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Birth Parents: Blogging The Emotional Journey Through Adoption

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Birth Parents: Blogging The Emotional Journey Through Adoption

By

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University – University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

Adoption often focuses on the adoptive parents and the child. Birth parents are frequently forgotten about even though the adoption process would not be possible without them. This study looks at the birth parents' experiences and the emotions they often endure. A textual analysis research design was used to gain insight into the birth parents' journey through the adoption process, using blogs written by birth mothers and birth fathers. Four blogs were studied with two written by birth mothers and two authored by birth fathers. Qualitative analysis was applied through grounded theory which utilizes coding to deciphering themes. This study brought to light the themes of a) identity, b) relationships with the subthemes of intimacy and support, c) "It's a hard line to tow" that includes, guilt/shame and stigma, d) "Utter devastation" which incorporates grief and loss, and e) alienation that consists of rejection, loss of control, and being misunderstood. The findings support the previous literature and have implications for future social work practice.

Keywords: birth parent blogs, birth parent support and seven core issues of adoption.

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Birth Parents: Blogging the Emotional Journey Through Adoption

Adoption is a well-known and wide-spread concept that effects many people. Sixty percent of Americans have a connection to adoption in some capacity (The Donaldson Institute, 2015). Birth parents, estimated at up to ten million, have placed between one and five million American children for adoption (Baden & Wiley, 2005). Researchers and clinicians often refer to the members involved in an adoption as the adoption triad. The triad consists of the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the adoptee. In the history of adoption studies, research has consistently omitted examining adoption through the birth parents' point of view, making birth parents the least studied member of the triad (Baden & Wiley, 2005; Brodzinsky & Livingston Smith, 2014; Claridge, 2014; Haugaard, Schustack & Dorman, 1998; Logan, 1996). The birth parents are the initiators of the adoption process and adoption would not be possible without them. Although birth parents have a huge role in an adoption, they are often forgotten about after the placement of their child has been made, as the focus is on the child entering his or her adoptive family.

When making the decision to place a child for adoption, birth parents have many factors they must consider, including the whether or not they are open to contact between themselves and the child, which is known as the level of openness. The first option presented to them is to enter into a confidential or closed adoption. This type of adoption does not allow any contact between the birth parents and the adoptee. Identifying information of the birth parents is also often kept confidential (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). The second option presented to them is a semi-open or mediated adoption. A mediated adoption allows contact between the birth parents and adoptee but it is made indirectly through the adoption agency or a lawyer (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). The final option is an adoption that is completely open. An open adoption allows for contact to be made directly with the birth parents

and adoptive child and all identifying information is available (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). These three levels of openness must be agreed upon by both the birth parents and the adoptive parents.

It is important to remember that the level of openness in adoption is on a continuum and birth parents can create an adoption plan with the adoptive parents based on how much openness each side is comfortable with. When birth parents choose an open adoption, it is possible to increase or decrease the level of openness throughout the years to fit what the birth parents are comfortable with in each season of their life. Whereas a closed adoption remains closed and does not have options to change the level of openness (Chapman, 1986). The choice of openness is an extremely important decision and requires a substantial amount of thought and support.

Social workers play a critical role in facilitating adoptions. The social worker can set the tone for the adoption in a positive or negative way depending on the established relationship with the birth parents (Menard, 1997). It is important that social workers are well trained, knowledgeable about adoption laws (Menard, 1997), understand the sensitive nature of adoption and recognize the importance of allowing the birth mothers to express their feelings in a safe environment (Logan, 1996). Social workers provide ongoing support to the birth parents and assist in preparing them for the emotional reactions they may encounter throughout the adoption process (Christian, McRoy, Grotevant, & Bryant, 1997).

Each member of the triad experiences the adoption in various ways. Silverstein and Kaplan (1982) identified the seven core issues that all members of the triad encounter. The issues include, loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and control (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). The goal of this study is to understand the emotional journey birth parents experience from the decision-making stage all the way through postplacement. Social workers must

understand the seven core issues of adoption and the emotional road the birth parents will face, so that they will be best equipped to prepare and assist birth parents.

Literature Review

The previous literature has looked at the birth parents' journey through the adoption process from pregnancy all the way to placement and beyond. There is documentation of the factors that play into how a birth parent comes to the decision of placing their child for adoption, such as birth father involvement, coercion and social stigma. Once the decision has been made and the child has been placed with an adoptive family, the research then addresses the emotions that a birth parent may experience. It then discusses the impacts the relinquishment of a child will have on the birth parents' subsequent life and where they often turn to for support.

Pre-Adoption

Decision making. Determining to place a child for adoption is a life altering choice for both the birth parents as well as the child. The decision is one that can take months to finalize and has many considerations that go into making the final determination. Many birth parents have similar reasons for making an adoption plan (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a; Cocozzelli, 1989; Deykin, Patti & Ryan, 1988; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Krahn and Sullivan (2015) identified two leading reasons birth parents chose adoption. Those include a lack of preparedness and a belief that adoption would be better for the well-being of the child. Feelings of being unprepared were often due to the birth parents no longer being in a relationship and the birth mother feeling as though she could not parent as a single person (Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Deykin et al. (1988), supported this finding and stated adoption occurs most commonly when the birth parents are not married.

In addition to relationship status and feeling unprepared, personal goals, societal and family attitudes, and socioeconomic status also play a role in the decision making process (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a). Cocozzelli (1989) found a distinct connection between a mother's socioeconomic situation and her decision in placing her child for adoption. Mothers who were of a lower socioeconomic status were more likely to parent their children and mothers who were of a higher socioeconomic status and felt their future plans would be disrupted by parenting were more likely to create an adoption plan (Cocozzelli, 1989). Each birth parent has reasons for placing the child for adoption and all reasons should be validated.

Birth fathers. Although the decision to place a child for adoption should be made by both of the birth parents, researchers often found that the birth father has little to no involvement in the decision making process (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Cicchini 1993; Clapton, 2007; Henny, French, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2011). Brodzinsky and Smith (2014) found that 63 percent of birth fathers were not involved in the decision or adoption process. Similarly, Henney, French, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, and Grotevant (2011) found 63.5 percent of partners were nonparticipants, Cicchini (1993) found 66 percent of fathers had little to no involvement and Clapton (2007) found 40 percent were excluded or banned in the decision making course. Being eliminated from the decision making process can have emotional effects on a birth father. Deykin et al. (1988) found that fathers who felt ignored, consequently fathered more children than those who were included in the adoption process. This finding could be the father's way of attempting to recover from the loss of the previous child to adoption without their involvement (Deykin et al., 1988). There is a clear issue of lack of birth father's participation in the decision-making process whether it was by choice or forced.

