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“Instead of Growing under Her Heart, I Grew in It”: The Relationship between Adoption Entrance Narratives and Adoptees’ Self-Concept

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“Instead of Growing under Her Heart, I Grew in It”: The Relationship between Adoption Entrance Narratives and Adoptees’ Self-Concept

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Abstract

Adoptees are partially or entirely disconnected from those involved in their birth stories, so adoptive families create adoption entrance narratives to fill that void. Scholars assert that these narratives impact adopted child well-being later in life, but that assumption has yet to be empirically tested. The goal of this study was to examine themes emerging from adoption entrance narratives ($n = 105$), and to then determine the impact of story content on adoptees’ self-concept. Seven themes emerged: openness, deception, chosen child, fate, difference, rescue, and reconnection. Results indicate the salience of the chosen child, negative reconnection, and difference themes significantly predicted differences in adoptees’ self-concept.

Keywords: adoption, adoption entrance narratives, adoptive families, birth story, narrative theory

Adoption is rapidly becoming a more common way to establish a family in the United States (Brodzinsky, Smith, & Brodzinsky, 1998). An estimated 50,705 children (or 2%–3% of the population) in the United States are adopted (Child Welfare League of America, 2008), and 47% of adults report having been “touched by adoption,” either by adopting a child, having been adopted, or being close to someone who is or has adopted (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2007). Despite the increasing prevalence of this family

form, according to Galvin (2006), these nontraditional, or “discourse dependent,” families must work to establish and maintain identity through discourse within and outside of the family. One of the ways discourse dependent families accomplish this is through narratives and family storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Langellier & Peterson, 1993; Stone, 1988).

Narratives help families to construct, interpret, and solidify meaning about their experiences and also function to create community in the family (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Koenig Kellas, 2005; Stone, 1988). Family stories also have a significant impact on the self-concept of individual family members (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; McAdams, 1993; Schechtman, 1996; Stone, 1988; Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999). Particular stories, such as the story of a child’s birth, are told and retold until they become part of the members’ identities. These narratives are the building blocks of one’s personal myth, or an individual’s story of identity and personal truth (McAdams, 1993).

Societal master narratives prescribe that families have birth stories for every child; but, in the case of adoption, the birth story may be incomplete, missing from the family system, or unknown. Research indicates that adopted children often feel a sense of loss because of their lack of personal stories (Galvin, 2010). To combat this sense of loss, adoptive families create adoption entrance narratives in place of a child’s birth story (Friedlander, 1999; Galvin, 2003; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). In turn, adoption entrance narratives teach children what it means to be adopted, why they were placed for adoption, and where they fit into their adoptive families. Thus, these stories likely impact the adoptees’ sense of place, history, identity, and value (Friedlander, 1999; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Despite the potential impact of these stories on adoptees’ identity formation, researchers have not empirically investigated the relationship between these narratives and adoptees’ self-concept later in life. Previous research has investigated adoption entrance narratives from the adoptive parents’ perspectives (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). However, to realize the impact of these narratives on self-concept, the adoptees’ perspectives must be considered. Understanding the complexities of adoptees’ entrance stories will give researchers and adoption practitioners a more holistic understanding of the link between the stories that help to create a sense of meaning for how adopted individuals see their entrance into their family, as well as their developing identities as individuals and family members. Thus, the goals of this study are to understand the varying parts of adoption entrance narratives and their relationship to adoptees’ self-concept.

We begin by discussing the importance of understanding family narratives, particularly those of adoptive families, and the challenges that adoptees undergo when forming and re-forming adoptee self-concept. We then present a study on the intricacies of 105 adult adoptees’ entrance narratives.

Family Narratives

From the cradle to the grave, humans construct and reconstruct the story of their identities. Each of us naturally constructs this story, called the personal myth, to synthesize the components of our identities into one self-concept (McAdams, 1993). The prime site from which people gather information for their personal narrative is the family (McAdams, 1993). Through family stories, parents socialize their children, convey life lessons, and

build familial and individual identity (Galvin, 2003; McAdams, 1993). Indeed, "We often grow into the stories until they fit as tight and are as unnoticeable as a layer of skin" (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 524). These stories impact individual well-being and identity development from childhood through adulthood (McAdams, 1993; Stone, 1988).

Cultural scripts help to shape the stories that are told in families (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Stone, 1988). By nature, canonical stories, also known as master narratives, are subject to societal normative discursive practices and expectations (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Langellier & Peterson, 1993). These stories prescribe "traditional" identities and family forms, perpetuating the concept of a nuclear, patriarchal, ahistorical family with biological children (Langellier & Peterson, 1993). For example, a married couple is expected to have a traditional story about how they met, fell in love and got married (Stone, 1988). The story is often told in that order and other characters such as children or ex-spouses are not often present. Any deviation from the traditional story of the couple's courtship is often ignored or looked down on.

