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# ***'Sunshine and Shadows'***

## **A Heuristic Exploration of Adoptive Parenthood**

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(Counselling Studies) in part fulfilment of the Modular Programme in Counselling  
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## ABSTRACT

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Adoption offers the chance for new beginnings both for the child and the adoptive parent, but it also contains the potential for disappointment and despair. The aim of this qualitative heuristic research study was to provide insight into the lived experience of adoptive parenthood and the impact adoptive children can have on their families. The experience of the researcher is found within the study, integrating her own experience with the personal accounts of the six participants. Data was collected using audio recorded semi-structured interviews. The data was transcribed and analysed using an inductive approach. Various themes emerged from the analysis process and the outcomes are in line with much of the literature on adoption and adoptive parenting. All six participants experienced difficulties; some encountered more profound issues than others. There were also many positive aspects found within the study including the participants' experience of satisfaction, happiness, pride and joy. Many of the themes and sub themes that emerged from the research are worthy of further research. Post adoption support however was of particular significance for the majority of the participants, suggesting further research in this area would be helpful.

## **Declaration**

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This work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

**Anna Constantine**

## Acknowledgements

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To

*My research supervisor Dr. Rita Mintz  
for her encouragement and warm support*

To

*The research participants  
for sharing their deeply moving experiences*

To

*My daughter Megan  
for her patience and love*

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## Introduction

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*There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge.*

*We try every means that may lead us to it.*

*When reason fails us, we make use of experience.*

(Michel De Montaigne, undated)

The importance of research within counselling and psychotherapy is considerable, not least because of the personal and professional development one can gain from considering new ideas and embracing a broader perspective from the knowledge and experience of others. According to McLeod (2003) it is not possible to be an effective counsellor without possessing “a spirit of openness to enquiry” (2003, p. 8). As a counsellor this research is offered with my openness to enquiry in mind.

This qualitative research study entitled ***Sunshine and Shadows: A heuristic exploration of adoptive parenthood*** is born out of my experience of adoptive parenthood and the desire to know the experience of others who have adopted. I am passionately committed to the study. As Moustakas (1990) observes this is an essential pre-requisite for heuristic research. My passion exists not only because I am an adoptive parent; I also believe there is a distinct deficit in the research exploring adoptive parenthood and I am not alone in acknowledging that more research is required within this area (Howe, 1996; Cairns, 2008; Wright, 2009).

It is evident that the main emphasis of adoption policy, practice and literature is focused on the adopted child and less so with the adoptive parent (Howe, 1996; McKay, Ross and Goldberg, 2010). It is not my intention to reduce the significance of the experience of the adopted child or birth family but wish to acknowledge the value of research regarding the experience of adoptive parents. Adoptive children can make significant demands on their parents and often the children's behaviour and needs can be profoundly challenging. Howe (1996) suggests that many adoptive children can be difficult to parent and that some adoption professionals can undervalue the impact that some children can have on their adoptive parents. He further maintains that the focus is on the disadvantaged children and consequently the needs of the parent can be overlooked. Through this research I hope to illuminate this important human experience and add to the dialogue regarding the experience of adoptive parenthood. I have employed creative methods within the work including poetry and painting to assist the illustration of the study, true to heuristic methodology. Some items are personal to me, others belong to the participants.

Becoming an adoptive parent can be a life changing experience both for adopter and adoptee, a special and rewarding experience, maybe after years of infertility treatment or waiting for a much longed for addition to an existing family or deciding on adoption over giving birth to a child. Nevertheless, as many researchers would acknowledge, it can also be an emotionally challenging, complex experience (Howe, 1996; Triseloitis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997; Smith and Logan, 2004).

Nothing could have fully prepared me for the arrival of my adopted child and the

roller-coaster ride that was to follow - filled with uncertainty, pain and pleasure, a bitter-sweet experience, involving the development of a loving bond between parent and child, a stark awareness of the context of the union, and the negotiation of a journey through the complex emotional maze of adoptive parenting. There have been many poignant moments, times of joy and times of sadness and despair. Many of the challenges and joys experienced by adoptive parents are also typical to all parents. Adoptive parenting however, often contains underlying feelings of uncertainty regarding the origins of the difficult behaviours the child might display and how these behaviours may impact the family dynamic. At times, the consequences of my daughter's early life experiences, prior to her adoption, have weighed heavily upon me and have impacted family life in many ways, including the negotiation of difficult behaviours and on occasion I have had to dig deep within myself to muster the strength to move forward

My personal experience of adoptive parenthood underpins the rationale for this research. I adopted my child as a single parent. My body clock was about to produce its valedictory chime and I was confronted with the reality that I would probably never have my own biological child. I had decided against medical interventions at that time, electing to embark on the adoption route. I was initially approved to adopt a pre-school age child and was matched with various children. I was also asked to consider a little girl outside my agreed age range. This was the child that was to become my daughter. When I reflect upon this period, my participation with pre-adoption courses, reading literature and meeting other parents that had adopted, none of these experiences could have adequately prepared me for the journey that lay ahead.