Coercion. The decision making process in adoption can also have unwelcome influences, making birth parents feel pressured into one outcome or another (Claridge, 2014; Cushman, Kalmuss, & Namerow, 1993; DeSimone, 1996; Haugaard et al., 1998; Logan, 1996; Wiley & Baden, 2005). Coercion can come from family members, the birth father, parents and even cultural norms (Wiley & Baden, 2005). Cushman, et al. (1993) found that 15 percent of women experienced some level of pressure to make a specific decision. Even if people who are not directly involved are not intentionally attempting to coerce birth parents, pressure can still be perceived through family attitudes and stigmatizing the pregnancy (Claridge, 2014). Logan (1996) found that the majority of birth mothers felt their mothers controlled the decision to make an adoption plan and had a lack of other supports to explore the variety of options available.

The level of coercion perceived by the birth mother can be an indication of the level of grief she will feel later. Haugaard et al. (1998) found that the lack of room to express feelings combined with feeling coerced, led to birth mothers experiencing higher levels of unresolved grief. Similarly, DeSimone (1996) also found elevated levels of unresolved grief when the birth mother felt the decision to relinquish her child did not align with their feelings and wishes at the forefront. Feeling forced into such a life altering decision can lead to issues with coping later in life and leave doubt in the birth mother's mind.

Social stigma. There can be a fair amount of shame associated with choosing to place a child for adoption due to the social stigma (Claridge, 2014; DeSimone, 1996; Henney et al., 2011). Birth parents often feel ashamed of an unplanned pregnancy due to societies' view of it being irresponsible. Birth parents also do not fit the normal idea of the American family that society has romanticized, which contributes to the shame (Claridge, 2014). DeSimone (1996) found that many women did not disclose the pregnancy or plans for adoption to family and

friends due to the stigma attached to out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Birth mothers may also feel like society will view them as an inadequate because of their decision to place their child for adoption (Henney et al., 2011). Social stigma can play a large role in the birth parents' decision to create an adoption plan, as they may fear how others will view them for the rest of their lives based on one decision.

Post-Adoption

Grief resolution. After making the decision to place a child for adoption, birth parents experience a range of emotions with grief often being one of the strongest (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Chapman, Dorner, Silber, & Winterberg, 1986; Christian et al., 1997; DeSimone, 1996). Placing a child for adoption is considered a huge loss that needs to be grieved. Birth parents need support, validation and understanding from their family and friends in order to grieve their loss. (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014). DeSimone (1997) indicated the importance of being accepted by others, and being encouraged to express her feelings greatly assists birth mothers in grief resolution. Accepting the reality of the loss and adjusting to not having the child are a few of the first steps in beginning to mourn (Chapman et al., 1986), which require support to process. However, without the proper support, birth parents can experience poor grief resolution.

Christian et al. (1997) discusses that poor grief resolution can be indicated by “crying during the interview, attempts to deny or repress the past, expressions of regret or guilt, depression...continuing nightmares about the child and the inability to move beyond the placement decision” (pp. 45-46). On the other hand, positive grief resolution can be indicated by “optimistic feelings about the decision, ongoing positive relationships, acceptance of the decision, ability to separate self from placed child...ability to move beyond the placement, and ability to express satisfaction with current life situations” (Christian et al., 1997, p. 46).

DeSimone (1996) supports this in finding the higher a birth mother's satisfaction with her current life situation, the lower level of grief she may have held.

Emotions. Grief is not the only emotion birth parents experience when coping with the adoption of their child (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015; Logan, 1996). Some of the other emotions commonly felt by birth parents are guilt, anger, sadness (Logan, 1996), depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014), confusion, fear, self-loathing, and jealousy (Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Many birth parents indicated the first month after relinquishing their child as the most difficult due to going from an extreme high to the lowest of lows in a very short period of time (Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Logan (1996) found that 82 percent of birth mothers experienced significant depression.

Although it is very common to feel a wide variety of emotions, it is oftentimes difficult to discuss with others (Logan, 1996; Wiley & Baden, 2005). Logan (1996) found birth fathers were perceived by family members as less affected by the adoption due to their lack of discussion around emotions. Similarly, Wiley and Baden (2005) found birth parents believed their emotions were out of proportion to the event that they experienced, which caused hesitation in discussing their feelings. It is important to not diminish the emotions birth parents experience, whether they choose to discuss them or not.

Even when birth parents discuss and work through emotions, it does not mean the emotion goes away. For many birth parents, the emotions surrounding the adoption stay with them forever (Clapton, 2007; Haugaard et al., 1998). Clapton (2007) found that birth fathers' "feelings and thoughts regarding the experience continued as a source of discomfort for a significant majority of the men throughout their subsequent lives" (p. 66). There was a permanent sense of loss and a shadow cast over their lives (Clapton, 2007). Haugaard et al.

(1998) stated, “many birth mothers report that these feelings do not diminish over the years, but remain strong” (p. 96). It is clear that adoption has a life-long impact on birth parents and can evoke a wide range of emotions.

Level of openness. As discussed previously, there are different levels of openness in adoption. Birth parents are allowed to choose what level they are comfortable with, oftentimes with discussion and input from the adoptive family. This decision is extremely important, as it can greatly affect the birth parents’ ability to cope. Brodzinsky and Smith (2014) reported that 83 percent of birth parents were in an open adoption, 11 percent were in a mediated situation and 6 percent were in a closed adoption. The more open the adoption arrangements are the greater grief resolution the birth parents experience (Christian et al., 1997; Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2007; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). This correlation could be due to the ability to feel connected and be reassured that the right decision was made (Christian et al., 1997). It is important for the birth mothers to know how the child was doing and that they were happy (Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Cocozzelli (1989) stated “an open placement may encourage certain mothers to relinquish who would not have relinquished under traditional circumstances” (p. 42). Having access to the child, eases the birth mother’s mind and made the emotions easier to process.

Closed adoptions leave much more to the imagination and there can be many unanswered questions. Birth mothers who choose a closed adoption are more likely to report that they are unhappy with their decision to place their child for adoption (Henney et al., 2007), compared to birth mothers in open adoptions who reported they were more satisfied with the placement arrangements (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014). Henney et al. (2007) found birth mothers in closed adoptions may not resolve their grief as well as those in an open adoption due to the lack of basic

information, such as updates and contact with the adoptive family. Similarly, Krahn and Sullivan (2015) found that “birth mothers were unanimous in noting that the experience of grief and loss would be greater in a closed adoption” (pp. 39-40). Wiley and Baden (2005) also support this finding and reported birth mothers in closed adoptions indicated “more traumatic dreams, sleep disruptions, and a sense that experience is surreal” (p. 26).

Regret. Birth parents can experience regret about their decision to place their child for adoption (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Krahn and Sullivan (2015) reported 7 percent of birth mothers regretted their decision to adopt; while Grotevant and McRoy (1998) stated 20 percent of birth mothers were dissatisfied with their adoption plan. Although most birth parents do not display remorse about their overall decision to place for adoption, there are other aspects of the adoption process that they regret. These include, “not spending more time with the baby at the hospital, not holding the baby, not being more assertive with their wishes for openness... and not choosing the right adoptive couple for their child” (Krahn & Sullivan, 2015, p. 33). It is extremely important that birth parents consider all of their options and seek assistance when making an adoption plan.