Discourse-dependent families, such as adoptive families, must pay special attention to formulating their family stories in response to cultural norms (Galvin, 2010; Tillman-Healy, 2001). Bochner, Ellis and Tillman-Healy (1997) asserted that adoptive families must work to legitimize their form of family in a culture that celebrates the biological family and marginalizes adoptive families. Adoptive parents have reported feeling stigmatized by those with biological children and feeling the need to legitimize their form of family (Miall, 1987). Legitimizing is something they do, in part, by telling family stories inside and outside of the family (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Yngvesson & Mahoney, 2000). One type of canonical narrative, the birth story, establishes a child's place in the family and in the world (Baker, Sedney & Gross, 1994; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001; Stone, 1988). It marks the beginning of a person's life story, and is influential in the development of his or her personal myth. Because adoptees are not "born" into their storytelling families, however, entrance narratives often take their place.

Entrance Narratives in Adoptive Families

Adoptive children become part of a family not through birth, but through law. Consequently, adoptive parents are often unaware of the events associated with the child's birth (Galvin, 2003; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Regardless of their entrance into the world, most children are naturally curious about the details associated with their birth and ask about these details as they get older (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003). In response, adoptive parents must reconcile the void of knowledge by creating adoption entrance narratives (Friedlander, 1999; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Adoption entrance narratives teach adoptive children what adoption means, where they fit into the family, why they were adopted into this family, and why they were placed for adoption. These stories are theorized to be the foundation for the child's personal myth and, thus, have lasting consequences on an adoptee's identity construction (Friedlander, 1999). Friedlander hypothesized that the content of adoption stories, which are told and retold throughout an adoptee's life, impacts adoptees' adjustment and well-being later in life.

A small but growing body of research has examined storytelling in adoptive families (Grotevant, Fravel, Gorall, & Piper, 1999; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Krusiewicz and Wood studied adoptive parents' versions of the adoption entrance narratives they tell to their children. They identified five themes that emerged from the stories, including *dialectical tensions* (i.e., the struggle between feelings of joy for themselves and sadness for the loss of the birth mother), *destiny* (i.e., the inevitability and rightness of their child's entrance into the family), *compelling connection* (i.e., the immediate and strong connection to the child), *legitimacy* (i.e., of the adoptive family form), and *rescue* (i.e., saving the child from threatening circumstances).

Krusiewicz and Wood's (2001) findings highlight the complexity of adoption entrance narratives, and show that adoptive parents recognize that they must discursively manage this complex story for their children. Adoptive families negotiate their societal differences through the creation and re-creation of adoption entrance narratives. Adoption entrance narratives are also important to the identity formation for the adopted child. Grotevant (1997) asserted that adoptees must work to understand the "layers of complexity" in their lives to come to a coherent and manageable self-concept (p. 140). Adoptees explore their origins and sense of self through questions such as, "Where did I come from? Who were my birthparents? Why was I placed for adoption? Do my birthparents think of me now? Do I have birth siblings? What does adoption mean in my life?" (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004, pp. 135–136). Adoptees must work to understand these questions and integrate their adoption into their identities to achieve a coherent self-concept and self-understanding later in life.

Thus, adoptees' version of their stories likely illuminates the theorized connection between family stories and individual identity development, yet research to date has neglected the adoptees' versions of their stories. Researcher on adoption storytelling has focused solely on the parents' point of view (Grotevant et al., 1999; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Although this is valuable information, an understanding of adoptees' perceptions and internalization of these parental messages will provide researchers with an understanding of how these communicative forces play out in adoptees' lives. Thus, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: What are the themes in adoption entrance narratives from the perspective of adopted individuals?

Previous research indicates that adoption entrance narrative themes are not mutually exclusive. Specifically, Krusiewicz and Wood (2001) found that most stories contained multiple themes and painted a multifaceted and complex portrait of adoptive parents' recollections of their child's entrance into the family. For example, a parent's story may contain both the elements of destiny and compelling connection. Because each story may have multiple themes, it is most appropriate to examine the salience of the themes present in a story in an effort to understand adoption entrance narratives in relation to individual self-concept. Perhaps a child whose parents emphasized the theme of compelling connection (e.g., "[You] were our child from the moment we walked into that room"; p. 792) would understand his or her adoption and, thus, self-concept differently from someone from a

family who emphasized rescue (e.g., recounting their trip to the Russian orphanage that “had no toilet paper”; p. 796) in their adoption story. The framing adult adoptees choose is likely a window into their feelings of self and family. Thus, in this study, we also examined the salience of each story theme to understand the ways in which the patterns of theme salience linked to individual self-concept and well-being.

The Link between Complex Narrative Themes and Adoptee Self-Concept

Krusiewicz and Wood (2001) noted that “the stories that adoptive parents create about how and why their children entered adoptive families can be extraordinarily important in mending, further rupturing, or otherwise modifying the children’s sense of place, history, identity, and value” (p. 786). The manner in which parents construct and children recall these stories has important ramifications for children’s self-concepts. The complex nature of adoption entrance narrative content and its links to individual self-concept merits further investigation.

