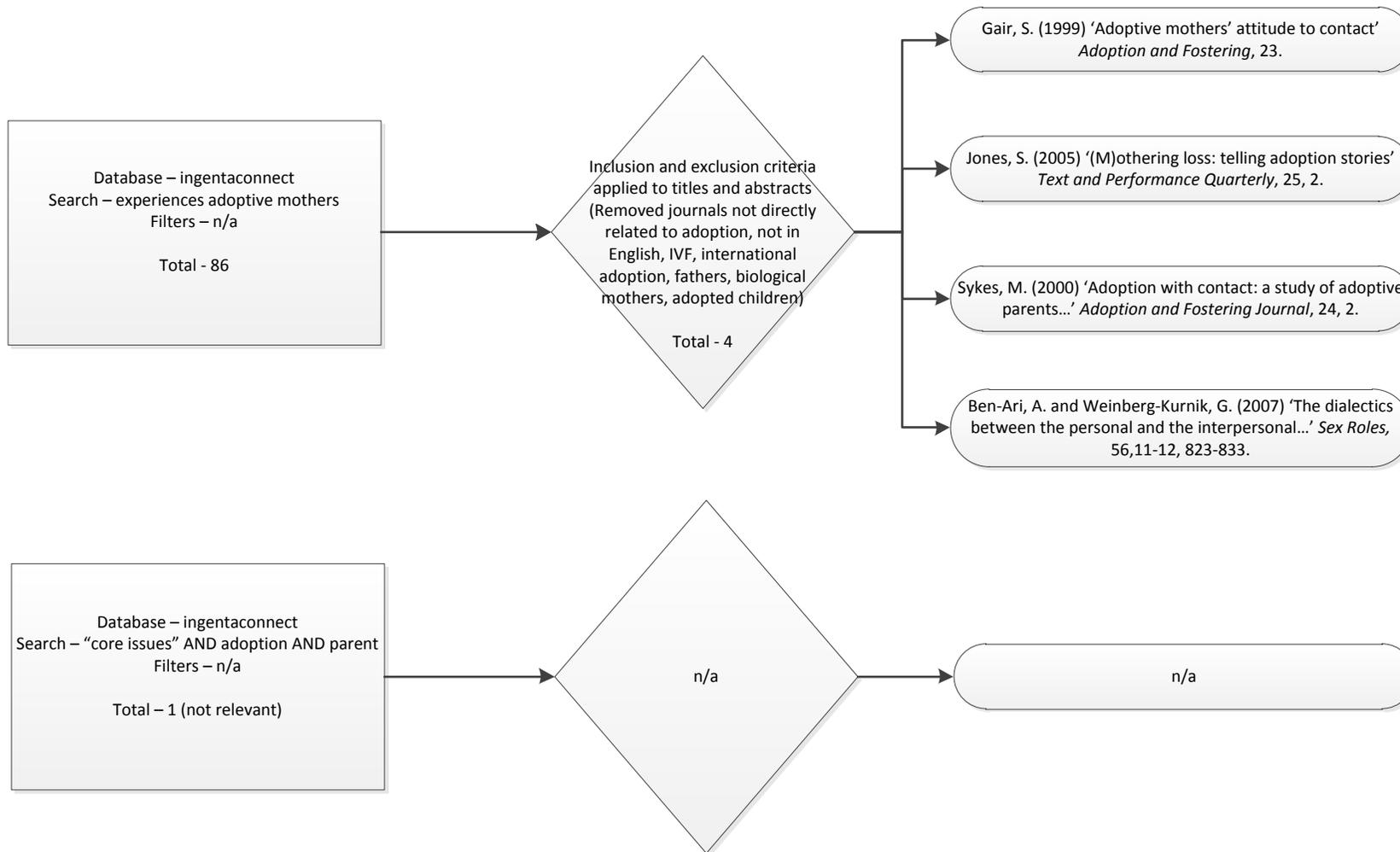


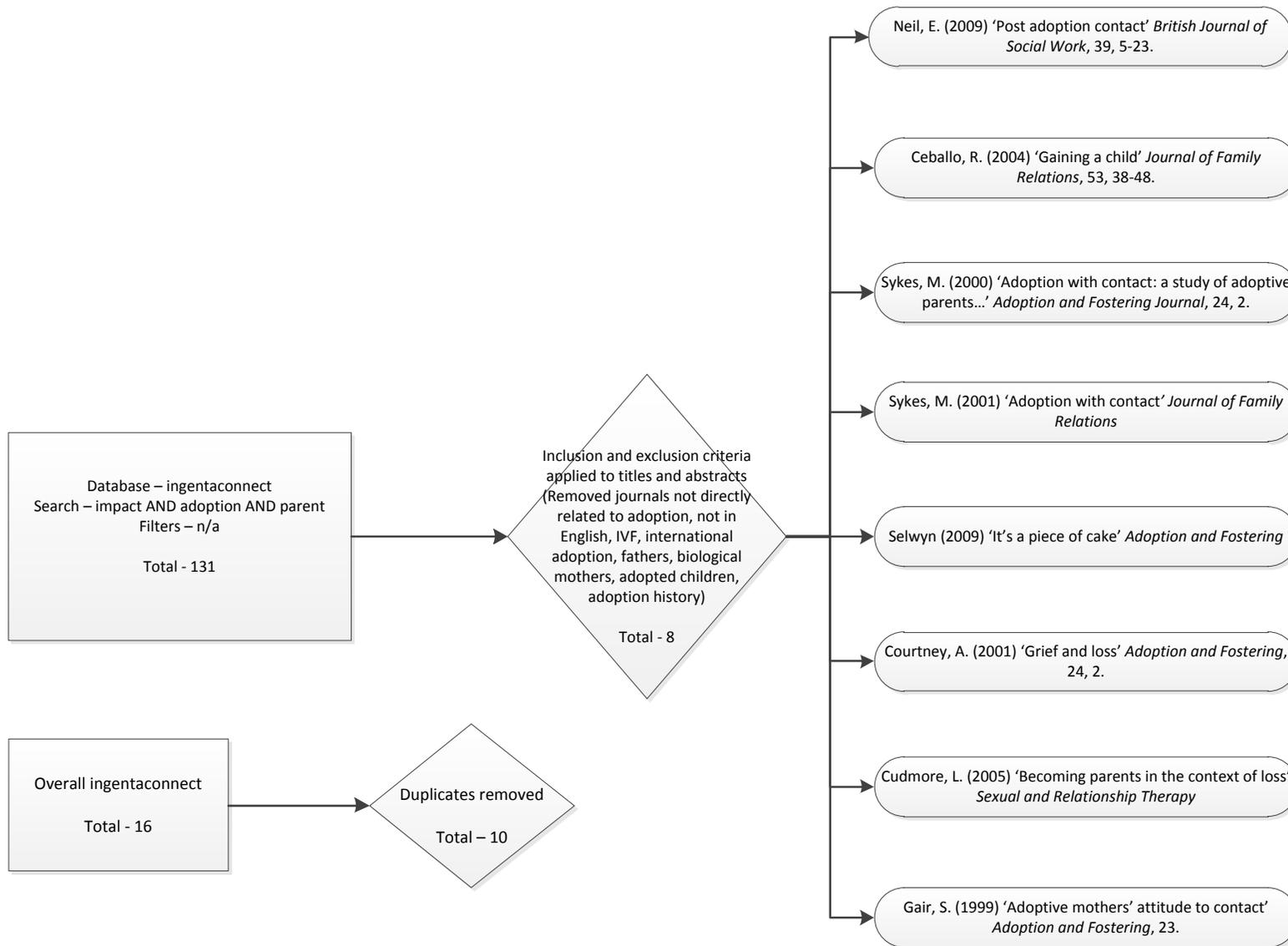


## Ingentaconnect Search

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**APPENDIX 3 – TABLE OUTLINING EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION CRITERIA EMPLOYED FOR THE SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE SEARCH**

**Inclusion Criteria:**

- Must be a study of some aspect of the experiences of adoptive mothers or parents.
- Must focus on adoption of children with country of origin.
- Must use a qualitative or mixed methodology.
- Must be in English.
- Must have been published between 1990 and 2011.
- Must be peer-reviewed.

**Exclusion Criteria:**

- If purely quantitative research.
- If meta-analysis or literature review.
- If focus is on international adoption.
- If focus is solely on fathers.
- If focus is solely on foster carers.
- If focus is solely on Special Needs adoption – this criteria was included as none of the parents within the research had adopted children with apparent Special Needs or Disabilities

**APPENDIX 4 – TABLE TO SHOW PAPERS RETRIEVED FROM LITERATURE SEARCH AND DECISION MAKING PROCESS FOR INCLUSION WITHIN LITERATURE REVIEW**

<b><u>Journal Article/Research</u></b>	<b><u>Exclusion/Inclusion Decisions</u></b>
Scott, R. et al (2006) ‘Becoming parents: Lesbian mothers’ adoption experience’ <i>Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services</i> , 19, 2, 1-23.	Exclusion criteria met – Quantitative study - International adoptions included
Mott, S. et al. (2011) ‘Depression and anxiety among postpartum and adoptive mothers’ <i>Archives of Women’s Mental Health</i> , 14, 4, 335-343.	Exclusion criteria met – Quantitative study - Adoptive women had adopted internationally
Grotevant, H. et al (2007) ‘ Many faces of openness in adoption’ <i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 10, 79-101.	Exclusion criteria met – Quantitative study
Yngvesson, B. (1997) ‘Negotiating motherhood: Identity and difference in ‘open’ adoptions’ <i>Law and Society Review</i> , 31, 1, 31-80.	Exclusion criteria met – Based on the experiences of birth mothers
Clark, M. (2008) ‘Celebrating disorienting dilemmas’ <i>Adult Learning</i> , 19, 3-4, 47-49	Exclusion criteria met – Individual reflections on adoptive motherhood - Focus is on adult learning rather than experience as an adoptive mother
<b>Timm, T. et al (2011) ‘Exploring core issues in adoption’ <i>Adoption</i></b>	Inclusion criteria met – Mixed methodology with clear evidence from qualitative aspects - Focus is on the experiences of adoptive mothers

<i>Quarterly</i> , 14, 4, 268-283.	
<b>Ben-Ari, A. and Weinberg-Kurnik, G. (2007) ‘The dialectics between the personal and the interpersonal...’ <i>Sex Roles</i>, 56,11-12, 823-833.</b>	Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative methodology using phenomenological research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is on the experiences of adoptive mothers</li> </ul>
Rosenberg, V. (1997) ‘The impact if secrecy and denial in adoption’ <i>Families in Society</i> , 78, 5, 522-530.	Exclusion criteria met – Focus not on the experiences of adoptive mothers, but on the ‘treatment’ and interventions that are used with all members of the adoption triad (children, birth parents and adoptive parents).
<b>Logan, J. (2010) ‘Preparation and planning for face-to-face contact after adoption’ <i>Child and Family Social Work</i>, 15, 315-324.</b>	Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative methodology using Thematic Analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is on the experience of adoptive parents – focuses specifically on one aspect (contact).</li> </ul>
<b>Daniluk, J. and Hurtig-Mitchell, J. ‘Themes of Hope and Healing’ <i>Journal of Counseling and Development</i>, 81, 389-399.</b>	Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative methodology using Phenomenological research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on the experiences of adoptive parents – focus on the whole experience rather than one aspect.</li> </ul>
Groze, V. (1996) ‘A 1 and 2 year follow-up of adoptive families and special needs children’ <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 18, 57-82.	Exclusion criteria met – Quantitative methodology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus solely on adoption of children with Special Needs/disabilities in America.</li> </ul>
Baldo, A. and Baldo, T. (2003) ‘A dual-career couple’s experience with adoption’ <i>The Family Journal</i> , 11, 400-403.	Exclusion criteria met – Single case study with no analytic aspect – simple description <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is the couples experience of counselling in supporting them through adoption process – focus not explicitly on experiences as adoptive parents.</li> </ul>
Dhami, M. et al. (2007) ‘An evaluation of post-adoption services’	Exclusion criteria met – Quantitative methodology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is on a very specific post-adoption support service provided in Canada –</li> </ul>