Birth Parents

Birth fathers. Birth fathers are not as identifiable as birth mothers, therefore they are often forgotten. Deykin et al. (1988) stated birth fathers are almost invisible in the adoption research. However, there have been a few studies looking at the adoption process through the lens of a birth father (Clapton, 2007; Deykin et al., 1988; Menard, 1997). Menard (1997) found birth fathers often do not engage with the baby until the birth mother offers them the opportunity. This lack of interaction could lead to birth fathers not feeling like they are a part of the process as well as a sense of exclusion. Clapton (2007) found that many birth fathers experienced an

immense sense of loss, of relationships, family dreams and contact with their child. Menard (1997) reported a correlation between active participation in the birth and a positive impact on the relationship with the birth mother. If the birth father was more involved in the birth, it positively strengthened the relationship with the birth mother. It is also important to note that the impact of adoption on birth fathers is no different than it is on birth mothers and fathers need just as much support (Clapton, 2007).

Romantic relationships. Placing a child for adoption can create a large amount of tension within the relationship between the birth parents as well as future romantic relationships (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a; Christian et al., 1997; Claridge, 2014; Henney et al., 2011; Wiley & Baden, 2005). Often times birth parents will lose their relationship with one another due to the stress of the placement decision (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a). Christian et al. (1997) reported “birthmothers who were still in a relationship with the birthfather were at greater risk for prolonged grief” (p. 51). The birth mother’s grief process was unable to fully run its course because being with the birth father constantly triggered more feelings of guilt and shame (Christian et al., 1997). Henney et al. (2011) stated that placing a child for adoption does not predict if a future relationship will function poorly or well, however, that life experience will greatly affect each relationship, including future romantic relationships.

The relationship between the birth mother and father may not work out, but the adoption stays with both parents into their next relationship. Some birth parents will quickly find a new relationship in hopes of filling the loss (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a). While other individuals will separate themselves from romantic connections and become detached in attempts to protect themselves (Claridge, 2014; Wiley & Baden, 2005). Many birth mothers also reported interpersonal issues with their current relationship due to the history of adoption

(Claridge, 2014). However, even though creating subsequent relationships after an adoption is difficult, many people are successful. Henney et al. (2011) found that the majority of birth mothers were satisfied with their current romantic relationship. It is possible to establish healthy relationships post adoption.

Support systems. It is important to seek out a support system when placing a child for adoption. The emotional journey through the process can be difficult. Brodzinsky and Smith (2014) stated birth parents “begin to recover from their loss with the passage of time and with appropriate support” (p. 178). The support system can include, family and friends, professional help, other birth mothers and self-help. Each birth parent can find what types of support works best for them.

Family and friends. Family and friends are often one of the most significant supports a person has (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Christian et al, 1997; DeSimone, 1996; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Parents, siblings, spouses, aunts, and close friends were identified as some of the people that supported birth parents the most (Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). DeSimone (1996) reported that birth mothers needed to be accepted by others and allowed to express her feelings. Brodzinsky and Smith (2014) suggested having family and friends receive formal education on adoption so they are better equipped to support the birth parents after placement. Receiving appropriate support from family and friends by way of validation and understanding, birth mothers were able to achieve higher grief resolution (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Christian et al., 1997).

Professional help. As much as family and friends can provide support, sometimes it is beneficial to receive support from trained professionals (Claridge, 2014; Cushman et al., 1993; DeSimone, 1996; Henney et al., 2007; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Henney et al. (2007) and Krahn

and Sullivan (2015) indicated that formal support from the adoption agency (social worker or counselor) as well as formal therapy is important and will benefit the birth parents in their emotional journey. Claridge (2014) discussed how therapy can assist with processing the decision, emotions and loss surrounding the adoption from someone who is competent in adoption. It is important to have an outlet to discuss thoughts and feelings in a non-judgmental setting (DeSimone, 1996). Cushman (1993) found the vast majority of birth parents had talked with a counselor or social worker for assistance in making the decision and/or post-placement emotions. Trained professionals are a good resource for birth parents and have been shown to be effective.

Peer Support. Having access to someone who has been through the same experience is an extremely beneficial support (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). It allows birth parents to discuss the ups and downs of an adoption with someone who has been in or is in their situation. Brodzinsky and Smith (2014) state, “this type of experience reduces stigma for birthmothers and provides an informal network of emotional support to help them during periods of distress” (p. 181). Similarly, Krahn and Sullivan (2015) also established that birth mothers had indicated other birth mothers were a great source of support. Birth parents go through a unique experience and can effectively support one another.

Self-help. There are certain aspects of coping that a person can initiate and complete on their own (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a; DeSimone, 1996). DeSimone (1996) found that birth mothers who were able to move on with their life and achieve a level of accomplishment, such as graduating from college, raising a family, or establishing a rewarding career, demonstrated a lower level of grief. While being productive in life has shown to help in the process, Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013a) states that keeping a journal or blog

may also serve as a positive outlet for a birth parents emotions. These are all things that a birth parent is able to take control of in their life post placement that may assist in processing the vast array of emotions.

Conceptual Framework

Silverstein and Kaplan (1982) identified seven core issues in adoption. The seven issues include: loss, rejection, guilt and shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and control. These core problems affect all members of the adoption triad in some way. Each of these issues will be explored through the birth parents' point of view.

Loss is a central aspect of adoption. Birth parents experience a significant loss by placing their child for adoption. However, the physical loss of the child is not the only loss birth parents will experience. The loss of the parenting role, loss of relationships, and the possible loss of contact with their child are also losses that may be encountered. Loss remains in a birth parents' life and is never fully forgotten (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

Birth parents will also experience rejection throughout the adoption process. Rejection can come in the form of rejection from the child, exclusion from family and friends and repudiation from society (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). Silverstein and Kaplan (1982) state feelings of loss are often heightened by rejection. When birth parents make an adoption plan, their family and friends may not agree with the decision, thus resulting in perceived rebuff. The social stigma of placing a child for adoption can also play into the birth parent's sense of rejection. Being refused by their child can also be one of birth parent's biggest fears. Birth parents often feel the need to hide their relinquishment in order to avoid being denied by society.