Mead (1934) asserted that people create their self-concept through social interaction. Humans come to understand themselves in relation to others and, thus, form a sense of selves within the social world. One aspect of self is based on the evaluations humans make of themselves on various dimensions such as intelligence, good looks, and athletic ability. Here, people may compare themselves to others’ abilities or standards. One’s evaluation of self, or self-esteem, depends on his or her perspective of his or her social standing and will impact his or her self-concept either positively or negatively. Another aspect of self is dependent on the values people attribute to the social world. As Cooley (1902) posited, people see themselves as a reflection of others’ perceptions of them. Thus, humans’ interpretations of themselves are influenced by their perceptions of the social world, whether it is a safe or scary place and whether people can be trusted or not. In this study, this view of the social world is conceptualized as generalized trust (Wrightsman, 1974). Because self-concept is an organization of many components interrelated in complex ways (Rosenberg, 1985), researchers must work to represent self-concept in multifaceted ways. Because adoptees may face challenges in forming a coherent self-concept throughout their lives (Grotevant, 1997), investigating each of these two elements of self-concept—self-esteem and generalized trust—may give researchers, clinicians, and adoptive families information that will assist adopted individuals in achieving coherence in their sense of self.

Self-Esteem

The first component of self-concept—self-esteem—refers to the extent to which an individual evaluates himself or herself positively or negatively (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). There is a substantial body of research on self-esteem of adopted individuals, but it has reflected contradictory or controversial findings. Adopted individuals have been found to have lower self-esteem than their nonadopted peers (Westhues & Cohen, 1997), whereas others have found adoptees have parallel or even higher self-esteem than their nonadopted peers (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994). Likewise, some scholars assert that adoption research relies too heavily on comparisons of and minute differences between adopted to nonadopted children (Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005). Thus, adoption researchers

need a more nuanced understanding of self-concept variables within the adopted population and the experiences that relate to changing patterns of these concepts.

Narrative scholars (Christensen, Wood, & Barrett, 2003; Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007) have found that an individual's self-esteem may also predict their recall of past events. Specifically, adults with higher self-esteem recall past experiences more positively (Christensen et al., 2003). Because stories both affect and reflect a person's evaluation of himself or herself, the link between story construction, or narrative theme salience, and self-esteem is expected. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

- H1: Adoption entrance narrative theme salience will relate to adopted individuals' reported self-esteem.

Generalized Trust

The second component of self-concept—generalized trust—is a person's general attitude toward humanity (Fromm, 1947). Fromm asserted that if people trust and respect humankind, then they will trust and respect themselves as they are a part of humankind. Indeed, our view of others has significant impact on not only our self-concept, but on our communicative style and capacity as well (Mead, 1934).

Likewise, the elements and perspectives represented in one's personal myth influence that person's view of the social world (Vangelisti et al., 1999). Our view of the world is constituted by the stories around us, and especially those that we internalize (Schechtman, 1996). Family narratives are a significant influence on one's personal myth (McAdams, 1993), and the perspectives represented in these narratives indicate a person's views toward their social world (Vangelisti et al., 1999). Thus, although generalized trust has not been studied in adoptees, adoption entrance narratives likely relate to adoptees' views of the social world. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

- H2: Adoption entrance narrative theme salience will relate to individuals' reported generalized trust.

It is apparent that familial stories shape family members' self-concepts and that adoptees face various challenges in forming a healthy self-concept, yet we are unaware of the intersection of the two. Adoption entrance narratives are the building blocks of adoptee self-understanding and mental well-being; thus, we must seek to understand how one relates to the other.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 105 adult adoptees including 14 men, 89 women, and two nonspecified. They ranged in age from 18 to 84 years old ($M = 35.5$, $SD = 16.07$). The call for research prompted adult adoptees, ages 18 or older, to participate. The conceptual definition of "adoptee" included any form of adoption in which the participant identified himself or herself as "adopted." The study did not distinguish between international or

domestic adoptees, or family and nonfamily adoptees at the onset. Instead, any differences in the groups were allowed to emerge from the data naturally. Eighty-one of the adoptees identified as participants of closed adoptions (with secured records and little to no contact with birth parents), eight identified as participants of an open adoption (with open records and the possibility of open contact with birth parents), and four identified as participants of a within-family adoption. Twenty-one of the participants identified as domestic adoptees, and eight participants identified as international adoptees. Seventy-five participants were younger than six months when adopted, 11 participants were six months to one year old, and 20 participants were one year old and older (ages ranging from 13 months to nine years old) at the time of adoption. Two students received research participation credit for a communication course.

Recruitment of participants took place in three steps. First, an e-mail was sent to university instructors, requesting announcements of the study in their classes. Second, participation was elicited through adoption discussion boards and support groups (e.g., Informed Adoption Advocates, Adopted Online, and Google groups) and social groups (e.g., Facebook, Google groups, Yahoo! groups) by first contacting the group administrator, and then posting the call to research on a discussion board or e-mail listserv. Occasionally, the administrator would voluntarily post the call to research onto another adoption site. Third, a snowball technique was used by asking those reading the research call to encourage adoptees in their social networks to participate.

Procedures

All participants completed an online informed consent form and then an online survey. The survey asked the participant to provide his or her entrance narrative, and then to complete measures of self-esteem and generalized trust. At the end of the survey, participants had the options of providing their names on a separate survey to receive research credit or providing their e-mail address to receive a copy of the final manuscript.