<i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 29, 162-179.	may not be generalizable to the UK.
<b>Ceballo, R. (2004) ‘Gaining a child’ <i>Family Relations</i>, 53, 38-48.</b>	Inclusion criteria met – Mixed methodology, however predominantly quantitative research as survey for major analysis built on initial qualitative interviews. N.B. It was felt that this piece of research, despite being on the cusp of meeting the inclusion criteria was important as it demonstrates how the experiences of adoptive parents differ to those of biological parents.
Santona, A. et al. (2005) ‘Partnering and parenting expectations in adoptive couples’ <i>Sexual and Relationship Therapy</i> , 20, 309-322.	Exclusion criteria met – Quantitative methodology - Focus was on the parenting capabilities of couples who wanted to adopt rather than on their experience of adoption.
Reilly, T. et al. (2004) ‘Post-adoption service needs of families with special needs children’ <i>Journal of Social Service Research</i> , 30, 51-67.	Exclusion criteria met – Quantitative methodology - Focus on special needs adoption.
Berry, M. (1990) ‘Preparing and supporting special needs adoptive families’ <i>Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal</i> , 7, 403-418.	Exclusion criteria met – Literature review not research - Focus on special needs adoption.
<b>Baltimore, D. and Crase, S. (2009) ‘A phenomenological exploration of adoption’ <i>Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research</i>, 3, 69-78.</b>	Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative research using Phenomenological methodology - Focus on adoptive parents’ experience of adoption.
<b>Gair, S. (1999) ‘Distress and depression in new motherhood’ <i>Child and Family Social Work</i>, 4, 55-66.</b>	Inclusion criteria met – Mixed methodology - Focus on the experience of adoptive mothers (specifically on post-natal depression).
Jones, S. (2005) ‘(M)othering loss:	

telling adoption stories' <i>Text and Performance Quarterly</i> , 25, 2.	
<b>Sykes, M. (2000) 'Adoption with contact: a study of adoptive parents...'</b> <i>Adoption and Fostering Journal</i> , 24, 2.	Inclusion criteria met – Mixed methodology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is on the experience of adoptive parents – differentiated between experiences of mothers and fathers therefore experience of adoptive mothers identified in research.</li> </ul>
<b>Prynn, B. (2001) 'Family building in adoption'</b> <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 25, 1.	Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is on the experiences of adoptive parents, particularly their experiences with their adopted children.</li> </ul>
Courtney, A. (2001) 'Grief and loss' <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 24, 2.	Exclusion criteria met – Focus is on the adopted child and biological parents.
Neil, E. (2009) 'Post adoption contact' <i>British Journal of Social Work</i> , 39, 5-23.	Exclusion criteria met – Focus on outcomes of adopted children.
Selwyn (2009) 'It's a piece of cake' <i>Adoption and Fostering</i>	Exclusion criteria met – Evaluation of a particular intervention not a focus on the experiences of adoptive parents.
Gair, S. (1999) 'Adoptive mothers' attitude to contact' <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 23.	Exclusion criteria met – Focuses on coping strategies of adoptive mothers, and the possible reasons for these coping strategies, rather than their wider experience of contact for adoptive mothers. N.B. This research is based on a wider piece of research (Gair, 1996) which was retrieved in the Snowball search and included in the literature search. It was felt more appropriate to include full research rather than journal article on less relevant section. The other Gair (1999) was felt to be more relevant as showed more detailed results that in original piece of research (Gair, 1996).
Cudmore, L. (2005) 'Becoming parents in the context of loss' <i>Sexual and Relationship Therapy</i>	Exclusion criteria met – Focus on the impact of infertility on the quality of marital relationships.
<b>Sykes, M. (2001) 'Adoption with contact'</b> <i>Journal of Family Relations</i>	Inclusion criteria met – Mixed methodology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is on the experience of adoptive parents – differentiated between</li> </ul>

	experiences of mothers and fathers therefore experience of adoptive mothers identified in research.
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**APPENDIX 5 – TABLE TO SHOW DECISION MAKING PROCESS FOR PAPERS RETRIEVED IN SNOWBALL SEARCH**

<b><u>Journal Article/Research</u></b>	<b><u>Source</u></b>	<b><u>Inclusion Decision</u></b>
<p>Gair, S. (1996) Adoption: a different road to mothering. Adoptive mothers' experiences of negotiating and maintaining the mothering role at significant points across the adoption life cycle. Doctoral thesis. James Cook University, Australia [Online]. Available at: <a href="http://eprints.jcu.edu.au/7903/">http://eprints.jcu.edu.au/7903/</a> (Accessed: 22 January 2012).</p>	<p>Gair, S. (1999) 'Adoptive mothers' attitude to contact' <i>Adoption and Fostering</i>, 23.</p>	<p>Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is solely on the experiences of adoptive mothers.</li> </ul> <p>N.B. This research was completed as a Doctoral thesis, and it was therefore felt that this would meet the criteria of peer review based on personal experience of Doctoral research.</p>
<p>Daly P, (1988) 'Reshaped parenthood identity', <i>Journal of Contemporary Ethnography</i> 17:1, pp 40–66,</p>	<p>Gair, S. (1999) 'Adoptive mothers' attitude to contact' <i>Adoption and Fostering</i>, 23.</p>	<p>Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative research using Grounded Theory approaches.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is on the experience of adoptive parents, in particular their identity change.</li> </ul> <p>N.B. It is acknowledged that this research is just outside of the range of dates initially specified (1990-2011). However, this research is very comprehensive and provides a great detail and understanding of how adoptive parents experience identity change from the first steps of the adoption process i.e. from the moment they decide to adopt. It was therefore decided that given the quality of the research it should be included. Additionally, Daly's other research is mentioned in a number of other articles relating to adoption, suggesting that it is well renowned research.</p>

<p>Krusiewicz, E., &amp; Wood, J. (2001). He was our child from the moment we walked in that room: Entrance stories of adoptive parents. <i>Journal of Social and Personal relationships</i>, 18, 785-803.</p>	<p>Baltimore, D. and Crase, S. (2009) 'A phenomenological exploration of adoption' <i>Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research</i>, 3, 69-78</p>	<p>Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative research using Thematic Analysis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus is on the initial stories and experiences of adoptive parents.</li> <li>- In a peer-reviewed journal.</li> </ul>
<p>MacDonald and McSherry (2011) 'Open adoption: adoptive parents experience of birth family contact' <i>Adoption and Fostering</i>, 35</p>	<p>Found through a hand-search of <i>Adoption and Fostering Journal</i>.</p>	<p>Inclusion criteria met – Qualitative research using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on the experience of adoptive parents.</li> <li>- From a peer-reviewed journal.</li> <li>-</li> </ul>

**APPENDIX 6 – OUTLINE OF THE MAIN PROCEDURES UNDERTAKEN DURING THE RESEARCH**

<b><u>Procedure</u></b>	<b><u>Date</u></b>
Interview schedule initial draft	November 2010
UEL Ethics request submitted	January 2011
UEL Ethics agreed	14 <sup>th</sup> March 2011
Local Authority confirmation to proceed with research	24 <sup>th</sup> June 2011
Participant letters sent	6 <sup>th</sup> July 2011
Interview schedule redraft #1	13 <sup>th</sup> July 2011
Pilot Interview #1	19 <sup>th</sup> July 2011
Interview schedule redraft #2	21 <sup>st</sup> July 2011
Pilot Interview #2	25 <sup>th</sup> July 2011
Data Collection – Interviews 3-9	July – September 2011
Transcriptions completed	July – October 2011
Analysis completed	October – February 2011

**APPENDIX 7 – THESIS PAPER TRAIL FOR LOCAL AUTHORITY APPROVAL**

Date	Type of Contact	To and From	Present	Subject	Outcome
14.03.11	Email	To: Researcher From: Ethics UEL	N/a	Ethics approved	Researcher to contact LA re. gaining approval
29.03.11	Meeting	N/a	Senior Educational Psychologist (SEP) and Researcher	Gaining approval from LA	Researcher to send letter to Director of Children's Services. SEP to check letter before sending.
04.04.11	Meeting	N/a	SEP and Researcher	Discussed how to format letter following SEP checking the original.	Researcher to reformat letter
11.04.11	Email	To: Director of Children's	N/a	LA Approval. Deadline given as 9 <sup>th</sup> May.	Researcher to wait for correspondence from Director of Children's Services.

		Services From: Researcher CC: Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) and SEP			
11.04.11	Email	To: Relevant LA Professionals From: Director of Children's Services	N/a	LA Approval. Director of Children's Services forwarded email to all relevant professionals	Researcher to wait for correspondence from Director of Children's Services.
11.04.11	Email	To: Researcher From: Director of Children's Services	N/a	LA Approval. Research proposal request has to be considered and agreed by the children's specialist services management team	Researcher to wait for further correspondence from Director of Children's Services.

12.04.11	Email	To: Relevant Professionals From: SEP	N/a	Email of support for research.	N/a
14.04.11	Email	To: Researcher From: Group Manager for Specialist Resources & Quality Assurance	N/a	Approval of research. Very positive feedback.	Researcher to wait for approval to go through Divisional Management Team (DMT).
15.04.11	Email	To: Group Manager for Specialist Resources & Quality Assurance From: Researcher	N/a	Thank you for swift and positive response	N/a

03.05.11	Email	To: Director of Children's Services From: Researcher	N/a	Follow up email regarding approval. Any news from DMT?	Researcher to wait for correspondence from Director of Children's Services.
11.05.11	Meeting	N/a	SEP and Researcher	Researcher has had no further response from Director of Children's Services.	Researcher to email PEP to ask for help in contacting Director of Children's Services
13.05.11	Email	To: PEP From: Researcher	N/a	Follow up email regarding approval. Any news from Director of Children's Services or DMT?	Researcher to wait for correspondence from PEP.
18.05.11	Meeting	N/a	SEP and Researcher	Researcher has had no further response from Director of Children's Services.	Researcher to email PEP to ask for help in contacting Director of Children's Services again. Researcher to raise at next supervision if still no response.

20.05.11	Email	To: Relevant professionals From: PEP	N/a	Follow up email regarding approval. Any news from Director of Children's Services or DMT?	Researcher to wait for correspondence.
20.05.11	Email	To: PEP From: Learning and Development Manager	N/a	How to progress. - Request to go to DMT meeting in April - Contact to be made between Researcher and relevant professionals e.g. Manager of Adoption Services	Learning and Development Manager to contact Researcher.
20.05.11	Email	To: PEP	N/a	Thank you for contacting	Researcher to wait for contact from Learning and

		From: Researcher		professionals.	Development Manager.
05.06.11	Email	To: PEP From: Researcher	N/a	Any response from DMT?	Researcher to wait for correspondence from PEP.
05.06.11	Email	To: Researcher From: PEP	N/a	PEP will “push at the highest level with an expectation of an immediate response”. Advised to continue based on the assumption that approval will be given.	Researcher to wait for contact from Learning and Development Manager and proceed with planning.
06.06.11	Telephone	To: Researcher From: Learning and Development Manager	N/a	How to progress with research. Researcher missed call.	Researcher to contact Learning and Development Manager on 07.06.11

06.06.11	Email	To: Researcher From: Learning and Development Manager	N/a	How to progress with research.	Researcher to contact Learning and Development Manager on 07.06.11
07.06.11	Telephone	To: Learning and Development Manager From: Researcher	N/a	How to progress with research	Researcher to contact Manager of Adoption Services to discuss contacting participants.
09.06.11	Telephone	To: Manager of Adoption Services From: Researcher	N/a	How to contact participants. Manager of Adoption Services not available – left message to ring back.	Researcher to contact Manager of Adoption Services to discuss contacting participants.
13.06.11	Telephone	To: Manager of Adoption	N/a	How to contact participants.	Researcher to contact Manager of Adoption Services to discuss contacting participants.