Guilt and shame are often at the forefront of emotions for birth parents. The social stigma of unplanned pregnancy often elicits feelings of embarrassment for a birth mother (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). Birth parents also repeatedly feel guilty for placing their child for adoption. Feelings of shame are also associated with the inability to provide and care for their child. Guilt and shame again can be brought forward by family, friends and society looking down upon birth parent's decision (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

Grief is one of the strongest emotions felt by birth parents. Adoption is often seen as a joyful event and the grief of the birth parents is repeatedly forgotten about. Birth parents will most likely experience intense grief upon relinquishing their child. However, it can linger throughout their lives due to the lack of a distinguishing event of closure for the birth parents (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

Birth parents may have a threatened sense of identity due to the loss of parenting (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). Birth parents often regularly experience role confusion. Although birth parents may identify themselves as parents, they do not have an outward display of being a parent. Silverstein and Kaplan (1982) stated neither set of parents (birth or adoptive) can fully claim the adoptive child which contributes to identity confusion.

Intimacy can be greatly affected for birth parents. Often times sex, intimacy, and pregnancy are associated with relinquishment of their child (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). This connection can cause birth parents to avoid becoming intimate with subsequent partners. Birth parents often fear commitment and affection in relationships including, romantic partners, family and friends and even future children (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

Birth parents may feel like they lose their sense of control. Not only do birth parents relinquish their child, but they also surrender their control. This conflict in emotions may lead to feelings of victimization or powerlessness (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). Birth parents go from being in control of making the decision to place their child for adoption and what level of openness they are comfortable with to the complete loss of control once the adoption is complete.

These seven core issues are the center of the adoption process. Silverstein and Kaplan (1982) state “identifying and integrating these core issues into pre-adoption education, post-placement supervision, and all post-legalized services, including treatment, universalizes and validates triad member’s experiences, decreasing their isolation and feelings of hopelessness” (p. 1). If social workers are aware and knowledgeable of these core problems, birth parents will be better prepared for the emotions and events of the adoption. The more the seven core issues are studied, the more qualified social workers will be in assisting birth parents.

Research Question

Researchers determined that birth parents are the least studied member of the adoption triad. The current study will attempt gain more understanding of how birth parents display the emotional course. With the conceptual framework of the seven core issues of adoption in mind, the following research question will be examined:

How do birth parents express the seven core issues of adoption when blogging about their adoption journey?

Methods

Research Design

The design of this research project is a textual analysis. A “textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). In order to accomplish this, the researcher makes “an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). For this study, online blogs written by birth mothers and fathers will be used for the text. Considering the primary focus of this study is to look at how birth parents experience the seven core issues of adoption, this research design was chosen because birth parents often use blogging as an outlet to express their emotions freely.

Sample

The sample for this study was chosen by researching adoption blogs. The website <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption/adoption-blogs/> was used to locate blogs that birth parents had written. The specific blogs used were found under the birth mothers and birth fathers tab. A total of four blogs were chosen, two written by birth mothers and two written by birth fathers. The titles of the chosen blogs are as follows: Blessings in Disguise, Adoption in the City, Baby Darling, and Statistically Impossible. Each blog had varying lengths of time that were represented, but this study only used the first year of posts for the purposes of this study. This researcher previewed all of the blogs prior to starting the coding process to ensure adequate amounts of information were available. The authors of the blogs each experienced the adoption process in a different way, were at different phases of the process, and began blogging at various stages.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze each blog, the researcher used grounded theory to identify themes and categories. Grounded theory consists of coding and finding emerging themes directly from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) states grounded theory is interactive and allows the researcher to continue to be involved with the data and find emerging analyses. Grounded theory uses open coding to create a conceptual framework (Padgett, 2008). Coding consisted of listing themes and concepts in the margins of the blogs. When coding was complete, codes were grouped into specific themes that had emerged throughout each of the blogs. The researcher then reviewed the blogs for a second time after determining the themes in order to establish validity.

Findings

The analysis of four blogs written by both birth fathers and birth mothers resulted in a variety of codes which were categorized into themes. The themes developed were consistent with Silverstein and Kaplan's (1982) seven core issues of adoption, along with a few additional themes. The themes identified included all seven-core issues of adoption (loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy and control), along with relationships, support, stigma, and being misunderstood. When comparing the themes, it was decided that the main themes would be identity, relationships with the subthemes of intimacy and support, "It's a hard line to tow" that includes, guilt/shame and stigma, "Utter devastation" which incorporates grief and loss, and alienation that consists of rejection, loss of control and being misunderstood. The researcher felt these five broader themes captured all of the themes and codes that were originally found. These themes represent the experiences of birth fathers and mothers and how they navigated and blogged their way through the adoption process before and after the placement of their child.

Identity

The first theme that emerged was identity. All four of the birth parents struggled with finding their identity of being a mother or father following the relinquishment of their child. The subsequent quotes are directly from the authors of the blogs to highlight this theme:

“Something I have been thinking about a lot and have been having a hard time accepting; is that as much as I want to be, I will not be [my daughter’s] father.” (Baby Darling, May 25, 2011)

“I am not his father but he is still my son. [Adoptive father] is his real father. [Adoptive mother] is his real mother. He is my son. He is [birth mother’s] son.” (Statistically Impossible, August 4, 2010)

These quotes demonstrate how each of the birth fathers struggled with the fact that they are feeling like they are not their child’s father. They are aware that their child will not view them as their father. However, they still identify their child as their own but the label of father versus birth father is difficult for them to establish as their own.

“I struggle daily with the fact that I feel like I’m her mother, yet know I’m not her mommy. There is a fine line between the two, but yet they’re a world apart.” (Blessing in Disguise, October 23, 2011)

“You see, I’m not really a mom. I’m not like my friends who are all parenting their beautiful children. I’m in my own category, but its’ closer to the category of someone without children than it is to the category of someone with children...His life is in other people’s hands, with that fact alone I don’t consider myself a mom.” (Adoption in the City, January 28, 2011)

It is clear from these quotes that the birth mothers are having a difficult time determining their identity as a mother. They do not feel like they are mothers because they are not physically parenting their child on a daily basis. However, they have still been through the experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and all the emotions that go along with these events. Therefore, they feel as though they can relate to other mothers to a certain extent but not fully, which contributes to their internal identity conflict.

This theme was chosen because all of the birth parents experienced similar feelings and discussed their struggles of determining their identity at length. It was apparent that their identity as mothers or fathers was an important part of their adoption process.

Relationships

The second theme that was determined encompasses the importance of relationships in each birth parent's life and has been further broken down into two subthemes of intimacy and support. The birth parents discussed the impact their child's adoption had on the many different relationships in their lives, which reflected the intimacy sub-theme, as well as the need for support from others while going through their adoption journey. The following quotes are a direct reflection of relationships and each subtheme:

“The point being my relationship with my family will never be the same. There has been a lot of healing in the pursuant year, but they’ll never be the same. The unbridled confidence in the trust and support of my family is gone...They are not the comrades I thought they were. They don’t ‘have my back’ as it were.” (Statistically Impossible, June 25, 2010)

This quote demonstrates how relationships outside of the direct adoption can be negatively affected by the placement of a child. The relationship between the triad members are all directly impacted by the decisions surrounding the adoption. However, bloggers identified that extended family of the birth parents were also afflicted. This birth father found that his relationship with his parents and siblings were impacted negatively and he expressed feeling disconnected from them.