Measures

Adoption entrance narratives

The adoptees' entrance narratives were elicited through an open-ended question on the online survey. The survey contained the following explanation of adoption entrance narratives: "An *adoption entrance narrative* is an adoptive family's version of the birth story. Adoption entrance narratives teach adoptive children what adoption means, why they were placed for adoption, and why they were adopted into their family." Participants were then given unlimited space to write out their personal adoption entrance narrative. The participants determined the length and detail disclosed in their adoption entrance stories, with the stories ranging from 19 to 835 words.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem was measured with Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1985). The RSES is a unidimensional measure of global self-esteem based on Rosenberg's (1985) theory of self-concept. The RSES is a 10-item, 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1

(*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*); and scores range from 4 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. Sample items include, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself," and "I feel I have a number of good qualities." In this study, the scale was reliable ($\alpha = .94$; $M = 29.91$, $SD = 7.09$) and similar to previous research on the adoptee population ($\alpha = .93$; $M = 31.40$, $SD = 29.60$; Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2006).

Generalized trust

Generalized trust was measured with Wrightsman's (1974) Revised Philosophies of Human Nature (PHN) Scale. This 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), measures one's beliefs about human nature according to six dimensions that are divided into two subsets: beliefs about substantive characteristics of human nature (called "trust") and beliefs about the extent of individual differences in human nature (called "cynicism"). The dimensions pertaining to trust were trustworthiness, altruism, independence, strength of will, and rationality; the dimensions pertaining to cynicism were the complexity of human nature and the variability of human nature. Items on this 20-item scale include "The average person is largely the master of his own fate," and "Most people try to apply the Golden Rule, even in today's complex society." Each subscale contained 10 items, which were summed together to create scores ranging from 10 to 60. Both subscales' compositions were reliable: trust ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 35.42$, $SD = 8.65$) and cynicism ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 33.47$, $SD = 8.90$). These trust and cynicism composition scores are similar to research on similar populations (trust: $\alpha = .76$; $M = 35.90$, $SD = 6.50$; and cynicism: $\alpha = .74$; $M = 36.80$, $SD = 7.10$; Edwards & Shepherd, 2004).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to uncover the narratives' themes in the data. Inductive coding (Bulmer, 1979) was used to allow themes and subthemes to emerge from the data. To be considered a theme, the following theme criteria had to be met: (a) recurrence, or when different words can express the same idea or meaning; (b) repetition, or when keywords, sentences, or phrases are repeated explicitly; and (c) forcefulness, or when underlining, italicizing, bolding, or increasing size of the text are found (Owen, 1984). A constant comparative analysis was conducted, where the first author and a trained coder continually established and reevaluated themes as they coded the stories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study's analysis occurred in two stages. First, the researcher and a coder examined all the narratives and identified broad themes individually. Then, the researcher and coder discussed and evaluated each other's findings. Seven adoption entrance narrative themes emerged including openness, deception, chosen, fate, difference, rescue, and reconnection. Each of these is discussed in the Results section. Once the themes were established, the first author coded 20 narratives, or 18.7% of the narratives in common with the second author to check for intercoder reliability. Reliability analyses using Cohen's kappa revealed good intercoder reliability ($\kappa = .92$). The remainder of the data was coded by the first author.

In addition to the narrative themes, we were also interested in the degree to which these themes were salient to the adopted individuals' entrance narratives. Because the hypotheses concerned the ways in which adopted children's stories varied in the degree to which certain identity themes were salient to the entrance story, a rating scheme was developed

to measure the degree to which story themes were salient to the entrance narratives. The resulting nine-question rating scheme rated the salience of this study's established six themes on a scale from 1 (*not mentioned at all*) to 5 (*extremely emphasized*). Each scale item corresponded with one of the narrative themes from the inductive analysis, with the exception of the themes of reconnection and rescue, which were analyzed with two items, each based on the salience of the positive or negative framing of the theme (e.g., "The story focuses on positive reconnection [either already occurred or desired to occur] with the birth parent," and "The story focuses on the anxiety and/or uncertainty associated with reconnection with the birth parent").

Raters again considered Owen's (1984) repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness components of a theme when determining the salience of the theme in a story. During training, two independent raters, unaware of this study's hypotheses, received operational definitions and exemplars of the themes, practiced rating five stories, and then jointly rated ten adoption entrance narratives. After the raters achieved adequate reliability for each item, they rated the remainder of the stories in common. Interclass correlations were calculated across all 105 stories and revealed adequate to excellent reliability on seven of the nine dimensions (openness = .69, deception = .97, special child = .83, fate = .63, different = .84, rescue [positive] = .78, and reconnection [negative] = .67). Two items (rescue [negative] and reconnection [positive]) were dropped from the analysis due to low interrater reliability (rescue = .46 and reconnection = .36). The raters' scores for the remaining dimensions were each averaged and then used in the final analysis.

Results

The inductive thematic analysis used to address RQ1, that asked which themes would emerge from adoption entrance stories, revealed seven themes: openness, deception, chosen child, fate, difference, rescue, and reconnection (see Table 1). The following section describes each theme.