		Services From: Researcher		Manager of Adoption Services missed call	
13.06.11	Email	To: Manager of Adoption Services From: Researcher	N/a	How to contact participants. Manager of Adoption Services asked to call Researcher.	Researcher to wait for further correspondence from Manager of Adoption Services
13.06.11	Telephone	To: Researcher From: Manager of Adoption Services	N/a	Diane is happy for research to go ahead. Advised Researcher to contact Team Manager of Adoption to contact participants.	Manager of Adoption Services to ask Team Manager of Adoption to contact Researcher ASAP.
14.06.11	Telephone	To: Researcher From: Team Manager of Adoption	N/a	Team Manager of Adoption is happy to help contact participants. Meeting arranged for	Researcher to take Information Letter and Consent Form to meeting with Team Manager of Adoption

				29.06.11	
15.06.11	Brief Discussion	N/a	Researcher and PEP	Has there been any response from DMT? Can I progress with research? DMT have informally agreed to research and it will go to meeting for formal approval this month.	Researcher to progress.
23.06.11	Meeting	N/a	Researcher, University Tutor and SEP	Progress of research. Research has been informally approved by DMT.	Researcher to contact PEP for official confirmation that it is OK to proceed.
24.06.11	Email	To: PEP From: Researcher	N/a	Confirming it is OK to go ahead with research.	Researcher to wait for confirmation from PEP.
24.06.11	Email	To: Researcher From: PEP	N/a	PEP's response: "Please continue to proceed. You	Researcher to proceed with research and meet with Team Manager of Adoption

				have at least received the in principle agreements of Manager of Adoption Services and Group Manager for Specialist Resources & Quality Assurance. I will push a bit further on your behalf.”	
29.06.11	Meeting	N/a	Researcher and Team Manager of Adoption	Contacting participants	Secretary to Team Manager of Adoption printed envelopes for Post Adoption Support group mailing list. Researcher to send out letters.

## **APPENDIX 8 – RESEARCH INFORMATION GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS**

“The Experiences of Adoptive Mothers: An Exploratory Study”

My name is Charlotte Harris. I am currently a Trainee Educational Psychologist, and am in my second year of studying for my Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology at the University of East London. I am writing to invite you to take part in my research study in which I am looking at the experiences of adoptive mothers. This will provide you with an opportunity to put forward your experiences of the adoption process, both pre- and post-placement.

It is important that you understand why this research is being carried out, and what the research process will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully, and please do not hesitate to contact me on the email address or telephone number at the end of this letter if you would like to know more.

What is the Purpose of the Research?

It is anticipated that the research will provide a greater understanding about how the process of adoption itself is experienced and what meaning adoptive mothers give to each element of this process, their views of pre- and post-adoption support, and their experiences of actually parenting an adopted child. Additionally, it is hoped that this study will help to support policy development to assist all professionals working for or with Adoption Services to work more effectively together to improve the experiences of adoptive parents, before and after placement, and also after adoption.

What Does the Study Involve?

If you would like to take part, you will be asked to fill in the consent form attached and return it to the address at the bottom. Once consent has been obtained, a convenient date, time and location will be arranged for you to meet with me. When we meet, you will be given the opportunity to discuss any additional questions you have about the research and the overall process. You will then be asked to participate in an interview with me, which should last no longer than an hour. This will give you the chance to discuss your experiences of the adoption process, and while I will have a few topics to cover in this semi-structured interview, any issues which you feel are important can be

included in this discussion. I would like to know about the process as a whole, preparation and training you have received, the experience of becoming an adoptive parent, post-adoption support services, and the experiences of the education system as an adoptive mother. The interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder to help with my analysis, and then they will be transcribed. Only I will have access to the unedited interview data. The information collected will be made anonymous, neither your name nor identity will be documented to ensure that you cannot be identified from the material. With your permission (given on consent form), some of the anonymous data may be displayed as verbatim extracts in the write-up to reinforce my analysis and interpretation, and the anonymised transcripts may need to be submitted as part of my thesis submission.

If at any time during the interview you get upset about anything that we are talking about we can stop straight away.

You are not obliged to take part in this research and are free to withdraw at any time from the interview. Should you choose to withdraw from the interview, any data that you have given will be destroyed and not used in the research.

The final write-up will form my thesis, and will be submitted in May 2012. With your permission (given on consent form) this research may be published in the future.

**If You Have Any Questions:**

If you have any questions or want to know more about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me on the email address or telephone number outlined below, and I will endeavour to reply to your query within 7 days.

Email: [edited for confidentiality – address in original letter sent to participants]

Tel: [edited for confidentiality – number in original letter sent to participants]

**If You Have Any Worries About This Study:**

This study has been approved by the Doctoral programme tutors at the University of East London, the University of East London Research Ethics Committee, and the Local Authority. If you have any worries about any aspect of this piece of research, please

contact myself and I will pass on your information to the Director of the Doctoral Programme, the Research Ethics Committee, and the Local Authority.

The Research Administrator at the University of East London is Merlin Harries who can be contacted at [merlin@UEL-Exchange.uel.ac.uk](mailto:merlin@UEL-Exchange.uel.ac.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

**APPENDIX 9 – CONSENT FORM**

Please complete this consent form if you wish to take part in my study on The Experiences of Adoptive Mothers.

Details:  Name:  Email:
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Having read the information letter, I understand what the research is about and what the purpose of the research is, and I would be happy to take part.

Yes  No

I understand that I will have to meet with the researcher, Charlotte Harris, at a convenient time and place, and participate in a semi-structured interview which will last for approximately 1 hour.

Yes  No

I understand that the information collected will be made anonymous.

Yes  No

I understand that I am giving permission for my anonymous data to be displayed as verbatim extracts in the researcher's write-up, and that the anonymised transcripts may need to be submitted as part of the researcher's thesis.

Yes  No

I understand that I am not obliged to take part in this research and am free to withdraw at any time from the interview.

Yes  No

I understand that I am giving my permission for this research to be published in the future.

Yes  No

Print Name:

Signature:

Date:

Please return this consent form to Charlotte Harris at the following address as soon as possible.

[edited for confidentiality – address in original letter sent to participants]

Thank you!

Charlotte Harris

## APPENDIX 10 – INITIAL DRAFT OF INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

As the purpose of the current research is to explore adoptive mothers' experiences of various aspects of the adoption process, the questions have been designed to elicit views on a broad number of topics. Prompts are written below each question.

1. Can you tell me about the adoption process?

*Prompts:* What are all the stages? How long did it take? How did you feel?

2. Can you tell me when you decided to adopt?

*Prompts:* How long ago was it? Reasons?

3. Can you tell me about the support you have received?

*Prompts:* family, friends? Professionals? Was this before or after your child was placed with you?

4. As an adoptive mother, how would you describe your experiences of the education system?

*Prompts:* teachers, schools, Local Authority?

5. Can you describe how adoption has affected your relationships with other people?

*Prompts:* partner, family, friends? What attitudes did you come across? How did this make you feel?

6. Can you tell me how it felt when your child was placed with you?

*Prompts:* What are the main differences that you have noticed?

7. What are the main challenges that you have faced throughout the adoption process?

*Prompts:* What has helped you cope? What have you learned?

## **APPENDIX 11 – SECOND DRAFT OF INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

### Introduction:

The aim of my research is to provide a greater understanding about how the process of adoption itself is experienced and what meaning adoptive mothers give to each element of this process. The interview should last no longer than an hour and will be recorded using a Dictaphone.

There are no right or wrong answers to my question. I am interested in your experiences and thoughts. While I may ask a few questions during the interview, I am interested in what you want to say and what has been important for you.

I will just quickly run through the consent form with you.

### Interview Question:

Can you tell me about your experiences of the adoption process and adoption itself?

### Prompts:

When did you decide to adopt?

Can you tell me about the support you have received?

As an adoptive parent, how would you describe your experiences of the education system?

Can you describe how adoption has affected your relationships with others?

What are the challenges you have faced throughout the adoption process?

What has helped you cope and what have you learned?

## **APPENDIX 12 – FINAL DRAFT OF INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

### Introduction:

The aim of my research is to provide a greater understanding about how the process of adoption itself is experienced and what meaning adoptive mothers give to each element of this process. The interview should last no longer than an hour and will be recorded using a Dictaphone.

There are no right or wrong answers to my question. I am interested in your experiences and thoughts. While I may ask a few questions during the interview, I am interested in what you want to say and what has been important for you.

I will just quickly run through the consent form with you.

### Interview Question:

Can you tell me about your experiences as an adoptive mother?

### Prompts:

When did you decide to adopt?

Can you tell me about the support you have received?

As an adoptive parent, how would you describe your experiences of the education system?

Can you describe how adoption has affected your relationships with others?

What are the challenges you have faced throughout the adoption process?

What has helped you cope and what have you learned?

**APPENDIX 13 – ETHICAL APPROVAL FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON**



Dr Mark Turner  
School of Psychology  
Stratford

ETH/13/66  
14.03.2011

Dear Mark,

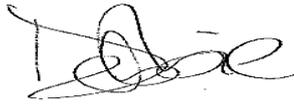
Application to the Research Ethics Committee: The Experiences of Adoptive Mothers  
(C Moulder)

N.B. Research started as Charlotte Moulder. Became Charlotte Harris on 18.06.2011

I advise that Members of the Research Ethics Committee have now approved the above application on the terms previously advised to you. The Research Ethics Committee should be informed of any significant changes that take place after approval has been given. Examples of such changes include any change to the scope, methodology or composition of investigative team. These examples are not exclusive and the person responsible for the programme must exercise proper judgement in determining what should be brought to the attention of the Committee.

In accepting the terms previously advised to you I would be grateful if you could return the declaration form below, duly signed and dated, confirming that you will inform the committee of any changes to your approved programme.

Yours sincerely



Debbie Dada

Admissions and Ethics Officer

Direct Line: 0208 223 2976

Email: d.dada@uel.ac.uk

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Research Ethics Committee: ETH/13/66

I hereby agree to inform the Research Ethics Committee of any changes to be made to the above approved programme and any adverse incidents that arise during the conduct of the programme.

Signed:.....Date: .....

Please Print Name

#### APPENDIX 14 – EXAMPLE OF UNANALYSED TRANSCRIPT

Transcript Helen

Interviewer went through consent form to ensure full informed consent. Participant happy with each aspect.

Interviewer asked questions regarding demographic (age, year of adoption, number of adoptees and age of adoptees at adoption).

I: My overall question is, can you tell me about your experiences as an adoptive mother?

P: Wow...Before the adoption or after or all of it

I: Whatever you want to tell me...

P: OK...Wow...umm, well we probably took about 18 months to become approved. Umm...some of the actual preparation process is quite intrusive, but we understood why that was. Umm, the social workers we were working with, there was confusion

over whether or not they needed to get a reference from my ex-husband, which was they didn't, then they did, then they didn't...and...that was quite upsetting, but other than that, you know, it was just a lot of hard work preparing, ready for the panel. Then we went to pane, which was quite daunting. A desk of 14 or 15 people around the table at the centre all asking questions. But what we hadn't realised that our social worker at the time had actually been matching whilst we were going through the preparation process. So she already had in mind two children for us...umm...so as far as our kind of peer group was concerned, where I guess you were bound to questions from others in the group, they was perhaps a small amount of conflict with the other women in the group because we went through very quickly...One thing I would say there from the point of view of support for me, is that we went and did our course in [another borough] because that was the next course available so that we could get through quicker, and I wish now we had waited and gone to a course in this area because we don't really see any of the other people from our group, umm...and I think it would have been nicer to have a bit more support. A bit like, you know, friends that have had their own birth children have got their NCT friends and everything, and we haven't got anything like that really.

Umm...yeah, so we were matched really quickly...umm...the timings are all a bit of a blur, but I think we went to panel around Easter, when we were approved, and the

children came home to us here in the June, so it was very, very quick. Umm...the birth mother was expecting the third child when Jenny and John came home to us, so at the point of their social worker coming here to see us, she also asked whether or not we would be prepared to take the third child as well. Which I was utterly excited about, and my husband was completely daunted...umm...and then when we talked through it, we realised that actually two toddlers, because John was a year and Jenny was two, and a new born baby all in one go might have been a bit much. So we decided not to go ahead with taking the baby as well.

And, it was a massive shock. I mean I was working full time in London until a week before the children came home to us. We had the week of going backwards and forwards to the foster carers. The children were with 2 separate foster carers although they're birth brother and sister they hadn't been kept together for various reasons. Umm...yeah, and it was a massive shock, because all of a sudden here you are at home with two children, with no contact with London and the kind of the outside world...umm...so at that point our social worker had already left the team, she'd emigrated overseas...and we didn't actually see anybody from social services team for 8 weeks after the children came home to us, and that's something I still to this day find difficult to deal with. Umm, and it's really lucky that we coped. Umm, because if we hadn't coped nobody would have known. Umm, and that wasn't sort of any back up

for us, given how intrusive the whole preparation process had been and now we actually had these children with us and there's no support whatsoever. Umm, it did pick up a bit after that, but...I felt quite let down by the social services team.