“There’s the connection I feel to [birth father]. Honestly, we made this AMAZING kid together, and I do think that connects us in a way I’ll never really have with another man, I guess at least until I have more kids. So no matter how much I move on from my relationship with [birth father], I think there’s still this fine tether back to him that might seem insignificant, but it’s holding me still, after all this time, after all the water under the bridge.” (Adoption in the City, June 25, 2011)

This birth mother describes how the relationship with her child’s birth father will always be present regardless of their relationship status or level of contact. The birth parents share multiple life changing events and will always have an emotional tie to one another. It is important to acknowledge this connection with significance.

This theme shows the evolution of relationships within the birth parents’ lives. The relationships they had prior to their child’s adoption, were changed following the relinquishment. It is clear that relationships between triad members as well as people outside of the triad are all affected by the placement of a child.

Intimacy. This subtheme discusses how closeness in relationships can be difficult for birth parents to navigate following the relinquishment of their child.

“I would like to be at the point where when I go on a first date with someone, I don’t feel like I have to tell them about it or I would be lying about who I am.” (Baby Darling, May 25, 2011)

“I want to tell him, or perhaps a better way to put it, I want him to know. The way for him to find out though keeps getting me caught up...Now there is no pressure, no impending event that will happen, nothing that will force my hand. The only motivation I have is I want him to know. I just wish I didn’t have to tell him.” (Adoption in the City, September 14, 2010)

These quotes establish that subsequent romantic relationships are difficult following the adoption of their child. The birth parents were unsure of how to discuss their child and their adoption in new relationships. They feel as if they have a huge secret that is part of who they are but they are unsure of the other person’s reaction. This creates a difficult dynamic for future relationships and is a source of stress in becoming intimate with a new person.

Support. Birth parents require support throughout their adoption journey. It is important for them to create relationships with people who will provide them the appropriate support.

“And while I know I’m not the only birthfather out there, I’m just tired of feeling like I am. I’m tired of feeling alone. Like on one can relate to me. And more specifically, like I have nowhere to turn for help.” (Baby Darling, March 29, 2011)

It is clear from each of the blogs, many birth parents feel alone in their journey. This quote shows how birth parents need support but they may not know how or where to get the support they need.

“I contacted a therapist last night...I’ve exhausted all of my ideas of ‘self-help’ and they have gotten me nowhere, so I’m turning to therapy and my anti-depressants once again.”
(Blessing in Disguise, September 28, 2011)

“These women [other birth mothers] out there share a really special connection with me, one I don’t think I’ll find anywhere else and I feel so lucky that for a couple hours last night I had a peer.” *(Adoption in the City, September 16, 2010)*

The birth mothers both reached out for support in different ways. The top quote demonstrates how doing things alone and trying self-help methods were not effective and she reached out to formal therapy and medication in order to help her. The second quote shows the support birth mothers can give to each other. They have a unique understanding of one another and can be very beneficial to one another. Support was a theme that emerged throughout each of the blogs. All of the birth parents struggled with not knowing where to turn for support but eventually found people and places where they were able to get the support they needed.

“It’s a hard line to tow.”

The third theme identified has been broken down into two subthemes of guilt/shame and stigma. The birth parents describe their feelings of guilt and shame which also relate to the social stigma that they experience. The subsequent quotes describe the subthemes of guilt/shame and stigma:

Guilt and Shame. Guilt and shame are often emotions that birth parents feel. These emotions stem from different sources as seen in the following quotes.

“I may not get to sleep tonight if I’m honest about this sense of guilt and shame...Because secretly I feel I was intensely selfish in my decision. I feel selfish because I didn’t

sacrifice myself and my life for my son. I feel shame because I believe I was selfish. My guilt is compounded because of the circumstances that led me to place my son for adoption. I didn't do it because I could not raise him. I did it because I would not raise him.” (Statistically Impossible, July 24, 2010)

This quote demonstrates when guilt and shame come from the motivations for placing a child for adoption. This birth father struggled with feeling selfish because he did not want to raise his child, even though he felt like he could have done it.

“It's eight months later. It's not acceptable for me to melt into a blob and not want to leave the house for a week. I, in a way, had an 'excuse' before. In the few weeks after her birth and after my signing the papers, it was almost expected of me to crumble.” (Blessing in Disguise, July 9, 2011).

“I wonder sometimes if what I am feeling is normal. She is almost 1, shouldn't I feel at least a little bit better by now? Better, not worse?” (Blessing in Disguise, October 18, 2011)

This birth mother struggled with feeling guilty because she was not feeling better after a significant amount of time. She indicated that she felt like it was acceptable to struggle with her emotions for the first few months but then started feeling like others were thinking she should be over it. Ultimately, she felt guilty for continuing to struggle with her emotions.

“As I started to not feel the pain all the time I did start to feel the guilt. Was it okay for me to return to a single life, to go out, to be with my friends, to laugh? Was it betraying my son by not acknowledging how much I missed him every moment?” (Adoption in the City, November 16, 2010)

It is clear from this quote that it can be difficult for birth parents to experience happiness and continue to live their lives as they did prior to relinquishment. This birth mother struggled with moving on with her life and not constantly thinking about her son. She felt as though she was disrespecting her son and “betraying” him if she was feeling happy. Guilt and shame was clearly displayed throughout the birth parent’s blogs.

Stigma. Birth parents are often stereotyped and society holds a stigma about them. It was apparent that the birthparents in this study felt the stigma which is displayed in the following quotes.

“Unfortunately, birthfathers are largely silent because they are most often presumed to be “dead-beat-dads” who walked out on the birthmother the moment she announced her pregnancy and never looked back. While that makes for excellent television it is quite far from the truth.” (Statistically Impossible, June 7, 2010)

“The reality is sometimes I think society assumes a birthmom is sort of a screw up, she needs saving. She needs people to come in and ‘fix’ this mess she got into. I’m not that kind of birthmom, the truth is I made choices in my life that led me being in a position where I couldn’t give my son the life I wanted him to have.” (Adoption in the City, November 28, 2010)

These quotes are prime examples of how birth parents experience stigma and stereotypes. In both cases, the birth father and birth mother did not fit the stigma or stereotype of society. The birth father felt as though all birth fathers were looked at as “dead-bead-dads”, which he was not and continued to have an intimate relationship with the birth mother far beyond the placement of their child. The birth mother felt like society saw birth mothers as people who needed to be saved

and helped out of an unfortunate situation they got themselves into. She did not identify with this because she felt like she made a conscious decision to make an adoption plan for her son, not because she needed to be “fixed”. Birth parent stigma is strong within society and the birth parents all used their blogs to discuss how this stigma impacted them. Therefore, it was chosen as a theme.