Theme	Example	<i>n</i>	%
Openness	For all of my life that I can remember I've known that I was adopted. My parents have let me read a long letter that my birth mother had given to the adoption agency. They've been very, very open about the whole process.	56	52.8
Deception	My parents never intended on telling me or my brother about our adoptions. It was to be their secret.	19	17.9
Chosen	I was special because they got to choose me. I remember feeling very special after they told me how I was different but only because they didn't have me like normal moms and dads. I remember feeling very happy because I felt very special.	47	44.3
Fate	They prayed and prayed for God to give them children to raise. They told us that we were special because God let them "pick" us.	14	13.2
Different	It made me feel as though I wasn't a part of the family. I was different. I always felt different.	8	7.5
Rescue	My biological parents were very young, 18-17, and could not take care of me, but they loved me enough to give me life and to give me to a family that could love me and take care of me.	49	46.2
Reconnection	I am really wanting to find my birth mother due to my adoptive mother and I don't speak.	17	16.0

Adoption Entrance Narrative Themes

Openness

Adoptees frequently cited openness as an important characteristic underlying their adoption story. In these stories, adoptees expressed that their families had "always been open" with them, or they "have always known" about their adoption. One participant said, "For all of my life that I can remember I've known that I was adopted. [My parents have] been very, very open about the whole process." Many participants discussed adoption as something very natural to their childhood and identity (i.e., "It was the most natural thing in the world"). These adoptees said that their adoptive parents had always been very honest and willing to talk about their adoption with them. Many of the adoptees seemed proud of their parents' choice to create an environment of openness in the family. They often contrasted their experience with those who learned about their adoption as a surprise, and were thankful for their coherent life story.

Deception

When deception was present in a narrative, it seemed to have a distinct and forceful impact on the adoption story. Deception usually pertained to the way the adoptee discovered his or her adoption. They may have found out as a surprise from another person (i.e., "The sister blurted out to me that I was adopted"), and some found out themselves (i.e., "I found out that I was adopted when I read some papers that my parents were completing about my brother also adopted [*sic*]"). Others always knew they were adopted, but later found out that their stories were partially inaccurate. In these stories, adoptees seemed to make

meaning of their deception in different, yet deliberate, ways, ranging from immediate acceptance to lingering resentment toward the adoptive parents. Negative reactions were often accompanied by a story of that deception's impact on the adoptees' lives. Others would have liked the deception to be handled in a different manner, but seemed to understand how difficult of a task it must be. The following participant exemplified this attitude:

My adoptive mother sat me down when I was 11 years old, at our kitchen table, to tell me she had to talk to me about something. Mind you—I'm 11 at the time—a few months away from starting my period, and heading down that pre-teen road that is rocky enough on its own!! She said, "You know you're adopted, right?" That's all she said—I had no idea what she was talking about—but when it hit me, I burst into tears, and couldn't stop. She might as well have hit me with a brick on the side of my head. It was like she decided when I turned 11, to tell me that I didn't belong there. I know that's not what she meant it; and she was obviously nervous, but she handled it wrong.

Chosen child

Adoptees with stories that contained the theme chosen child attributed their adoption to their adoptive parents' deliberate decisions, as opposed to an external or God-like force. These adoptees saw their adoption as a purposeful action, not a random occurrence. Participants whose narratives contained this theme repeated, "I was picked," "I was chosen," "My adoptive parents wanted me," and "My birth mother chose them." The repetition element of Owen's (1984) thematic criteria was emphasized in this theme. Notably, the aforementioned phrases were often repeated multiple times within one narrative.

A prevalent element to this theme was that one's chosen status made him or her special, unique, and good. Oftentimes, the adoptees communicated the idea of being picked and of being special in the same thought. One adoptee framed it this way: "I remember feeling very special after they told me how I was different but only because they didn't have me like normal mom and dads. I remember feeling very happy because I felt very special."

Fate

Whereas the chosen child theme recognized the adoptive parents as responsible for the success of the adoption, the fate theme asserted that destiny united them with their adoptive parents. They recognized that their family is a special kind of family; bloodlines are unneeded because fate brought them together. These participants attributed their destiny to a greater being, such as God. The assumption is that this adoption was out of human control and instead controlled by higher powers. The adoptees often cited a miracle or phenomenon that indicated their adoption was destiny. For example, one adoptee reported that her brother arrived on their mother's birthday: "It was the best birthday present she was ever given!" Other miracle instances were cited when the timing of "the call" that a baby was available occurred at unexpected times. The adoption process was referenced often in these instances, where the adoptive parents were left to wait at the whim of the cosmos. Regardless of the being or force responsible, the adoptive family had no control over the situation; thus, the adoption became fate.

Difference

Adoptees who incorporated the theme of difference into their stories expressed that they felt uncomfortable and often outcast because of their status as an adoptee. These participants felt different because they knew that their life stories began differently. When this difference was expressed in the story, it permeated the entire adoption entrance narrative. Once difference was established, the story seemed to be tainted by the adoptee's disappointment or confusion about being adopted. One participant expressed this difference:

I was adopted WAY back when it was popular to tell adopted kids "they were special" because the adoptive family wanted and loved them so much. This never sat well with me for two reasons first, it made me feel even more different from other kids than I already felt and, second, it put a lot of pressure on me to, in fact, BE special.