Umm, what do you want me to tell you about?

I: Just your experiences as an adoptive mother...whatever you feel is important really...

P: yeah...it kind of goes in waves...Our daughter who's now 6, umm...is very...she's very bright, and she's very aware...and, she's obsessed with babies, and I do feel that some of that is because she realises there's a part of her life where she wasn't with us, she has a very good relationship still with her foster carer who we see 3 or 4 times a year. Umm, but she...she is the one of the two of the children who talks about her birth mother a lot, wants to know about her birth mother, wants to know how her birth mother got to hospital...umm...whether or not she went in a bed in the hospital. She asks lots of very in depth questions, but it goes in waves, and we'll go a couple of weeks where she won't talk about it at all...umm...but she constantly reminds me that she is adopted...and...

I: And how does that make you feel?

P: Quite upset sometimes, yeah, yeah... We've just come back from holiday and umm, she was in the pool telling this complete stranger how she has two younger siblings but she doesn't see them, and the lady clearly thought that I'd had miscarriages. And she was quite happy to sort of tell her whole life story to this simple stranger... umm... And for her, which is fine, it's something that she's working through and we support her in that and talk to her openly about it... But, it is just a constant reminder that she is adopted... umm, she has a few behaviour issues as well... and again, sometimes that can be a bit tricky to deal with. Not to say that if she was my birth child it wouldn't be any different anyway... umm, but I guess you kind of have this nagging doubt at the back of your mind that are these the traits of the birth parents, and how much of this is just development and how much of it is something that is nature coming through... yeah... Our son is not bothered at all about being adopted. Umm, he's never really asked any questions. He has been present throughout all the discussions with Jenny. So I am conscious that we probably need to sort of reinforce it more with him because the last thing I want is for it to suddenly be a shock to him one day, umm, or for somebody to say something to him in the playground or something.

My husband is also adopted, so that's a real benefit. Umm, but he never remembers being told that he was adopted, and we told both our children very early on, so that again it was something that they naturally grew up with...

Ask me some questions [laughter]. I feel like I'm babbling.

I: No no, that's exactly what I want you to do...umm, I suppose I'm interested in kind of, umm...I mean you talked a bit about the early process and that sort of thing...and do they have contact with their birth mother at all?

P: No, no, it's not...but they've got letterbox contact, but she doesn't tend to write. Her bi-, umm...Jenny's birth father's family, not her birth father himself, but certainly his parents and his sister are very consistent and they write twice a year, which is the agreement. And obviously we write twice a year, and I do 4 sets of letters because they have different birth fathers so there's one letter about John to his birth father and his birth mother, and then another letter each to her birth mother and Jenny's birth father. So yeah...

I: and they obviously came quite soon after you'd been approved, how did that kind of feel and did you feel prepared, that kind of thing. How was that experience?

P: Really I was just elated really that it was all happening. After what felt like quite a long preparation process, and probably wasn't actually that long in experience of other people, I was just elated that it happened so fast.

In terms of being prepared, there's obviously a lot of practical stuff around the house. We had only moved in here 4 months before we were approved, umm, so did crazy stuff like having to put a bath back in to the bathroom and decorating as much as possible, that sort of thing, and do all the practical things. From an emotional point of view, I'm not that sure how you can prepare yourself, umm...It isn't like having a natural child where that child is growing inside you, your kind of bonding with the child I guess, umm...as your pregnancy develops. All of a sudden, here you are and you have 2 children, or however many children. I did feel that it ta-...it probably took me the first 2 or 3 years to catch up with being a mother, if that doesn't sound daft. Because again, they weren't asleep for most of the day like a new-born child would have been, they were there, they were full on, and still are very active children...umm...and so we were immediately out finding toddler groups, going to the park, making...our children making relationships with friends' children, that kind of stuff...umm, so I'm not sure emotionally how much you can do to prepare yourself.

The stuff in the process of becoming an ado-, approved as an adoptive parent, stuff like drawing your support network, at the time I just thought 'this is crazy', but actually it did make me think, and in hindsight I realise that it is a good thing to do. Umm, other practical stuff like researching playgroups and facilities locally. Knowing that you had your own readymade information pack as soon as they arrive. So, as well as coping with the children, you didn't have to be doing all that other sort of research at that time as well, so it was quite handy that that was done.

I: So that was done during the process?

P: Yeah, that was part of the process, to research local facilities and play groups, and that sort of thing. I mean a lot of that does come afterwards. Once you go to say one playgroup and then people say to you 'o have you been to such and such...'. And friends, luckily we had friends with children the same kind of age, so they very much kind of took us under their wing and helped us. Yeah, but even crazy stuff like what to feed the children...the foster carers were brilliant...umm, but Jenny in particular had no routine at the foster carers house. It was a house with 4 other older children so she was staying up til 10 o'clock at night that kind of stuff and sleeping in til 10 o'clock

the next morning. So that kind of thing I tried to establish fairly quickly and just get them both in to some kind of routine. I needed it too just to stay sane...yeah...

I: So they were both in different foster carers...and how did that affect...how did you find their relationship...

P: They'd kind of met periodically whilst in the separate foster carers' home...umm...Jenny had been quite feisty, and is still quite feisty now, and she used to hit John quite a lot...umm, initially. Of course he's now actually bigger than she is so there's not so much of that going on. Umm, but yeah, she...I wouldn't say she struggled with him, but there was a period of us all getting to know each other, it wasn't like they already had a bond. Now they're incredibly close. They fight just like normal siblings, but if one was without the other they want to know where the other one is and they've got a very close relationship. And they play really well together when they want to...sometimes...so yeah....

I: So your relationships have kind of changed, would you say?

P: They've developed definitely. Umm...I mean obviously you can't have that immediate relationship the day they arrive. I think I've calmed down as well. I felt this massive sense of having to get everything right. I still do to a certain extent, I think I'm quite hard on myself, but because they are, they are adopted children, I perhaps feel more of a sense of responsibility...umm...than...I don't know, maybe that's not fair, but I do feel a massive sense of responsibility to get it right, to break the cycle which we talked about quite a lot during our training programme. Of not allowing, hopefully our children not getting in to the same kind of cycle as...umm...as the birth mother and her birth parents as well, and both of their fathers as well. Umm, so yeah, I've probably learnt to relax slightly, probably only over the last year, maybe couple of years...umm, and to be a bit more confident, because I certainly...I do doubt myself a lot, just wanting to do it right for them...

I: And that's because you feel that they're adopted...

P: yeah...

I: And they need that kind of...

P: yeah...and because we've been given that responsibility and this opportunity ourselves, we don't want to get it wrong. For their sake I want to do everything I can to make sure they have a good life and a good childhood. Umm...yeah...and then it's stuff like...over the summer holidays you kind of feel...umm...I don't know...not wanting them to go back to school having forgotten everything they learnt before they left for the summer holidays, which I guess is just the same as any parent really. But I do tend to beat myself up a fair bit...

I: And how...in terms of the relationship with her husband...how's the changed or evolved?

P: Umm...We're very strong, very together...umm...very united as far as the children are concerned. They are both hard work, they're really...umm...a lot, you know, kind of, I'm struggling at the moment with finding friends who don't judge my children. Umm...we went to somebody's house for tea last night and Jenny pushed a 3-year-old boy over, and my friend, who's actually my oldest friend from when I was 3, got very upset about what Jenny had done...umm...and I was too, don't get me wrong, but umm, I kind of sometimes feel that the gulf between their behaviour and other children of the same age is growing, and it's hard to find people who don't judge you, just

accept your children for what they are and don't get too upset by what they do...umm, which is not to do with my husband at all...

I: No that's fine...

P: But it's just something that I'm very conscious of at the moment. I think probably, you know, initially people give you that space and they give you that allowance because they know that is private issue, but as time goes on, which is great, they just forget. And that's how it should be...but I think because I have regular daily reminders that we're not quite...you know, we are different to a birth family...umm...you kind of sometimes do need an allowance.

Umm...but going back to my husband...yeah, no, it's good. We are very united on the children and we've worked really hard to maintain our own relationship, and I think that's really important. We've tried to make time to go out together still, and just be us, as well as being 'mum' and 'dad', and we do a lot of stuff the 4 of us together...so yeah...it's OK...

I: Umm...what would you say, I suppose the biggest challenge as an adoptive mother is?

P: (pause) umm...well for me not blurting it out all the time. Because there's only 4 days under a year between the children and when they were little I was regularly asked 'are they twins?'. And I'd stupidly, because I've got this awful thing where I have to tell the truth wherever I go, I'm not very good as just kind of fudging things. And I go 'O no their 4 days under a year'. I just couldn't actually believe some of the stuff that complete strangers came out with in the street. Like... 'O, couldn't you keep out of bed with him'...that kind of stuff, and you'd think 'I'm sorry!', like I have no idea who you are. So then I'd blurt out 'no, they're adopted'...umm, and I have to le-, I kind of...I don't want to feel like...I don't want to be making excuses for the fact that they're so close in age. That's how it is, and you know, just...I guess accept that...I need to accept what they are. And I do accept it...I'm digging myself in to a hole...umm, yeah...that doesn't really answer your question

I: It's alright, it's your experience...

P: Yeah...

I: And what's been the biggest support?

P: Umm...my husband and I together and our relationship...my mum. My dad died last year, so...umm...only 3 months after the children came home to us he was diagnosed with cancer, and...that's been quite hard putting that in to the melting pot as well...umm...and this, well last year...my mum and I nursed him together at home. He was only 60 when he died...umm, so he was fantastic initially, but then as he became worse he couldn't support us in the way that he wanted to. But my mum definitely. She's amazing, and I think it's been a sort of a two-way process for her as well. Dealing with her loss she's had the children, who she feels...she regularly says they kind of give her a purpose. So, umm...yeah...friends to some extent...umm...but really mainly just immediate family...

I: I mean is there anything else that you feel has been important within your experience as an adoptive mother?

P: (pause)...I think the preparation course was good. It was a very intense one week preparation...umm...so that was helpful. It just immediately raised awareness, and probably prepared you, prepared us, for a situation that was possibly a lot worse than ours has been in terms of their family history and umm...how to deal with contact with their family, which we just haven't had to deal with. Umm...the foster carers

initially definitely were a massive help as well. It's been lovely to stay in touch with both of them so that they can see how the children are developing. So yeah, that's definitely helped...umm...

And just trying to be normal and not kind of feel like we've got to walk round with a big sandwich board saying 'They're adopted'...so what, they're children just the same as everybody else really...so yeah...

(Pause)

I: I don't think I've got any more questions to be honest. That was really interesting. Was that OK?

P: yeah...I felt like I babbled (laughing)

I: No no, babbling is good (laughing). There's lots of information and that's the main thing. It's just about, like I said, what you've experienced and that's what I'm interested in. So...thank you very much.

Interviewed terminated after 24 minutes.

**APPENDIX 15 – EXAMPLE OF AN INITIAL ANALYTIC NOTATION**

**Transcript Helen**

1 Interviewer went through consent form to ensure full informed consent.

2 Participant happy with each aspect.

3 Interviewer asked questions regarding demographic (age, year of adoption,

4 number of adoptees and age of adoptees at adoption).