“Utter Devastation”

The fourth theme determined has to do with the birth parents feelings of grief and loss. Each blogger discussed this theme extensively throughout their blogs. Each birth parent experienced both grief and loss and it was clear these were shared emotions among both birth fathers and mothers. The following quotes illustrate the subthemes of grief and loss:

Grief. Grief was a main theme throughout all of the blogs. Each person experienced a high level of grief, which can be seen in the following quotes.

“The experience was one of utter devastation. A bomb had gone off inside me blowing apart the structure and sense of my understanding. I could barely string together a complete sentence.” (Statistically Impossible, June 8, 2010)

“It’s like when you break a glass into 5 pieces and try to glue it back together, but it doesn’t fit quite right because there’s a teeny tiny shard missing with throws the entire shape off balance. It will never fit back together quite right because it’s like a puzzle and every little piece is crucial. It’s a club I never wanted to be a part of – the club of people who understand what it’s like to leave a piece of your heart behind and try to pick up the pieces and move on as best you can – the club of people who are mothers but have nothing to show for it.” (Blessing in Disguise, July 12, 2011)

“I’m starting to realize this will be a lifelong process, I’m not even close to dealing with all the emotions that came from the original placement, and now I realize I’ll always be bringing home new junk, and those emotions and feelings need to be dealt with when they show up.” (Adoption in the City, February 18, 2011).

Each of these quotes displays the immense sense of grief they went through. They also demonstrate that the grief is a lifelong emotion that will follow them throughout their life. It is not something that is worked through quickly or only experienced for a short amount of time. They will always experience feelings of grief because they are missing a piece of themselves. Grief is a central theme in adoption from the birth parent’s perspective.

Loss. Loss goes along with grief as they are grieving something they lost. The birth parents discuss their experiences of loss in the subsequent quotes.

“I’m sick of feeling like I’ve lost my child before I got to know her.” (Baby Darling, March 29, 2011)

This birth father talks about the feeling of loss being associated with not getting to know his daughter before he “lost” her. In his situation he was unable to meet his daughter before she was placed with the adoptive family. Therefore, his sense of loss began far before the placement as he knew he wasn’t going to be able to see her prior to her placement.

“I worry that I will feel it all over again for each milestone in her life. Last fall I ‘lost’ a baby. When she turns three, will I feel like I’m ‘losing’ a toddler? Will I feel like I am ‘losing’ a kindergartener? I hope not.” (Blessing in Disguise, September 14, 2011).

“Well, all those little losses a parent feels as a child grows, I felt them all in the painful moment I relinquished my child. I still felt the joy, that my child has a life full of

possibilities ahead of him, that perhaps he would be more than what I could even imagine, but it was also heartache. There are differences though with birth parents. We feel that same pain, in a concentrated way, but more so, we have a loss. A parent might feel sadness on their child's first day of school, but then can experience the joy of the situation when their child comes home that afternoon. Even when a child moves away, they are still connected with their parents in a way that the parents see the good in letting go. With birth parents, instead of going step by step of letting go of their child, we're pushed down the stairs, and when we're at the bottom we have the door slammed on us."
(Adoption in the City, October 1, 2010)

The birth mothers discuss similar ideas of not only experiencing the loss of their child but they also miss out on watching them grow up first hand. Just as an adoptive parent feels the loss of each stage of life, they also endure those losses but in a more concentrated way. Just as an adoptive parent would experience the sense of loss throughout their child's life as they reach each milestone, the birth parents' feel as they go through the defeat of each one of those losses all at once at placement. The adoption amounts to a lifetime of damage all at once, which can be overwhelming. The sense of grief and loss are extensively talked about throughout each of the birth parent blogs, thus making it a primary theme.

Alienation

The last theme found incorporates the birth parent's feelings of alienation. This theme was further broken down into three subthemes of rejection, loss of control, and being misunderstood. The subsequent quotes directly demonstrate each subtheme:

Rejection. Rejection is often a feeling birth parents experience. They can feel rejection from family, friends, the adoptive parents, the birth mother or father, or even their child. The following quotes illustrate their feelings of rejections in a variety of ways.

“...all I wanted was to help her mother and support her through it, only to have more and more doors shut in my face. Having someone tell you that you will not be there for your child’s birth (in the hospital at all) and you may not even see them before they are placed; is not something that sits well for me... I NEED TO BE OKAY WITH IT TOO!!! I need closure just like she does.” (Baby Darling, March 8, 2011).

This quote demonstrates the rejection this birth father felt from the birth mother. He was not welcome at the hospital for his daughter’s birth and was not able to meet her prior to her being placed with the adoptive family. He expresses how important it is for the birth fathers to be involved in the adoption process and especially the birth so they can receive the same amount of closure as the birth mother.

“Everything about me said ‘despair’. Yet the congratulations continued. Each time it was like a stab in the gut. Every iteration like another blow to a nail pinning me to a board. ‘Congratulations’ meant ‘you should be grateful’. Saying congratulations meant this should be good news and I don’t have the right to have mixed feelings.” (Statistically Impossible, December 13, 2010)

This father felt rejection from others when they would tell him congratulations. He felt as if it rejected his feelings surrounding the adoption and that he was supposed to be happy about the child he created. Expecting a child can bring many emotions but society assumes they are

positive feelings, leaving this birth father feeling rejected for the negative feelings he was having surrounding his child's birth.

"It hurts a little when she has 30 comments on one picture that are all some variation of 'she's gorgeous' 'what beautiful hair!' ...It stings even more to see 'your little girl is so beautiful', because I can't help but feel like I get no credit for her existence." (Blessing in Disguise, October 6, 2011).

"I feel like an outsider at the party. I guess that is what makes visits like this so hard. It's not about me, or about my relationship. The visit is about [my son's] life and my finding a tiny little piece of it. I'm okay with that, I know I'm not the center of his world. But days where my precious time with him aren't about us but rather just about him can make me feel unimportant." (Adoption in the City, May 16, 2011).

Again, the birth mothers discuss similar feelings of rejection from the adoptive families. They feel as though they "get no credit" or are "unimportant" in some situations with the adoptive family. Although often unintentional on the adoptive parent's part, feelings of rejection can occur within the birth parents.

Loss of Control. Birth parents often feel a loss of control. The following quotes emphasize the birth parents lack of control.

"I have correspondence with the agency and have them telling me what the MOTHER chose, and how the MOTHER feels, and if the MOTHER is comfortable allowing me to be involved. News flash everyone. Darling has a FATHER too! A FATHER who loves and cares about her. A FATHER who wants the best for her too. And a FATHER who has a

lot more experience and exposure to the adoption world than the MOTHER ever has.”