Participants often expressed feelings of difference through reports of feeling outcast (i.e., "It was like she decided when I turned 11, to tell me that I didn't belong there"), or through their conceptualization of adoption (i.e., "My a[doptive] mother would rock me to sleep with a song she made up about me being 'Mommy's adopted baby girl'."). Some narratives depicted difference as a response from their peers about their adoption, as with this adoptee: "I went to school and shared with some of my friends that I was adopted and remember how they teased me because they thought I was somehow different now."

Rescue

Rescue was often expressed implicitly by explaining the reason that the children's birth parents could not or chose to not to raise them (i.e., "I was told that the mother who gave birth to me was too young to raise me and didn't have a daddy for me"), or explicitly by demonstrating that the child underwent a period of abandonment (i.e., "I was in a foster home for a little over 3 months before my adoptive parents brought me home."). In both scenarios, the adoptive parents came to rescue the child from a potentially threatening experience. The message in these types of narratives is that their adoptive family is the better family.

Many of these adoptees portrayed their birth parents' decision as one of external circumstances. Their birth parents were too young (e.g., "My mom told me that my mother was 16 and felt she was too young to [take] care of a child, so she put me up for adoption"), unable to financially support a child (e.g., "My parents have also showed [*sic*] me pictures of my birth-mother who was too young to be able to financially support a child"), and was generally unable (e.g., "My understanding at the time was that my birth mother wasn't able to raise me") to care for the participant. Regardless of the specific reason presented, this suggests that the adoption was not the birth parents' "fault" and that the situation was out of their control.

Reconnection

Those stories containing the reconnection theme demonstrated the adoptee's desire to or struggle with reconnecting with his or her birth parents. Some of the adoptees expressed

some affect toward “the search” (i.e., fear, hesitation, and excitement), and others were very factual in their indication to find their birth families (i.e., “I’m still looking for two brothers”). Oftentimes, the adoptees expressed a tension between interest and fear of finding their birth families, as expressed by this participant: “I don’t know how to look for [my birth parents]. And what happens if by some chance I find them and they want nothing to do with me? I’m not sure I could maintain my sanity.” These adoptees are curious, but apprehensive to expose themselves to the traumas of their past. Although the narrative prompt did not mention the search for birth parents, these participants had reconnection incorporated into their narratives.

Through inductive analysis of the adoptees’ entrance narratives, we found seven overarching themes: openness, deception, chosen child, fate, difference, rescue, and reconnection. Each of these themes is unique and contributory to the stories constructed by these adoptees and their parents. The presence of these seven themes, and the intermixing of them within the stories, demonstrates the complexity of these adoption entrance narratives. The following section describes our investigation of these intricate themes on adoptees’ self-concept.

Narrative Theme Salience and Self-Concept Development

The hypotheses in this study sought to understand the salience of narrative themes on adoptees’ self-concept development. To test the links between story theme salience and the dependent variables, standard multiple regressions were run to examine the extent to which each of the seven themes predicted adoptees’ self-concept, as measured by self-esteem and generalized trust. For H1 on the links between story themes salience and self-esteem, results indicated the seven themes accounted for approximately 14% of the variance in self-esteem, $F(7, 93) = 2.09, p = .05$. Specifically, the salience of the theme chosen ($\beta = .25; t = 2.48, p < .05$) and the salience of negative reconnection ($\beta = -.22; t = -2.08, p < .05$) were the significant predictors in the model, such that a highly salient focus on anxiety or negativity surrounding reconnection with birthparents negatively predicted self-esteem, whereas a high focus on being chosen and special positively predicted self-esteem. Thus, adoptees who focused their stories more on negative reconnection with their birth parents reported lower self-esteem. Those who focused their stories more on being chosen by their adoptive parents reported higher self-esteem.

H2 investigated the relationship between story theme salience and generalized trust. The generalized trust scale (PHN) is broken into two concepts of generalized trust: trust and cynicism. The model was a significant predictor of generalized trust, accounting for 15.3% of the variance, $F(7, 93) = 2.40, p < .05$. Again, chosen ($\beta = .25; t = 2.42, p < .05$) was a significant predictor in the model. There was also a trend for the salience of the different theme ($\beta = .19; t = 1.87, p = .06$). Thus, those adoptees who reported a greater focus on being chosen and being different tended to have higher scores of generalized trust. The model for generalized trust-cynicism was not significant. Thus, H2 was partially supported.

Discussion

Family stories, such as adoption entrance narratives, both affect (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; McAdams, 1993; Schechtman, 1996; Vangelisti et al., 1999) and reflect (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Grotevant, 1997) individual self-concept construction and well-being. Although scholars often assert that adoption entrance narratives impact adoptive child well-being and adjustment later in life (Friedlander, 1999; Galvin, 2003; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001), there is no existing empirical evidence supporting that claim. Thus, the goal of this study, in addition to uncovering adoption entrance narrative themes from the adoptee's point of view, was to assess the link between adoption entrance narrative content and individual self-concept. Findings demonstrate the complexity and multidimensionality of adoption entrance narratives. Seven narrative themes emerged in participants' narratives, and three of these themes seemed particularly important in understanding adult adoptees' self-concept. This study contributes to scholarly understanding of adoption and narratives by first providing an account of adoption entrance narratives from the perspective of adoptees, and then by providing a unique look into the impact of these narratives on adoptee identity.