There are all kinds of adoptive parents: single parents, male, female, married, unmarried couples, gay and straight, who adopt children of various ages. Some adopt babies, others pre-school and older children. Adopters may adopt one child, others many more. The ethnicity, social class and ages of adoptive parents are diverse.

Giving voice to others who wish to share their personal experience of adoptive parenthood is at the heart of this research study. The work aims to explore the lived experience of psychotherapeutic professionals who are adoptive parents. Using recorded and transcribed semi-structured telephone interviews, I have obtained rich data (Moustakas, 1990). Elements of the participants' stories have resonated with my experience of adoptive parenthood, others are different. Their stories are touching, evocative and powerful, a privilege to encounter. My voice is present within the work, a shared enterprise with the participants. The decision to select professionals for the sample was born out of an assumption that the participants would embody a high level of self-awareness, capacity to engage with the research and have access to professional and personal support, if required.

I have welcomed the challenge to approach the study as a heuristic researcher, integrating my experience within the work alongside, what was for me, a new role as researcher. Etherington (2004) points out that as counsellors it is unnecessary to take on the new role of researcher as "every encounter with our clients is itself a research activity" (2004, p.110). My role as researcher was to highlight the lived experience of being an adoptive parent, not to counsel participants. Yet, there was a certain inevitability that I should approach my role as researcher embodying

Rogers's (1951) core conditions of empathy, acceptance and congruence and I was aware at various times throughout the interview process how easy the boundaries between interviewer and counsellor can be blurred.

Through this research study my aim was to highlight and promote further understanding of the experience of adoptive parents. The research is significant for adoptive parents, those within the process of adopting a child, social care professionals and beyond. The study also has significance in terms of therapeutic practice, hopefully offering therapists a deeper insight into adoptive parenthood. Providers of therapeutic post-adoption services may find this research useful, promoting further understanding regarding the complexities of parenting an adoptive child.

The subsequent chapters include a review of the literature; an overview of the methodology; the findings from the data analysis; a theoretical discussion of the data; my personal thoughts and reflections and finally a conclusion, summarising the main findings of the study and offering suggestions for further research.

## *Review of the Literature*

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Adoption is, in part, an act of imagination –  
an act that biological birth requires, too, if less obviously.

How is this new life connected to you?

How do you make it yours?

(Green, 2005)

### **Search Strategies**

My literature search focused on books sourced from the University of Chester and my personal resources. I also accessed a wide range of journals from adoption, counselling, psychology and social work. By searching the electronic data-bases PsycINFO and Google Scholar, using a variety of search terms including adoption, post-adoption and adoptive parenthood, several research studies were identified. Further search strategies and terms can be found in Appendix 1.

A review of the literature is presented using the following themes:

- Adoption in context
- The impact of parenting an adoptive child
- Attachment and Loss
- Support

## **Adoption in context**

It is important to acknowledge that adoption reflects, and is influenced by, dominant social and cultural ideologies. There are various studies that serve to ground the research within a historical and contemporary context, including Parker (1999), Smith and Logan (2004) and Howe (1996). A useful framework for understanding adoption is proposed by Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1999). This work emphasises the legalities of adoption: *“Adoption is a legal procedure through which a permanent family is created for a child whose parents are unable or unwilling or are legally prohibited from caring for the child”* (1999, p.1). The process of adoption usually involves three parties: the relinquishing biological parents, the child and the adoptive parents. Within the adoption field this is known as the adoption triad (Freundlich, 2000; Hamner, 2002).

Wrobels and Neil (2009, p.xv) suggest that *“adoption is a global phenomenon that touches the lives of numbers of families”*. Many countries are associated with either inter-country adoption or domestic adoption and the cultural context of the particular country has a major influence on how adoption is undertaken. Within the United Kingdom the process of adoption is viewed as a way to provide children within the social care system with families. The legalities of this system allows the child to be adopted without the birth parents’ consent. Other European countries reject adoption and have developed other ways to help children who are, for whatever reason, unable to live with their birth parents. For some countries adoption means sending children abroad to new families (Worbel and Neil, 2009).