(Baby Darling, March 8, 2011)

This birth father struggled with the lack of control he had within throughout the entire adoption decision making process. He felt as though the agency was only taking the birth mother's opinion into consideration and only informing him of her decisions. He felt as though he had lost all control regarding his daughter.

“That’s sort of how I feel with my daughter’s family – they, essentially, hold my heart in their hands when they hold that beautiful baby, and they are in more control of my feelings right now than I am. That’s scary.” (Blessing in Disguise, October 23, 2011)

This birth mother expresses the control the adoptive family has over her emotions. They are in control of when they send pictures and updates. They are in control of scheduling visits. They have control over the birth mother's emotions. This quote shows how much lack of control the birth parent has.

“Knowing that my relationship with my son is driven by what other people think is best is difficult. I know I make decisions in this as well, but my decisions can really only be in the negative, choosing to limit or cut off contact, but wanting more, well that’s overstepping. So I will always feel somewhat powerless and that is hard. And even harder is not letting that make me a smaller person.” (Adoption in the City, August 11, 2011)

“When I realize how little control I have again and again in his life and even in our relationship, it feels like a punch in the gut.” (Adoption in the City, August 16, 2011)

These two quotes show how limited the birth parent is in their relationship with the adoptive family. The only thing this birth mother felt she had control over were to negatively

impact her relationship, which does not feel like much control. The loss of control is a central theme for birth parents.

Misunderstood. Birth parents often feel misunderstood. They are navigating through an event that many people have never been through, thus they do not feel understood in their actions and feelings.

“I need someone to talk to, yet I feel like no one really understands.” (Blessing in Disguise, March 16, 2011)

“I guess the hardest thing for me was I never felt like anyone really understood, no one else on the planet was grieving for [my son], the [son] that I lost. I was alone in that.” (Adoption in the City, March 4, 2011)

The birth parents struggled with feeling misunderstood, like no one else understood what they were going through. Both of these quotes illustrate how they want to talk with others but also feel like they cannot because others have not been in their position. This leads to a feeling of loneliness. Being misunderstood was a common theme in the birth parent’s blogs.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The five previously established themes, identity, relationships, “It’s a hard line to tow”, “Utter devastation” and alienation are direct inferences from the subject matter of the identified blogs. The themes were developed from compiling the individual codes from each one of the birth parent blogs. Once themes were identified, the themes were also combined with like themes to create the five larger, overarching themes.

Identity. The first theme of identity, was expressed by both birth mothers and birth fathers as being something they struggled with following the adoption of their child. The birth parents dealt with unsure feelings around identifying themselves as a mother or father. It was clear that they do not readily classify themselves as a parent because they are not parenting their child on a daily basis. However, both of the birth mothers and fathers have been through the experience of having a child, which allows them to relate to other mothers and fathers. This experience is where their identity conflict arises; through having these experiences and emotions but not actively participating as a parent on a daily basis. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013a) also discusses identity issues may arise from family and friends not acknowledging a birth parent's status as a mother or father, which can reinforce the identity conflict.

Relationships. The theme of relationships was chosen because all of the birth parent blogs discussed their relationships with significant others, families and friends as being an important part of their journey. It was evident that the relationships that were described by the birth parents had been significantly impacted by the decision to relinquish their child. This theme was then broken down into two subthemes of intimacy and support.

The subtheme of intimacy depicts the difficulty that the birth parents had with subsequent relationships after the adoption had taken place. Claridge (2014) found that many birth parents have interpersonal issues with subsequent relationships due to their identity as a birth parent, which was also seen in this study. In the current study, the birth parents felt as though the adoption of their child was a significant part of their life and identity, but they were hesitant to disclose that information about themselves for fear of how their date or significant other would

react. This caused anxiety with the birth parents and caused reluctance in becoming intimate with another person.

The second subtheme of support describes the need for guidance when going through the adoption process, both before and after. All the birth parents reached out for assistance in different ways, but the overall theme of support was apparent. Seeking counsel is consistent with the literature, which showed that it is important that birth parents are able to express their emotions and to be accepted by others in order to progress with their grief resolution (DeSimone, 1997). It was also indicated that the birth parents often feel alone in their journey and are unsure of where to reach out for support. This important point notes that birth parents may not reach out for advice for the sole fact that they do not know where to turn. Of the supports that were identified, professional guidance from therapists and support from fellow birth mothers were commonly discussed. The previous literature also found that professional counsel was beneficial in processing their emotions (Claridge, 2014; Cushman et al., 1993; DeSimone, 1996; Henney et al., 2007; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015). Krahn and Sullivan (2015) also found that having a fellow birth parent or someone who has gone through the same experience was also helpful. Overall, a need for support was evident throughout the blogs.

“It’s a hard line to tow”. This theme consists of two subthemes of guilt/shame and stigma. These were two important topics that were discussed at length by both of the birth mothers and fathers. The literature supports the theme of experiencing guilt, as Logan (1996) found that guilt, anger, and sadness are also often felt by birth parents surrounding the relinquishment of their child. Birth parents experience guilt and shame, stemming from a variety of sources. Some feel responsible because of the reason that motivated them to place their child for adoption, and some feel remorse for the way they are feeling post relinquishment. In this

study, one of the birth fathers felt culpable because he felt like he was being selfish by choosing to place his child for adoption. The motivation for making a decision to place your child for adoption is different for everyone, but can often lead to a feeling of remorse. They feel as though they should have or could have parented, or they did not want to give up their current lifestyle in order to parent. In some cases, the guilty feeling does not come from the decision to relinquish, but by their feelings following the placement. Both of the birth mothers blogged about wondering if their emotions they were feeling were normal or acceptable. Wiley and Baden (2005) also found that birth parents often felt like their emotions were out of proportion to what they should be feeling. On one hand, they felt like they should be moving on and not be struggling emotionally but on the other they also felt wrong for moving on and being happy. They often felt responsible no matter what emotions they were experiencing.

The second subtheme, stigma, was discussed by both of the birth mothers and fathers in a similar way. The previous literature identified that there is a stigma associated with placing a child for adoption (Claridge, 2014; DeSimone, 1996; Henney et al., 2011), which supports this theme. Society often assigns shame to birth parents for their decision to place a child for adoption; this shame can be based on inaccurate and unrealistic assumptions. For these birth parents, the stereotypes that were discussed, did not match their experiences. The birth fathers discussed society's view of them being uninvolved and ending the relationship with the birth mother upon finding out about the pregnancy. In both of their cases, this was far from the truth. The birth mothers also talked about the stigma of birth mothers needing to be saved from their poor decisions. However, both of these mothers made a conscious decision for their child and their child's wellbeing, not because they needed someone to come rescue them. The stereotypes that these birth mothers experienced, is different than what was discussed in the literature. The

literature states that the most common stigma that birth mothers experience is out-of-wedlock shame (DeSimone, 1996) and others viewing her as an inadequate mother (Henney et al., 2011). Although the birth mothers did experience the effects of social stigma, they were different than what was discussed in the literature. It is important to not stereotype birth parents because the chances are they do not fit the assumed labels and in fact have had a different experience.