5 I: My overall question is, can you tell me about your experiences as an adoptive mother?

6 P: Wow... Before the adoption or after or all of it?

7 I: What ever you want to tell me...

8 P: OK... Wow... umm, well we probably took about 18 months to become approved. Umm... some of the actual preparation process is quite intrusive! but we understood why that was. Umm, the social workers we were working with, there was confusion over whether or not they needed to get a reference from my ex-husband, which was they didn't, then they did, then they

*Contextualised timing of adoption*

*The overwhelm of experience  
Vulnerability  
lack of control*

*Uncertainty*

*Exploratory I*

*Don't see process as being a whole - experience is separated.*

*Adoption experience is contextualised in different time periods*

*Difficult to articulate it - where to start?*

*Overwhelming - is this the O- or the experience?*

*intrusion. Invasion in to life - vulnerability?*

*reason for intrusion: Why?*

*communication - overall process confusing*

*Impact of previous experiences / aspects of life - back + forth. Uncertainty. How does this make her feel?*

1

Difficulty of Emotions Control

Fear of the unknown

Rivalry Social expectations

Impatience Embedded in time Disappointment of expectations Isolation

1 didn't... and... that was quite upsetting, but other than that, you know, it was  
 2 just a lot of hard work preparing, ready for the panel. Then we went to pane,  
 3 which was quite daunting. A desk of 14 or 15 people around the table at the  
 4 centre all asking questions. But what we hadn't realised that our social  
 5 worker at the time had actually been matching whilst we were going through  
 6 the preparation process. So she already had in mind two children for  
 7 us... umm... so as far as our kind of peer group was concerned, where I  
 8 guess you were bound to questions from others in the group, they was  
 9 perhaps a small amount of conflict with the other women in the group  
 10 because we went through very quickly... One thing I would say there from  
 11 the point of view of support for me, is that we went and did our course in  
 12 [another borough] because that was the next course available so that we  
 13 could get through quicker, and I wish now we had waited and gone to a  
 14 course in this area because we don't really see any of the other people from  
 15 our group, umm... and I think it would have been nicer to have a bit more  
 16 support. A bit like, you know, friends that have had their own birth children  
 17 have got their NCT friends and everything, and we haven't got anything like  
 18 that really.

upset - emotions. Brushed over quite quickly  
 The Panel - control? lack control about <sup>difficulty talking</sup> aspects  
 daunting - Didn't say much about panel once mentioned.  
 Inclusion again

Unknown processes - control again. Is this a good or bad thing?  
 Umm -> does this mean she didn't want this to happen?  
 peer group - formed on what?  
 expectations of other ppl

conflict + rivalry btw parents over speed of process mothers!! not fathers  
 Was this conflict explicit?  
 Need to get process over quickly - impatience

get through what? Interesting choice of words  
 Slowed the process down. Is this the real reason for waiting? Is there another reason?  
 Support: How would support help? Feelings of isolation?

difference  
 No support  
 Peer support is important. Makes you feel the same. Not on your own.

Embedded in time  
 Speed  
 Coming home  
 Polarity of emotion  
 Reality of decisions  
 Resentment of changes  
 Shock!  
 Overwhelm  
 Different worlds  
 Realities  
 Loss of identity

Umm...yeah, so we were matched really quickly... umm... the timings are all a bit of a blur, but I think we went to panel around Easter, when we were approved, and the children came home to us here in the June, so it was very, very quick. Umm... the birth mother was expecting the third child when Jenny and John came home to us, so at the point of their social worker coming here to see us, she also asked whether or not we would be prepared to take the third child as well. Which I was utterly excited about, and my husband was completely daunted... umm... and then when we talked through it, we realised that actually two toddlers, because John was a year and Jenny was two, and a new born baby all in one go might have been a bit much. So we decided not to go ahead with taking the baby as well.

And, it was a massive shock. I mean I was working full time in London until a week before the children came home to us. We had the week of going backwards and forwards to the foster carers. The children were with 2 separate foster carers although they're birth brother and sister they hadn't been kept together for various reasons. Umm... yeah, and it was a massive shock, because all of a sudden here you are at home with two children, with no contact with London and the kind of the outside world... umm... so at that point our social worker had already left the team, she'd emigrated

Time line of process. Embedded within time  
 Us here. Where else would they have gone.  
 Speed of process Sense of them coming 'home'.  
 Very important - repeating quickly fast a lot.  
 preparation for children What would a 3rd child have meant?  
 excitement different emotions for parents  
 daunting looking at it realistically decisions to make  
 Disappointment A bit much what? Coping with 3?  
 Shock! Good or bad? Resentment of changes  
 Very quick transition. Juggling parenthood + work. Timeline of events.  
 Repeating 'home'.  
 What reasons? Why were they adopted together?  
 Shock again! What does shock imply? overwhelm? sudden = speed. Physical reaction  
 Contact with work. Different world  
 Loss of identity (being a parent or adoptive parent?)

Expectations vs reality

Inner resources vs luck

Process of coping  
Self belief

Isolation + loss

Difficulty in  
expression  
Suppressed feelings

Waves!!  
Child as own

Status of relationship  
loss

Difficulty in difference

overseas...and we didn't actually see anybody from social services team for 8 weeks after the children came home to us, and that's something I still to this day find difficult to deal with. Umm, and its really lucky that we coped. Umm, because if we hadn't coped nobody would have known. Umm, and that wasn't sort of any back up for us, given how intrusive the whole preparation process had been and now we actually had these children with us and there's no support whatsoever. Umm, it did pick up a bit after that, but...I felt quite let down by the social services team. Umm, what do you want me to tell you about?

I: Just your experiences as an adoptive mother...whatever you feel is important really...

P: yeah...it kind of goes in waves...Our daughter who's now 6, umm...is very...she's very bright, and she's very aware...and, she's obsessed with babies, and I do feel that some of that is because she realises there's a part of her life where she wasn't with us, she has a very good relationship still with her foster carer who we see 3 or 4 times a year. Umm, but she...she is the one of the two of the children who talks about her birth mother a lot, wants

No contact from social services  
Expectations vs reality. What did they feel they needed from SS  
Coping! Interesting way to express this  
Back up for what? luck? Why lucky? Why would they not have coped? Inner resources  
Repetition of intrusion - felt they were used vs something luck.  
Not coping not an option  
Reality of getting children. self belief  
Disappointment? Have these feelings been suppressed  
Beams limited about what might have happened - Have these feelings been suppressed  
Difficulty talking about experience  
Is this linked to speed of process?  
Did the quick matching give her time to process approval + prepare emotionally?

Our - sees her as her own  
Metaphor - up + down good vs bad.  
back + forth  
Traits of daughter - Aware? of what is this a bad thing?  
Understanding of children regarding background  
Importance of foster carer - is there some resentment about relationship w/ FC  
Importance of background  
Awareness of birth mother  
Difficult to cope with as mother

Guilt  
Constant feeling of  
difference  
Self as mother

Blockage in expression  
Guilt about feelings  
Self as mother  
Social acceptance

Dismissal of emotions

Excessive thinking  
Overwhelmed thoughts

Process of coping

Uncertainty  
Self-doubt  
Self as different

to know about her birth mother, wants to know how her birth mother got to hospital... umm... whether or not she went in a bed in the hospital. She asks lots of very in depth questions, but it goes in waves, and we'll go a couple of weeks where she won't talk about it at all... umm... but she constantly reminds me that she is adopted... and...

I: And how does that make you feel?

P: Quite upset sometimes, yeah, yeah... We've just come back from holiday and umm, she was in the pool telling this complete stranger how she has two younger siblings but she doesn't see them, and the lady clearly thought that I'd had miscarriages. And she was quite happy to sort of tell her whole life story to this simple stranger... umm... And for her, which is fine, it's something that she's working through and we support her in that and talk to her openly about it... But, it is just a constant reminder that she is adopted... umm, she has a few behaviour issues as well... and again, sometimes that can be a bit tricky to deal with. Not to say that if she was my birth child it wouldn't be any different anyway... umm, but I guess you kind of have this nagging doubt at the back of your mind that are these the traits

Questions about birth mother  
How does this make her feel?  
Why is this important?  
Waves again!  
Daughters awareness of background adoption.  
Reminds me -> does she see this as personal? with her all the time 'constant'.  
How does this affect feelings of being a mother?  
Upset - talked about general emotion not feelings as a mother  
Affects day-to-day life - story to illustrate  
Strangers' understanding of the situation. Are strangers understanding important?  
Openness of daughter - threatening? social acceptance  
Helping children work through feelings.  
Openness to daughter  
Reminder again! Constant despite saying doesn't talk about it all the time.  
Beh' of children  
Coping with beh'  
Difference btw birth child + adopted child.  
Doubt uncertainty

**APPENDIX 16 – EXAMPLE OF INITIAL TABLE OF THEMES**

	Theme	Page/Line	Quote
1	Clear start	P1 L4-6	Right, Right, so it'll go right back to...(slow thinking about response) [I: yeah yeah from whenever...] from the very beginning? Yeah! Right back to when we sent the forms off really
3	Nothing is guaranteed	P2 L17-20	then they make it quite clear at that point that, that, tha...umm, that really it's absolutely a preliminary visit and following that you're then required to go on a training course
4	Maintaining support	P3 L27-30	I mean we also found that doing that we gelled much more as a support group, which ultimately has been incredibly important [I: yeah] as we still are a group and we still meet each other regularly
5	Entwined identities	P3 L36-39	I mean, do you, I suppose...from a personal point of view, although my husband and I spent a very, very long time indeed trying to make up, well, deciding whether we going to go ahead and adopt or not, umm...we, I think eventually
6	Natural decisions	P3 L37-40	I spent a very, very long time indeed trying to make up, well, deciding whether we going to go ahead and adopt or not, umm...we, I think eventually, I was very sure that we were very careful never to push him
7	Stages of life	P3 L40-42	I was worried he already had two older children and he had at one stage said

			when we had first got married that he didn't want any other children
8	Children as a choice – 'the norm'	P4 L41-43	he had at one stage said when we had first got married that he didn't want any other children, and that's what was our agreement (stilted speech) when we got married
9	Changing needs	P4 L43-45	but as time went on and they grew up and they've moved away, umm, he's, urr, had second thoughts really and we realised how much we missed having children about
10	Inevitability of adoption	P4 L45-48	I've always been interested in adoption because I'm adopted myself, ummm...and we weren't able to have children together ourselves. Umm, so anyway that seemed to me like, you know, the obvious choice to me was to adopt
11	Second thoughts – fear of rejection?	P4 L48-52	So, we chatted about it and originally he said no and then umm eventually one day he just said 'yes alright let's do it'. So, umm, then of course I completely had the hibby jibby's (smiling) and it took me about two years from that point to actually pluck up the courage to then send off the forms
12	Changing roles	P4 L51-54	it took me about two years from that point to actually pluck up the courage to then send off the forms [I: yeah] until eventually he was threatening to say 'well if you don't do it we're not going to do it at all' (laughing) so, you know, you've got six months to decide'.
13	Implications of children	P5 L55-59	I'm not sure if this is the right thing for us, we maybe are too old now and we've

			got, you know, our lives, you know, we have a very nice life and this house and everything, do we really want to start being poor again (slight laughter) and you know, have the house wrecked [I: yeah] and whatever.
14	Fear of moving forward	P5 L54-62	So anyway it all happened then and urr urr I had still very, very I'm not sure if this is the right thing for us, we maybe are too old now and we've got, you know, our lives, you know, we have a very nice life and this house and everything, do we really want to start being poor again (slight laughter) and you know, have the house wrecked [I: yeah] and whatever. Umm, so anyway I was very unsure then I eventually got put on the spot about it, but I thought 'let's go on the introductory course and we'll know by the end of that if this is for us or not'
15	Instant reaction	P6 L71-77	the actual course itself started a couple of weeks later so we turned up and umm I think by the end of the first day I knew we were definitely going to be adopting children [I: lovely]. It was just, you know, I just knew straight away [I: hmm (in agreement)] we started the first sort of talk that, umm, well certainly by the afternoon that was it, you know, no, no this is definitely what I want to do
16	Safety of decisions	P6 L76-77	this is definitely what I want to do and my husband really enjoyed it as well
17	Developing supportive relationships	P6 L78-80	So, after the course, really for us the pivotal thing was the people that did the course with us were great. They...were all relatively mature people, very interesting bunch from all walks of life

18	Difference between mothers	P7 L93-95	The only thing I think from that course that I found difficult to deal with was umm...they showed you an interview of a moth...a...a birth-mother who'd given up her children
19	Anticipation	P10 L130-133	so we were very up and...oooo...you know very excited. Excitement, gosh, we're ready, you know we've got these children in the pipeline and we haven't even started our assessment at that point
20	Love in anticipation	P10 L133-135	we got terribly excited and she came round and brought a video of the children and we fell in love with them and it was incredible
21	Protection against feelings of loss	P10 L135-139	I can't actually remember quite what happened after that but it all fell through very quickly. Well in the end I think it just...the social worker needed a couple to be able to say they were interested in adopting these two, and so that she could actually get an adoption order
22	Role of adoption	P11 L138-142	so that she could actually get an adoption order, or whatever the order was that she needed, I don't know whether it was an adoption order at the stage, but whatever the order was. Basically she was trying to get the children away from the parents and...
23	Unavoidable emotions	P11 L143-144	well I certainly hadn't really quite understood that, and I had emotionally got totally, totally in to it.
24	Explosion of feelings - loss	P11 L144-	And I think something, having talked to other people, if the very first group of