This study provided an understanding of the social construction of adoption entrance narratives from the perspectives of the adoptees themselves. Adoption research, particularly with a communication focus, has largely represented the adoption experience from the perspective of adoptive parents (Harrigan, 2010; Suter, 2008). Although this information is useful in developing an understanding of the adoption experience, the perspective of the adoptee must be considered as well (Docan-Morgan, 2008; Kranstuber, 2009). Adoptive parents help their children to construct their adoptive identities, but little is known about the way adoptees internalize their parents' messages and construct their adoptive identity themselves.

The importance of studying the adoptee's perspective is apparent when considering the variations in perspectives between adoptive parents and adopted children. These variations are evident when comparing Krusiewicz and Wood's (2001) findings of themes in adoption entrance narratives with this study's findings. Destiny and rescue were common themes in both the Krusiewicz and Wood's parents' narratives and the adoptees' adoption entrance narratives in this study. This study's chosen child theme also has common threads with Krusiewicz and Wood's compelling connection theme. These commonalities support Krusiewicz and Wood's and Friedlander's (1999) claims that parents help their adopted children understand adoption and adoptive identity through narrative. It seems that adoptees are incorporating some of the messages crafted by their parents into their own adoption entrance narratives.

Differences in adoptive parents' and adoptees' stories seem to exist as well. Unlike in adoptees' stories, the revelation of the adoption was not a consistent theme in the parents' accounts (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Adopted individuals readily elaborated on the way in which they learned about their adoption, suggesting that the vehicle for transporting the story may be as significant as the story itself. Likewise, the participants of this study did not seem to be motivated to legitimize their family form through their stories, as did Krusiewicz and Wood's participants. Researchers have found that adoptive parents report

feeling socially stigmatized because adoption is viewed as “second rate” (Miall, 1987), but this study’s population of adoptees did not report such feelings of stigmatization. It seems that many of the adoptees did not feel the negative social pressures that their parents had. Perhaps this is because adoptees have integrated their adoptive identity into their personal identity (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004) or perhaps because adoptive parents are more frequently and explicitly asked to justify their decision to adopt (Suter, 2009).

The second main contribution of this study is the investigation of the relationship between adoption entrance narratives and adoptee self-concept—specifically, self-esteem and generalized trust. Of the seven themes that inductively emerged from adoptees’ stories, the salience of the themes chosen child, negative reconnection, and difference emerged as significantly contributing to or reflecting on adoptees’ self-concepts.

Adoptee Self-Esteem

Adoption researchers have reported heterogeneous findings regarding adoptee self-esteem levels (March, 1995). In reaction to this heterogeneity, March stated, “adoption appears to be the only factor to consolidate these individuals into any distinct, unified group” (p. 654). Our study contributed to the understanding of adoptee self-esteem by finding that the salience of two themes in the adoption entrance narrative (e.g., chosen child and negative reconnection) was associated with adoptee self-esteem. This suggests adoptees’ narrative sense-making of their adoptive experiences affect or reflect their self-esteem. Specifically, those who have the chosen theme report higher levels of self-esteem. Those with narratives containing an element of being chosen for adoption often reflected on their experience as an adoptee as somehow “better” than that of nonadoptive individuals. These adoptees see that, unlike most parents, their parents had the option of *choosing* their child, thereby implying that there are inherent benefits to adoption. For example, one adoptee’s parents told her to tell other children “that I was special because they [my parents] got to choose me—their parents didn’t have that option.” Because self-esteem levels are based on people’s comparison of their lives and traits to others, it seems as though the “chosen children” feel as though they are in a relatively better or more unique and special situation than their nonadopted peers and, thus, have comparably higher self-esteem than adoptees who do not see this as central to their entrance narratives.

Those with a story containing negative reconnection, however, were found to have significantly lower self-esteem than their peers. It is important to note that the survey prompt did not ask for the current state of the adoptees’ relationships with their birthparents or their feelings on reuniting with their birth parents. The adoptees chose to include this element of their adoption story, thereby emphasizing and reflecting the importance of the issue of searching for one’s birth parents. People who expressed negativity regarding their potential reconnection seemed to be making sense of their adoption and adoptive identity through their entrance narrative. In stories containing the negative reconnection theme, adoptees grappled with anger, anxiety, or asking hypothetical questions about a potential reconnection with their birth parents. Previous research suggests that adoptees often cite the need for a more cohesive identity or a stronger self-concept as a significant reason to search for their birth parents (Sachdev, 1992; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). These findings may help to explain the link between a negative focus on birth parent reconnection and adoptee

self-esteem. Dunbar and Grotevant (2004) asserted that adoptees need to integrate their adoptive identity into their personal identity to be psychologically well in later life. The authors speculate that this process of adoptive identity integration is reflected in the stories adoptees tell about their experience. The low self-esteem of adoptees whose narratives focused on negative reconnection may be a product or precursor to their anxiety and ongoing process of adoption identity integration.