“Utter Devastation”. This theme describes the birth parents’ experience with grief and loss. This theme was discussed at length in all four of the blogs studied, which the previous literature also supported. Each of the birth parents presented with an extensive amount of grief surrounding the relinquishment of their child. Grief was one of the main emotions that the birth parents displayed and felt. The literature states that grief is often one of the strongest emotions felt by birth parents (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Chapman et. al., 1986; Christian et al., 1997; DeSimone, 1996). They also discussed that this emotion is not one that can easily be worked through. It is a lifelong process that different events and experiences will always trigger. This finding is consistent with the literature in identifying that these emotions stay with them forever in some capacity (Clapton, 2007; Haugaard et al., 1998). They will always have a piece of them missing that can never be replaced by something else.

The birth parents also discuss their feelings of loss. It is obvious that they have lost their ability to parent their child, but that is not the only thing they feel has been lost. Both of the birth mothers shared that their feelings of loss stirred up at every stage of their child’s life. They grieve the loss of their child when they reach major milestones, because it was another event that they missed out on being a parent for. They also describe the feelings of loss at the time of placement being extremely intense and attribute that to feeling all of that loss all at once, where their adoptive parents will feel over time. The literature supports this finding as it has been found

that birth parents experience a permanent sense of loss (Clapton, 2007). Grief and loss go hand in hand and were a central topic that was discussed by all of the birth parents.

Alienation. The last theme that was established captures the birth parent's feelings of alienation. The birth parents often felt like they were being rejected, lost their control and were misunderstood, which is how these became the subthemes. Feelings of rejection were common in both the birth mothers and fathers. The stigma of birth fathers not being involved in the adoption process could lead to feelings of rejection for the birth fathers. If they want to be involved but are being pushed out because the birth mother or other supports buy into the stigma, it leads to the birth father being rejected. This is supported by Clayton (2007) who found that 40 percent of birth fathers were excluded or banned from participating in the decision making process. Another social stigma of pregnancy being an exciting thing, can also lead to birth parents feeling rejected. One of the birth fathers discusses that when people congratulate him when they find out he is expecting a child, leaves him feeling rejected because he feels like that makes it not okay to be feeling negatively about the pregnancy. It is also easy for birth parents to feel rejected by their children or the adoptive family. Often it is not intentional, but seeing their child be showered with love and support by other people, while they are in the background can feel isolating for the birth parent as if they are unimportant in their child's life.

Birth parents also frequently feel like they have lost control. They have lost their control of their child's life which can directly impact their emotions and feelings. One of the birth mothers discusses how the adoptive parents have control over her emotions because they can control when updates are sent, visits are scheduled and information is shared with her. Not only does she not have control over when she has contact with her child, but she also doesn't have control over the emotions she feels related to these updates and visits. The birth parents also

present their lack of control within their child's life. They do not have a say in the decisions made for their child, or how much contact they have with their child. That is all up to the adoptive parents, leaving the birth parents control less.

The final subtheme of being misunderstood depicts the birth parent's feelings like no one understands them fully. They feel like they have gone through such a significant life event but that they are alone in it. Every birth parent's experiences adoption in a unique way, which leaves them feeling like they do not have anyone that fully understands what they are going through. Adoption is often looked at as a positive event. However, there is another side to it where there is a birth parent grieving their child. So, while everyone involved in the adoption is experiencing happy emotions, they are in the background feeling the complete opposite.

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this study relate to the research design and the sample chosen. The researcher was unable to find any other studies that looked at adoption from the birth parent's view using a textual analysis. The sample of blogs was also not found in previous studies. Blogs are easily accessible to other birth parents and are often looked upon for advice and support. As a source of encouragement and guidance to birth parents, it is important that researchers study blogs to further understand if the content is consistent with the seven core issues of adoption and previous research. The research design and sample population gives the current study a unique and relevant perspective.

On the other hand, the limitations of this study connect to the limited number of blogs analyzed, and the unknowns about the authors. The small number of blogs were chosen using one website. There are thousands of adoption blogs written by birth parents and it is unknown if

the sample chosen is representative of the birth parent population. The demographics of some of the authors are also unknown. This poses as a limitation as the results may not be generalizable to the entire birth parent community. However, even if the results may not be conclusive of the birth parent experience, it is still important to understand how blogs portray the adoption process and assisting birth parents through the emotional journey of adoption.

Practice Implications

The practice implications that can be taken from this research as well as the previous research is that the seven core issues of adoption have been shown to affect both birth mothers and fathers. Birth parents are often overlooked after an adoptive placement has taken place. But, it is important that professionals working with birth parents are aware of the experiences and feelings their clients are dealing with. Through this research, pregnancy counselors and adoption social workers can gain knowledge and insight into what feelings birth parents confront; social workers will be better equipped in supporting them through the process. As stated previously, adoption can often be looked at as a positive event and it is easy to forget about the challenging emotions a birth parent may be feeling simultaneously to the adoptive parents' sheer excitement.

The seven core issues of adoption have been the framework for the present research. It has been found that all seven core issues were represented within the birth parent blogs that were studied. Although the issues were represented in all of the blogs, it is important to note that they were not all displayed in the same ways. Birth parents all have unique experiences through their adoption journey. It is essential that birth parents are not all placed in the same category and outsiders should not assume that they feel one way or another based on the seven core issues. The seven core issues of adoption should be used as a guide to help support birth parents and to assist in exploring how they are being displayed in each individual person.

It is also important that agencies in the adoption field continue to evaluate their supports for birth parents. Birth mothers and fathers often do not know where to turn to for help because they are feeling rejected and alone with their experiences. Agencies should have programs in place that are designed specifically for birth parents in order to best support them. If supportive services were made more available and accessible to birth parents, they may not feel as isolated.

Future research can focus on more effective ways to support birth parents throughout the adoption process with the knowledge of the seven core issues of adoption in mind. Based on the present research, it is clear that birth parents are in need of better guidance and support in during all phases and stages of the adoption process. Now that it has been shown that the seven core issues of adoption are present in birth parents with various experiences, the focus can be shifted to determining powerful strategies to assist birth parents navigate their emotional journey through adoption.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study determined that birth parents experience all seven core issues of adoption in various ways. Despite the limitations of the study, the results were consistent with past literature about the birth parents' experiences. Adoption is a lifelong experience for all members involved. Birth parents experience the lasting effects of the relinquishment of their child far past the physical act of placing their child with an adoptive family. The findings indicate that adoption social workers and agencies need to better support birth parents through the adoption process, well beyond the birth of their child. An improved understanding of the issues and support a birth parent may need by professionals, will assist birth parents in lessening the level of negative long term effects resulting from the placement of their child.

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