		148	children, if you get, if you end up looking at more than one, it's the first group that emotionally is the biggest bang. Umm...because if things do fall through it's quite devastating and certainly for me that was emotionally
25	Long-lived experiences	P11 L148-150	Because you build up. You know, you've been on this course and you've been thinking about it for years, and then suddenly there's these children that might be going to be yours
26	Deflation following loss	P11 L150-152	And if it doesn't come off, it's the most incredibly balloon popping thing. And the deflation
27	Heart break	P11 L150-152	And if it doesn't come off, it's the most incredibly balloon popping thing. And the deflation
28	Choice is important	P12 L155-158	I suppose the point I was trying to make was that it's one of those situations where if you aren't necessarily going to be taking the first group of children, you know, the emotion is phenomenal. And that's quite hard to deal with
29	Surprise of emotional response	P12 L157-160	the emotion is phenomenal. And that's quite hard to deal with. You know, and most of these couples, you know have tried...been through so much to get to this point.
30	Control	P12 L162-165	as I was always very clear from the word go that we did actually want to see more than...well after that experience, that we did want to see more than one group until we were sure. And we were very lucky that they enabled us to do

				that.
31	Personal role overlaps with adoption role/identity	P12 165	L162-	as I was always very clear from the word go that we did actually want to see more than...well after that experience, that we did want to see more than one group until we were sure. And we were very lucky that they enabled us to do that.
32	Difficulties with own background	P13 182	L178-	I think the only bit that I found particularly difficult to do was the family tree bit, because I'm adopted myself, which is quite an interesting thing. I remember getting very angry about having to do the family tree because I didn't really know much to put down, but umm...a
33	Anger at own feelings	P14 184	L180-	I remember getting very angry about having to do the family tree because I didn't really know much to put down, but umm...and I said 'well why do you need to know this anyway?' and I'm still to this day not exactly sure why (laughing). I had to do it but it was very difficult to do
34	Control	P14 187	L185-	we'd just discuss the topic and then generally, we'll virtually for every topic she'd let us write the notes up
35	Adoption as a profession	P14 190	L189-	And I know that for many of my colleagues the social workers actually wrote up their F1 for them
36	Old life imitating new life	P14 193	L191-	yourself it's great because you have complete ownership of everything that's written about you...umm...you can steer the form in the direction you want it to

			be
37	Preparation for new phase of life	P15 L196-205	They made you think what your parenting skills would be like and how you'd work together. But, I think the other thing, it just made us realise what a wealth of background experience we had. And you know, lots of...I suppose being a bit older, you know my husband and I have been through quite a bit together. And before we even met each other, you know we'd both had difficulties in our lives and it was quite good putting it all together and realising that as a result of all those difficulties and things, it might actually put us in quite a good position to be able to....you know...tackle different issues with children later on
38	Past in to present	P15 L206-208	You know realising that some of the things in your past that you kind of forget about are actually now going to be of some use (smiling). So that was quite a, you know, a beneficial experience
39	Changing roles	P16 L211-215	I think quite early on in the process there was an issue about if I was going to go back to work or not go back to work. And perhaps, we weren't terribly realistic at the time, and I thought that umm I might be able to do some work from home...umm...
40	Anger at losing old identity	P16 L211-217	I think quite early on in the process there was an issue about if I was going to go back to work or not go back to work. And perhaps, we weren't terribly realistic at the time, and I thought that umm I might be able to do some work from

			home...umm...and umm Sam was really quite pushing us and I got a bit angry and...whatever...but it...you know, she was very good, very good indeed.
41	Always been ready	P16 L220-223	And when you've waited, whatever...50 odd years to have children then you, or 40 years or whatever to have children...umm...you don't particularly want to go back to work unless you have to...so...
42	Motherhood inevitable	P16 L220-223	And when you've waited, whatever...50 odd years to have children then you, or 40 years or whatever to have children...umm...you don't particularly want to go back to work unless you have to...so...
43	Adoption as a compromise	P17 L229-235	Yes, we were quite clear from the beginning that we wanted three. Umm...we actually...well I wanted five [I: O wow] which I mean I know realistically...and had I been able to go through and things and had my own children five would have been fantastic. I mean if we could have afforded it. Umm...but...obviously realistically you know cut that down to three because you know, you can't just take five children at once...financially we couldn't have managed it
44	Maintaining grasp on reality – adoption as a fantasy	P17 L235-237	So again Sam I think was rather surprised at the thought. And I think initially perhaps thought that we were a bit away with the fairies...you know we didn't really have much of a clue
45	Accomplishment as parents	P18 L 237-239	But I think as time went on it became more apparent that yes we had actually thought about this quite a lot and that we were able to...that we could manage

			three
46	Choice not for everyone	P18 L245-250	And you know we had also signed up to...do you know 'Be My Parent'? [I: no]. I think it's a...like a newspaper that basically advertise children. I mean some people find it quite horrific...it's...umm, it's by the is it the British Adoption and Fostering Association...yes I think that's [I: agreeing]. BAAF run it, they print it. Umm and you can join it...you know, you can subscribe and they'll send you the newspaper every month which has children in it

## **APPENDIX 17 – EXAMPLE OF AN INTERPRETATIVE SUMMARY**

Suddenness and newness seem important within Patricia's experience, being mentioned in summary at the end of the transcript. While the desire to be a mother has always been with her, Patricia at times seems to feel out of her depth and without natural motherly skills. Patricia seems to feel that she is still learning how to be a mother, and sees her husband as an authority on parenting - he is the one to listen to and learn from. Patricia seems to feel as though she is reliant on others, especially her husband, but does not seem to be used to this and therefore tried to gain a sense of control and power during the adoption process. She seems to want support, but seems ashamed of this and therefore uses her peers as safe examples of need.

She has experienced a change in her own identity, but seems to be striving for a joint experience with her husband, perhaps to protect her from feeling vulnerable and like a not good enough mother. Is she worried about losing her identity from before the adoption?

Towards the end of the transcript you get a sense that the adoption has provided Patricia with completeness and fulfilled her desire for a family.

### Themes

- Self as a mother
- Fear of identity change and fitting role
- Fear of losing original self
- Pendulum of emotions
- Unmet desire for birth child
- Creating ideal family
- Choice, power and control
- Need for support
- Joint, intertwined identity
- Choice of adoption
- Natural, nature of parenting
- Battle in adoption

**APPENDIX 18 – EXAMPLE OF EMERGENT THEME GROUPS**

Theme Title – Self as a mother			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
41	Always been ready	P16 L220-223	And when you’ve waited, whatever...50 odd years to have children then you, or 40 years or whatever to have children...umm...you don’t particularly want to go back to work unless you have to...so...
42	Motherhood inevitable	P16 L220-223	And when you’ve waited, whatever...50 odd years to have children then you, or 40 years or whatever to have children...umm...you don’t particularly want to go back to work unless you have to...so...
47	Self-preparation	P18 L251-253	But I’d actually subscribed to it for about a year or two years before we’d even started the process. So we had a pretty good idea from that what sort of children we would be adopting
59	Instinctive nature of motherhood	P24 L329-334	‘well I just need to see probably at least five children’s reports before I can be absolutely sure that we’re going for the right ones’. And she said ‘well how do you know that they’re the right ones?’. And this was a ridiculous answer ‘but I will just know’ (laughs) ‘but I’m not just going to go for any first group of children that have been thrown at us’

75	Mother knows best	P32 L449-456	And they have a strict plan, you know, because a lot of children are adopted under the age of 5. and umm, one of ours was under the age of 5. and there was this insistence that we still kept to these 2 weeks, and we were quite happy to go over three weeks or whatever it would take for the three boys. You know, they are older it maybe takes a bit longer. So we'd made a plan. I think originally it did go over about three weeks, which also took in to account John's soccer school, the birthday and whatever. That was fine. We were very happy with it.
85	Question of true motherhood	P38 L537-543	But they did have...they actually had...until we actually adopted the boys...while we were having the adoption placement, they are jointly responsible for the children. Umm...so legally they have half the responsibility...I don't think you have complete legal responsibility in fact until...we have parental responsibility, but they had legal responsibility during the adoption placement...I think that's how it works.
96	Feeling of hopelessness and helplessness as mother	P43 L616-621	he had a very faint stutter occasionally umm before, but now he's started to...he can hardly speak, he can hardly get the words out. So we're pretty sure he's had some...most likely to be related to his emotional situation...ummm...he's actually in speech therapy now to umm see whether we can help him with that. The psychological issues might be deeper than that obviously

101	Mother as teacher	P47 675-676L	And umm...we still had to teach Tim how to hug and kiss because he didn't...but he's quite good at it now
102	What makes a 'real' mum?	P47 L679-683	He had a very close relationship with Julie his foster carer...umm...because...she was his mum, he doesn't remember his real mum really. Because Julie nurtured him...umm...but he was very much babied. I think he needed it 'cause he hadn't been nurtured at all really. So she nurtured him a lot
107	Mother as support and protection	P49 L708-711	Because he's such a lovely boy, but suddenly this horrible person comes out so he called him 'Mr Nobody' and now that we can actually pinpoint the behaviour and umm we say occasionally if he just appears and we start saying 'I do hope Mr Nobody not coming out again'

Theme Title – Fear of adoption fear of identity change and fitting role			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
11	Second thoughts – fear of rejection?	P4 L48-52	So, we chatted about it and originally he said no and then umm eventually one day he just said 'yes alright let's do it'. So, umm, then of course I completely had the hibby jibby's (smiling) and it took me about two years from that point to actually pluck up the courage to then send off the forms
39	Changing roles	P16 L211-	I think quite early on in the process there was an issue about if I was going to

		215	go back to work or not go back to work. And perhaps, we weren't terribly realistic at the time, and I thought that umm I might be able to do some work from home...umm...
113	Sudden identity change	P52 L751-753	It's all about confidence isn't it...because you can't...literally you go from one day being a single...well not a single...a couple...a childless couple, to a...being a parent with three children

Theme Title – Fear of adoption losing original self			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
13	Implications of children	P5 L55-59	I'm not sure if this is the right thing for us, we maybe are too old now and we've got, you know, our lives, you know, we have a very nice life and this house and everything, do we really want to start being poor again (slight laughter) and you know, have the house wrecked [I: yeah] and whatever.
14	Fear of moving forward	P5 L54-62	So anyway it all happened then and urr urr I had still very, very I'm not sure if this is the right thing for us, we maybe are too old now and we've got, you know, our lives, you know, we have a very nice life and this house and everything, do we really want to start being poor again (slight laughter) and you know, have the house wrecked [I: yeah] and whatever. Umm, so anyway I was very unsure then I eventually got put on the spot about it, but I thought 'let's go

			on the introductory course and we'll know by the end of that if this is for us or not'
40	Anger at losing old identity	P16 L211-217	I think quite early on in the process there was an issue about if I was going to go back to work or not go back to work. And perhaps, we weren't terribly realistic at the time, and I thought that umm I might be able to do some work from home...umm...and umm Sam was really quite pushing us and I got a bit angry and...whatever...but it...you know, she was very good, very good indeed.
114	Move from couplehood to parenthood	P52 L751-753	It's all about confidence isn't it...because you can't...literally you go from one day being a single...well not a single...a couple...a childless couple, to a...being a parent with three children

Theme Title - Pendulum of emotions			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
19	Anticipation	P10 L130-133	so we were very up and...oooo...you know very excited. Excitement, gosh, we're ready, you know we've got these children in the pipeline and we haven't even started our assessment at that point
23	Unavoidable emotions	P11 L143-144	well I certainly hadn't really quite understood that, and I had emotionally got totally, totally in to it.