Adoptee Generalized Trust

The elements and perspectives represented in one's personal myth also are importantly linked to that person's view of the social world (Vangelisti et al., 1999). This study supports this claim by noting that the salience of adoption entrance narrative themes are associated with adoptees' levels of generalized trust. Chosen child and difference themes were significant predictors of higher levels of generalized trust. The chosen child finding supports existing theorizing suggesting that positive views of self relate to positive views of others (Fromm, 1947); and, thus, those who have secure views of themselves may also have secure and content views of the world. Those with the chosen child theme also had significantly higher self-esteem than other adoptees. They were taught that they were special and unique in the world, and it seems that this positive view of self is also reflective of an optimistic view of the world. It may be that these adoptees learned to value and trust themselves; and, in turn, they projected that value and trust onto others in their entrance narratives.

Results also indicated that those who incorporated feelings of difference into their narratives also reported higher levels of generalized trust. Although this result seems counterintuitive, a more in-depth examination of stories with highly salient themes of difference may help to explain this finding. Specifically, in their stories, adoptees with a salient theme of difference reported feeling different from the norm and unable to conform in certain social arenas. This feeling of difference was accompanied by a desire to be like their peers. Thus, they feel different from those around them, but still trust and like those people. In some of these stories, adoptees expressed the desire to be like their schoolmates or look like their families. For example, one adoptee expressed her feelings of difference through physical features in her family: "I was very lucky to have been adopted by them. The only distinction in that family was 'me'. I felt different, and I was different. [My parents] both had dark brown hair I had strawberry blonde hair, they both had brown eyes I had blue." Indeed, social comparison theory notes that people naturally make comparisons of themselves to others, and sometimes those comparisons function to idealize others at the expense of our own self-concepts (Festinger, 1954). Thus, although those with salient levels of difference expressed feelings of difference, they also seemed to be more trusting of others, perhaps due to the importance they place on social comparison. In summary, the results indicate that adoption entrance narratives are complex, multidimensional and important to adoptees' self-concept. Adoptees whose entrance narratives contained the theme of chosen child tended to have higher levels of self-esteem and generalized trust. Those stories containing the difference theme also exhibited higher levels of generalized trust, whereas those adoptees with stories containing negative reconnection tended to have lower levels of self-esteem.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study contributes to the scholarly understanding of adoption and communication, a few limitations must be considered. First, it is important to note the strong female presence in the study's sample ($n = 89$; 85.7%). Scholars have noted that parents tell family stories differently to boys than to girls (Reese, 1996). Thus, this study's findings largely reflect adult female adoptees' entrance narratives. Future research should investigate the differences present in these stories based on the sex of the child. This would reflect both the parents' decisions to alter the story based on the sex and the differences or similarities in the child's interpretation of the story.

The second limitation lies in the participant selection process. As with many convenience sample data collections, the participants were self-selected into the project. Those who were motivated to divulge their story actively volunteered for the study. Likewise, online discussion groups may attract adoptees with high adoption salience; thus, the sample may be skewed based on that characteristic. Those whose adoption is central to their identity may have different experiences from those whose adoption is a less integral feature of their sense of self.

This study advances the relatively new field of communication research in adoption, and allows communication scholars to continue building on this knowledge base. First, scholars should investigate the influence of adoption entrance narratives on *family* identity, well-being, and functioning. This study demonstrates that adoptive family stories are related to *individuals'* senses of self, but scholars are unaware of how family stories, like adoption entrance narratives, may also be related to overall family climate. Second, researchers should probe into other stories that function as sense-making devices for adoptees. Family narratives that are passed down through generations often highlight likeness of families (Stone, 1988). How do these family stories help or hurt adoptee family cohesion, functioning, and satisfaction?

Third, communication scholars should investigate the function of adoption narrative storytelling as coping strategies. Scholars have noted that the act of storytelling can help participants construct a sense of understanding and control (Pennebaker, 1992; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Weber, Harvey, & Stanley, 1987). This sense-making can be potentially beneficial for individual health and well-being (Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003; Koenig Kellas, Trees, Schrod, LeClair-Underberg, & Willer, 2010). Indeed, adopted individuals need to secure their adoptive identity to be mentally healthy as adults (Grotevant, 1997), and perhaps telling the story of their birth can mediate that process, particularly for individuals whose adoptions are considered difficult or negative.

This study's findings have both practical and theoretical implications. Practically, these findings could inform adoption practitioners and adoptive parents on the most beneficial types of adoption entrance narratives for adoptees. Educating on adoption issues helps parents construct healthy discursive messages and, consequently, help adoptees create positive identities (Brooks, Simmel, Wind, & Barth, 2005). Adoptive parents can be better informed on the influence of their adoption entrance narratives on their children. Academically, these findings will advance our knowledge of adoptive family use of discourse to create, maintain, and manage their family and individual identities. This focus on discourse

illuminates the centrality of communication in these “discourse dependent families” (Galvin, 2003) and advances the argument that communication scholars are appropriately situated for the study of adoptive families.

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