24	Explosion of feelings - loss	P11 148	L144-	And I think something, having talked to other people, if the very first group of children, if you get, if you end up looking at more than one, it's the first group that emotionally is the biggest bang. Umm...because if things do fall through it's quite devastating and certainly for me that was emotionally
26	Deflation following loss	P11 152	L150-	And if it doesn't come off, it's the most incredibly balloon popping thing. And the deflation
27	Heart break	P11 152	L150-	And if it doesn't come off, it's the most incredibly balloon popping thing. And the deflation
29	Surprise of emotional response	P12 160	L157-	the emotion is phenomenal. And that's quite hard to deal with. You know, and most of these couples, you know have tried...been through so much to get to this point.
33	Anger at own feelings	P14 184	L180-	I remember getting very angry about having to do the family tree because I didn't really know much to put down, but umm...and I said 'well why do you need to know this anyway?' and I'm still to this day not exactly sure why (laughing). I had to do it but it was very difficult to do
68	Psychological pain as wounding	P29 412	L411-	And it was a really traumatic experience. And umm...just really horrendous in fact. And...umm...so we went back totally subdued
72	Processing emotions	P31 434	L432-	And they took us straight off to go to the introductions meeting. Or a meeting to plan the introductions, which I would not recommend anyone every do that

			because you were just SO emotional.
115	Whole body response to adoption	P52 L751-754	It's all about confidence isn't it...because you can't...literally you go from one day being a single...well not a single...a couple...a childless couple, to a...being a parent with three children. And it is quite a shock to the system...

Theme Title – Unmet desire for birth child			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
43	Adoption as a compromise	P17 L229-235	Yes, we were quite clear from the beginning that we wanted three. Umm...we actually...well I wanted five [I: O wow] which I mean I know realistically...and had I been able to go through and things and had my own children five would have been fantastic. I mean if we could have afforded it. Umm...but....obviously realistically you know cut that down to three because you know, you can't just take five children at once...financially we couldn't have managed it
71	Initial stage as birth	P31 L430-432	You've just been approved for your children...you know, these are your three children. The first children in your life, and it's just like, you know, you've just had a baby

Theme Title – Creating ideal family			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
49	Creating ideal family	P19 L262-268	And we were relatively interested in slightly older children. I mean certainly, they were a bit older than we thought was ideal...umm...because originally our age range was from about 3 to 7. I think my husband...well I was always happy with older children I think my husband was more comfortable with...didn't really want to take anyone over the age of 7 initially. Umm...but that was our ideal
57	Importance of choice and power in creating family	P24 L326-331	I'm telling you this because I think it's quite unusual for people to be given that amount of choice. And umm I think it was at that point Sam said to me, you know, 'where are you going with this?'. And I was at work one day and I spoke to her on the phone and I said 'well I just need to see probably at least five children's reports before I can be absolutely sure that we're going for the right ones'
58	Fear of not having 'ideal' family	P24 L329-334	'well I just need to see probably at least five children's reports before I can be absolutely sure that we're going for the right ones'. And she said 'well how do you know that they're the right ones?'. And this was a ridiculous answer 'but I will just know' (laughs) 'but I'm not just going to go for any first group of children that have been thrown at us'

60	Creating perfect family	P25 345	L344-	that's our experience. That we were able to really pick and choose the perfect ones
65	Building foundations and creating family	P29 403	L400-	When you write the children's welcome books you can try to put in that you know a little bit about them. You know, put in little pictures of their favourite football team. You know just to make it look a bit like you really understand them and that we're just the family for them
117	Children create family	P53 767	L764-	But now we tend to do stuff together more or less...or if he's at a football match with the boys they're only away for a couple of hours so we have much more time at weekends together. Umm...with the family.
118	Creating family unit – completion of self	P54 772	L769-	I don't think we ever had any problems anyway particularly... but just the whole family. Being part of a unit, it's a lovely feeling, it's a lovely warm feeling being part of the family.

Theme Title – Choice, power and control				
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line		Quote
28	Choice is important	P12 158	L155-	I suppose the point I was trying to make was that it's one of those situations where if you aren't necessarily going to be taking the first group of children, you know, the emotion is phenomenal. And that's quite hard to deal with
30	Control	P12	L162-	as I was always very clear from the word go that we did actually want to see

		165	more than...well after that experience, that we did want to see more than one group until we were sure. And we were very lucky that they enabled us to do that.
34	Control	P14 L185-187	we'd just discuss the topic and then generally, we'll virtually for every topic she'd let us write the notes up
50	Strong ideas provide control	P20 L277-280	but initially we were quite clear that we wanted a mixed sibling group. We didn't want three girls, we didn't want three boys, wanted a mixture of girls and boys. We didn't mind what, two girls and boy or two boys and a girl
51	Power over decisions	P20 L280-281	So we didn't really look at those boys very closely to start with 'cause they were three boys

Theme Title – Need for support			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
4	Maintaining support	P3 L27-30	I mean we also found that doing that we gelled much more as a support group, which ultimately has been incredibly important [I: yeah] as we still are a group and we still meet each other regularly
84	Coping in isolation	P37 L530-534	I think in a polite way I would say that we were extremely unimpressed with the children's' social worker and the commitment and effort that she didn't make really (laughs) that she should have been making and didn't. umm frankly she

			was happy to just leave us to it. Which we were happy to do because she wasn't particularly helpful
89	Fear of own responsibility	P40 L572-575	But once you've got that they stop all the support you know. And I think that's quite...I think that's like the carpet's been pulled out from under you. I mean I've been lucky because my husband had children before and he's really experienced so...you know...together we kind of worked it out
90	Perceived need for support	P40 L572-575	But once you've got that they stop all the support you know. And I think that's quite...I think that's like the carpet's been pulled out from under you. I mean I've been lucky because my husband had children before and he's really experienced so...you know...together we kind of worked it out
92	Feeling unimportant	P41 L582-585	I mean they do say you can ring them, but I mean in my experience, not my personal experience, but my colleague and my friends who have also adopted, the support doesn't seem to be there very much. It's like...well...'we're not interested any more now'
94	Search for help	P41 L593-598	afterwards the support is very, very difficult, particularly if you have problems...umm...and some authorities do say, some agencies do say 'yes we are here to support you', but actually in reality...trying to actually get...what you do need is the funding for some psychological support and that they just don't have the money for.

Theme Title – Identity change joint, intertwined identity

	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
5	Entwined identities	P3 L36-39	I mean, do you, I suppose...from a personal point of view, although my husband and I spent a very, very long time indeed trying to make up, well, deciding whether we going to go ahead and adopt or not, umm...we, I think eventually
56	Categories of adoptive parents	P23 L318-321	they're so energetic and so...and I think one of the things I think actually the family finder and the children's social worker were concerned that they could find parents that were energetic and perhaps as we older we don't quite fit in to that category.
112	Changing self	P52 L749-751	You know...so umm...so now it's very much calmer and the boys know what's what...and we know what we're doing

Theme Title – Choice of adoption

	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
8	Children as a choice – ‘the norm’	P4 L41-43	he had at one stage said when we had first got married that he didn't want any other children, and that's what was our agreement (stilted speech) when we got married

9	Changing needs	P4 L43-45	but as time went on and they grew up and they've moved away, umm, he's, urr, had second thoughts really and we realised how much we missed having children about
10	Inevitability of adoption	P4 L45-48	I've always been interested in adoption because I'm adopted myself, ummm...and we weren't able to have children together ourselves. Umm, so anyway that seemed to me like, you know, the obvious choice to me was to adopt
15	Instant reaction	P6 L71-77	the actual course itself started a couple of weeks later so we turned up and umm I think by the end of the first day I knew we were definitely going to be adopting children [I: lovely]. It was just, you know, I just knew straight away [I: hmm (in agreement)] we started the first sort of talk that, umm, well certainly by the afternoon that was it, you know, no, no this is definitely what I want to do
16	Safety of decisions	P6 L76-77	this is definitely what I want to do and my husband really enjoyed it as well

Theme Title – Parenting skills Natural nature of parenting			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
37	Preparation for new phase of life	P15 L196-205	They made you think what your parenting skills would be like and how you'd work together. But, I think the other thing, it just made us realise what a wealth

			of background experience we had. And you know, lots of...I suppose being a bit older, you know my husband and I have been through quite a bit together. And before we even met each other, you know we'd both had difficulties in our lives and it was quite good putting it all together and realising that as a result of all those difficulties and things, it might actually put us in quite a good position to be able to....you know...tackle different issues with children later on
38	Past in to present	P15 L206-208	You know realising that some of the things in your past that you kind of forget about are actually now going to be of some use (smiling). So that was quite a, you know, a beneficial experience
99	Parenting skills not natural	P46 L661-663	But behaviourally we...decided back to the word go that we would go down the route of being firm, and James again learned this from having his previous children.
103	Fear of judgement	P48 L689-696	What do you do with a child who...a 6 year old child who throws his bag in the playground and starts stamping, and throws his coat in the playground and starts stamping, and everybody else...all the other mothers are looking at you going 'what is going on?' and you're screaming at the top of your voice (does impression of tantrum)...telling me that you're hurting him and screaming out that...and you're trying to grab them to stop...and he's screaming 'you're breaking my arm'...and everyone's staring at you...it's an absolute nightmare

104	Out of depth as mother	P48 696	L689-	What do you do with a child who... a 6 year old child who throws his bag in the playground and starts stamping, and throws his coat in the playground and starts stamping, and everybody else...all the other mothers are looking at you going 'what is going on?' and you're screaming at the top of your voice (does impression of tantrum)...telling me that you're hurting him and screaming out that...and you're trying to grab them to stop...and he's screaming 'you're breaking my arm'...and everyone's staring at you...it's an absolute nightmare
105	Natural parenting skills	P48 701	L697-	James said 'well that's fine. Just walk away from him. Just say, you know...you can stop now and nothing more will be said about this or of you carry on, if you don't stop now then you will have a privilege taken away. And if you still don't stop you'll have nothing'. So the next time he did it that's exactly what we did, well I did
111	Self as a pupil	P52 744	L739-	In some ways it's quite traumatic 'cause they did have tantrums and things, and I didn't really know how to deal with them because I was new to it...and you know, I'd get quite upset and he'd always phone me and then he'd chat to me. He'd say 'well next time try this'. And invariably it would work...so it was all about learning strategies together, working together and having

Theme Title – Battles in adoption			
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
53	Fight for ownership	P22 L298-300	there turned out to be a problem with the actual foster parents I think really wanted to keep them and we decided we didn't want to get into a battle
69	Battle of adoption	P29 L412-414	just we'd always said that we weren't going to fight foster carers, but there was clearly a big push from the [area] London social services
76	Battle of adoption	P33 L469-473	I just got a phone call at work one day to say that she was emailing it over to me and this was the changed plan. And they'd even forgotten that it was Tom's birthday and they'd actually arranged introductions for him on his birthday. Our very first meeting was on his birthday, which we had to really, really fight. That was really hard
81	Fragility of process	P36 L506-508	I mean at one point I very nearly pulled out. We were driving along to meet the boys and I just thought...almost had to stop the car so I could get out screaming...umm because it was just so traumatic. But we got through it in the end...umm...

**APPENDIX 19 – EXAMPLE OF FINAL CLUSTER TABLES WITH SUPERORDINATE THEMES, SUBTHEMES, EMERGENT THEMES RELATED TO THE SUBTHEMES, AND THE QUOTES WHICH WERE REFERENCED TO THESE EMERGENT THEMES.**

Common Themes

**Becoming ‘Mum’**

<b>Theme Title – Becoming ‘mum’ (developing a new identity)</b>		<b>Deborah</b>	
	<b>Themes from Version 1</b>	<b>Page/Line</b>	<b>Quote</b>
8	Becoming mother – transformation to mother	P2 L29-34	And of the change, the change that you go through yourself. I see myself changing on a daily basis as a person. And I even said to my husband ‘I know that I am changing’. And I said this yesterday and he said ‘you’ve changed faster than I ever thought possible I could cope with’. Because of that, you know, you become, you no longer become, you become an entity of who you were
9	Preventing loss of self as not mother – keeping separate identities	P3 L33-39	Because of that, you know, you become, you no longer become, you become an entity of who you were, but you have to try and keep...it’s really complicated...but yeah (laughs). There’s a little part of you want to keep...and I’m really aware of that. I try to keep it intact. I don’t want her to be part of that part of me. And you know, so I still do go out with friends and I still do things that I...because I want to see her and us happy with myself, so that she can have

			that.
10	Identity as mother overlapping in marriage	P3 L40-49	<p>I: so do you feel it's changed your relationship with your husband as well?</p> <p>P: it's become more of a friendship, more than so than a m-, and it has changed because...its changed in the sense of, like I said the change, the responsibility that we go through. So I find I expect a lot more of him. Before he could come home at whatever time he wanted, but now I actually do a timetable for him, so he knew what I expected from him and, because he has no sense of time whatsoever, so in that sense that has changed. And, I tell him much more...I've become more serious...so where as before I was jokey, now it's like, no actually this is the way its gotta be. And its gotta be this way because of this.</p>
45	Feeling of being recognised as parent by child – reinforcing identity as mother	P13 L199-201	Now she still goes up, but she will look back to see where we are, you know, or make sure that it's ok – she almost looks for approval (laughs)
46	Foster carers – friends or rivals?	P13 L203-205	She has amazing foster carers, and we love them to bits and we still see them, which is brilliant. They became friends rather than, you know
59	Mothering 'creates' a person. Birth is just a process	P17 L273-279	I just think 'Really!'. No I am her real mother! There is no other way, there's nothing to hide. Yes OK she came from somebody else's womb, but...you know...and she said 'well you didn't create her' 'I created her in my mind for 5 years, I have shown her her morals, she has my mannerisms, she has my values, she has my way of living. I am teaching her her life skills. You cannot create

			anymore than that. You can't. It's impossible!
68	Desire to mother is innate	P20 L313-320	You simply, as they would, want to be a mum, you have the ability and capability to do, umm, the different style of parenting that they require. And that's all there is to it. There isn't a hidden agenda of wanting to give a child that needs it a home. Yes that is part of it, but that isn't the main part of it. It simply is that its humans need to leave that legacy...you know you have to have that legacy, and you have this innate, umm, need to have and procreate and have your own child. And that is precisely what it is. And she is my own child.
69	Right to be a mother – unfairness of situation	P20 L317-319	It simply is that its humans need to leave that legacy...you know you have to have that legacy, and you have this innate, umm, need to have and procreate and have your own child
70	Importance of ownership	P20 L318-320	you have this innate, umm, need to have and procreate and have your own child. And that is precisely what it is. And she is my own child.

<b>Theme Title – Creating mother's role</b>			<b>Clare</b>
	<b>Themes from Version 1</b>	<b>Page/Line</b>	<b>Quote</b>
36	Mothers role as protector	P10 L179-182	Even within our own family, people try to understand, and at least the good will is there. Umm, but it gets harder and harder, and the worse we get treated by the children the harder it is to actually stick up for them

46	Identity as mother	P17 L308- 310	I thought, the first thing you do is tell the mother, surely you'd tell the mother, and she never told me
72	Adoption experienced differently as a mother	P33 L605- 609	But it was Jim I felt sorry for when they first came to live with us because they didn't know what dad's were for, so he just got ignored because they'd always been cared for by single women. All the foster carers had been single women as well. So poor Jim, it was almost like he didn't exist from the day they arrived
73	Creating role/identity as 'good parents'	P34 L616- 618  P34 L621- 624	You need to build up rituals and bridges and stuff with them because they don't know what dad's are for'. I said 'you've got a blank sheet, invent it. You know, do it your self'  Those kind of things, that were our way of laying down what they had never had before, like the foundations to good parenting and love and affection. And we tried so hard

<b>Theme Title – Inevitability of motherhood</b>		<b>Lucy</b>	
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
76	Destiny – inevitable and unavoidable nature of adoption	P21 L352- 356	we were lucky, but you know I think...we believe in Fate anyway, and you know obviously he was meant for us because otherwise we wouldn't have got him. So you know, we were just lucky. And obviously he met our criteria and we met

			his...so we were just lucky. In the right place at the right time
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<b>Theme Title – Self as a mother</b>			<b>Patricia</b>
	<b>Themes from Version 1</b>	<b>Page/Line</b>	<b>Quote</b>
41	Always been ready	P16 L220-223	And when you've waited, whatever...50 odd years to have children then you, or 40 years or whatever to have children...umm...you don't particularly want to go back to work unless you have to...so...
42	Motherhood inevitable	P16 L220-223	And when you've waited, whatever...50 odd years to have children then you, or 40 years or whatever to have children...umm...you don't particularly want to go back to work unless you have to...so...
47	Self-preparation	P18 L251-253	But I'd actually subscribed to it for about a year or two years before we'd even started the process. So we had a pretty good idea from that what sort of children we would be adopting
59	Instinctive nature of motherhood	P24 L329-334	'well I just need to see probably at least five children's reports before I can be absolutely sure that we're going for the right ones'. And she said 'well how do you know that they're the right ones?'. And this was a ridiculous answer 'but I will just know' (laughs) 'but I'm not just going to go for any first group of children that have been thrown at us'
75	Mother knows best	P32 L449-	And they have a strict plan, you know, because a lot of children are adopted

		456	under the age of 5. and umm, one of ours was under the age of 5. and there was this insistence that we still kept to these 2 weeks, and we were quite happy to go over three weeks or whatever it would take for the three boys. You know, they are older it maybe takes a bit longer. So we'd made a plan. I think originally it did go over about three weeks, which also took in to account John's soccer school, the birthday and whatever. That was fine. We were very happy with it.
85	Question of true motherhood	P38 L537-543	But they did have...they actually had...until we actually adopted the boys...while we were having the adoption placement, they are jointly responsible for the children. Umm...so legally they have half the responsibility...I don't think you have complete legal responsibility in fact until...we have parental responsibility, but they had legal responsibility during the adoption placement...I think that's how it works.
96	Feeling of hopelessness and helplessness as mother	P43 L616-621	he had a very faint stutter occasionally umm before, but now he's started to...he can hardly speak, he can hardly get the words out. So we're pretty sure he's had some...most likely to be related to his emotional situation...ummm...he's actually in speech therapy now to umm see whether we can help him with that. The psychological issues might be deeper than that obviously

101	Mother as teacher	P47 675-676L	And umm...we still had to teach Tim how to hug and kiss because he didn't...but he's quite good at it now
102	What makes a 'real' mum?	P47 L679-683	He had a very close relationship with Julie his foster carer...umm...because...she was his mum, he doesn't remember his real mum really. Because Julie nurtured him...umm...but he was very much babied. I think he needed it 'cause he hadn't been nurtured at all really. So she nurtured him a lot
107	Mother as support and protection	P49 L708-711	Because he's such a lovely boy, but suddenly this horrible person comes out so he called him 'Mr Nobody' and now that we can actually pinpoint the behaviour and umm we say occasionally if he just appears and we start saying 'I do hope Mr Nobody not coming out again'

<b>Theme Title – Self as mother</b>		<b>Sandra</b>	
	<b>Themes from Version 1</b>	<b>Page/Line</b>	<b>Quote</b>
9	Proving self as mother	P3 L39-46	<p>We came through Amsterdam. I had to really really questions to answer. And as you can see how light she is and how dark I am</p> <p>I: so because she wasn't your daughter...</p> <p>P: But even at Heathrow I had to stand aside for a full hour. Everyone in the plane that I was on, they went. All the other planes they come in and go. I was</p>

			left there in the corner with my daughter. And they would try and prove that everything was done legally. Finally, the gentleman came back and said 'It's OK'. He even checked all the computers...check it out
19	Motherhood is a natural, automatic process	P7 L116-120	Before the adoption it was difficult for me because I was with this adoption in my mind, but you know in the African culture you just adopt unofficial. I think also here sometimes you hear the next of kin or the other next of kin. It just happens automatically. If one of the siblings dies then the child 's aunt automatically becomes the next mother to this child
20	Uncertainty fuelling adoption	P7 L121-131	But sometimes you don't know where you will end in life. I never thought I would end up here in life. So I never legalised anything, because people automatically thought she was mine. My sister was not married to the guy who impregnated her, she never said. So everybody thinks that he was a married man. So the child was born in my house, grew up in my house, everything in my house so it was too much to think of that separation. But when they were still there the two of them it was OK for me. Then I realised this child is going to be marginalized if I drop dead today. Who will say who she is in my life, in my relation. Nobody will take notice. Because I could see things starting to not work because I didn't have certain legal papers. So I started from there
21	Ownership of child	P8 L131	But I need to make the child my own. This child has been my own even from

			birth
22	Feelings of motherhood vs legality	P8 L134-137	these kids grew up together. (pointing to picture)... That's my late sister, that's my son, that's me...so the way they grew up and the way my family was it was very difficult for me to even comprehend that certain systems would not work because legally they can't
28	Motherhood as a cross-cultural phenomenon	P10 L157-159	I: It sounds very different...the 2 cultures are very different. P: Very. Very different. But if you are a mother, you are a mother, that's it.
29	Take on role and identity of mother	P10 L160-165	She would call me mum because she was copying from the big brother, she would call me mum. And then to her mum she would 'Sandra's mum'. She would come and report 'mum, Sandra's mum is hitting me', 'Sandra's mum is scolding me'. And then I would say 'hey Jasmine's mum stop hitting my daughter'. That what she would do. She has referred to me as mum ever since. So it was not even a problem
32	Adoption as certifying motherhood	P11 L181-184	And even after the panel it had to go to the Department of Schools, Children and Education...the want the whole issue of eligibility to adopt...then until you get that certificate you can't proceed. You have to wait for that certificate. It took ages and ages
34	Adoption as a formality – already seen as her child	P11 L191	I couldn't think of having bread with butter knowing that my children are not having any of that

43	The 'trick' of motherhood	P14 L241-246	They are just the same children, they are just the same. They are given love, they are given that care, and if you try to talk to them calmly, one day in their own time they will be fine. Fortunately they will be fine before they are messed up. Some will even be fine when they brought children in the home. But they will still be fine later. They will just learn from their...But the trick is to persevere
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<b>Theme Title – Instinct of motherhood</b>			<b>Lucy</b>
	<b>Themes from Version 1</b>	<b>Page/Line</b>	<b>Quote</b>
13	Fulfilment of womanhood	P4 L47-48	And I think...umm...I think as a woman you feel you've got that instinct
14	Motherhood as an instinct – engrained	P4 L48-50	you know, it's like a...I think it's like a deep rooted maternal instinct that you know, you want to nurture don't you, as a mother
47	Maternal instinct knows child	P12 L189-194	'Is there any child that you look at and feel drawn to?'. Which is what we thought was gonna happen. Not knowing nothing about that particular child. In our heads we thought, well maybe that's the way they do it. You know, maybe they see what we as a couple are drawn to. Whether we would choose the same child, or whether one of us would like a different one.
59	Child as priority	P15 L239-243	And obviously, John doesn't come first anymore. Where as obviously he was first...and...now he's second in queue, Tom comes first...umm...I think that's

			possibly been a little bit harder for him than it has for me. You know, I think men always like to think they're first or number one
61	Changing priorities	P15 L248-252	I think it does change...it does change, I think your relationship slightly, because you don't have as much time for each other...and you know you've got so many more things to do...umm...so yeah, it does change things, but it's just a different dimension in your life, it's just a different way of life...
63	Motherhood as a natural process	P16 L261-268	and I talk to other women and they say the same. You know, they think when you have no children they come first...umm...and...because it all changes I think it takes them a little bit...it takes them longer to slot in to a routine than it does...I think a women would just do things naturally, you know, Tom would come first before John...and...whether he likes that or not, that's the way it is...and...you know, I think it took him a little bit longer to get his head round it than it did me really
70	Belief in self as mother	P19 L312	We can give him 110%...
75	Impatience and readiness to become mother	P21 L351-352	you know, for us it wasn't quick...umm... you know, it couldn't be quick enough really

Theme Title – Motherhood as completeness			Lucy
	Themes from Version 1	Page/Line	Quote
16	Determination to have children no matter what - need and yearning powerful feeling	P4 L52-56	You know, when you want something you cant have you want it even more I think deep down And you know I think Tom's umm...you know...he's filled a big hole because I think...I'm trying to explain it...I think unless you've been through it some people don't understand that unless...
17	Childlessness is feeling of emptiness	P4 L56-60	you've got a big...for us, you know maybe not for everybody, you've got a big gap, or a big hole, that's missing I think in your life...umm...that I think only a child can fill, I think. It's not the same for everybody, but for us, for me...umm...
22	Ownership	P5 L79	So, you know, and that's it, you know he's ours.
62	Fulfilment as mother	P15 L253-255	I think it's more of an enrichment in life, it's more...yes you don't have as much time for each other, but...he ho...you know, that's life, it's the way things are
64	Childlessness as emptiness	P16 L269-272	You don't have as much time and you cant just do things you wanna do. But like I said to him, 'yeah, but it changes your...umm...you know, it fills that gap'