Howe (1996) states that over the last thirty years there have been significant changes in adoption philosophy and practice, from recognising adoption as a way of meeting the needs of the childless, to understanding adoption as a way of offering children developmental opportunities. He suggests that the welfare of the children is now highlighted and the needs of the adoptive parents are secondary and argues that “*to ignore the needs of the parents is, in a sense, to ignore the needs of the children*”(1996, p. 5). Other changes in the landscape of adoption over this period include the social acceptance of single parent families, increased availability of contraception and the legalization of abortion that have served to limit the number of healthy infant adoptions (Zosky, Howard, Smith, Howard and Shelvin, 2005). The Adoption and Children Act 2002 has implemented regulations requiring local authorities to assess need in terms of adoption support to ensure better consistency and quality of service in adoption support (Luckock and Hart, 2005)

### **The impact of adoptive parenting**

Adoption offers the chance for new beginnings both for the child and adoptive parent, but it also contains the potential for disappointment and despair. Many adopted children have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect before joining their new families and are often in turmoil and in desperate need of healing, understanding and love. Adopted children are likely to feel rejected, hurt, frightened and hostile and adoptive parents can encounter many problems. Various literature considers the experience of adoptive parenting including Hindle and Shulman's work that acknowledges adoptive parenting involves “*a distinctive constellation of emotional forces*” (2008, p.1). Research by Timm (2011) also considers core

issues within the adoptive family system. Using a participant self-report survey the study assessed the depth to which adoptive mothers reported the experience of various issues including unmatched expectations, identity, mastery and control, bonding and attachment, family integration and loss and grief. Results indicated all issues were experienced but with varying degrees. It is clear that within the context of the literature much consideration is given to the difficulties of adoptive parenthood and less emphasis on the experience of joy and satisfaction. However, a number of anecdotal works, although highlighting the challenges, also emphasize the feelings of joy, happiness and fulfilment experienced by adoptive parents (Varon, 2000; Hirst, 2005; Kruger and Smolowe, 2005; Morrison, 2007; Wise, 2007).

Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1999) assert that the expectations of adoptive parents may be different from birth parents. They argue that if adoptive parents perceive adoption as an inferior option, or perhaps experience feelings of shame due to problems with fertility, then a sense of insecurity regarding their ability as parents may be experienced. Similarly, research by Neilheister (2001) reveals that adoptive parents were less satisfied with the parenting performance than non-adoptive parents. Research by Larson (1999) however, suggests that adoptive couples may understand themselves as being better parents than their biological counterparts due to an enhanced appreciation of the experience of parenting.

Another issue that may impact adoptive parents is contact with their children's birth families. It is not unusual for communication to take place between the adopted child and the birth family. The extent of contact varies and is planned according to the child's needs and may change over time according to the developing needs of all

parties (Morris, 1999). One form of contact is through the 'letter box' system, undertaken by adoption services for the exchange of information between the adopted child and birth family in the form of letters and cards. Another form of contact is the face to face meeting with birth parents or extended birth family. There may be problems for adoptive parents in terms of contact due to a subconscious belief that the child will prefer their birth parent or perhaps the birth parent may decide they want their child back (Morris, 1999). Supporters of post-adoption contact may argue that contact is good for children and expectations of adoptive parents must change to accommodate contact. It is clear however that expectations and the feelings of adoptive parents in relation to post-adoption contact must be considered to aid the "fluidity and complexity" of ongoing arrangements (Smith and Logan, 2004). Research by Logan (2010) finds considerable differences in the extent to which adoptive parents were involved in the arrangement of contact and this appears to be a significant factor in the outcome of ongoing contact arrangements. Circumstances unique to the adoptive family should be considered when determining the type and frequency of contact (Morris, 1999).

Taking a psychoanalytic view to adoptive parenthood, research by Blum (as cited in Brinch, 1990) found that partners in adoptive couples undertaking therapy brought to the task of adoptive parenthood internal conflicts from their own past history. Furthermore, Brinch (1990) suggests that similar to birth parents, adoptive parents must deal with many internal conflicts. He suggests however, that in terms of adoptive parents, conflicts tend to manifest in issues of "defectiveness" of either the self, the partner or the adopted child. Issues surrounding entitlement and oedipal guilt, relating to the possession of a child born to someone else, are also conflicts

experienced by adoptive parents (Brinch, 1990) It could be argued that parents may find it difficult to integrate feelings of love and hate and may split these feelings, consciously or unconsciously, between their adoptive child and a long hoped for biological child (Hindle and Shulman, 2008). This is supported by Cairns (2008) who highlights the ways in which people's inner worlds can impact each other at an unconscious level. She argues that the task of parenting an adoptive child who has experienced early life trauma is 'a professional-level task' not just general parenting.

Another theme evident within the literature is parenting adoptive children with special needs. In terms of adoption special needs refers to a child who has a behavioural, physical or mental disability and may be difficult to place for adoption. Parenting an adopted child with special needs can be both emotionally and physically demanding. Perry and Henry (2009) explore the experiences of adoptive families who parent children with disabilities. There are however, many adoptions of special needs children that offer adoptive parents great satisfaction and are considered successful (Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1999). Useful literature in relation to adopting a child with physical and learning disabilities is presented by Morris (1999). She considers the additional challenges involved and how for many adoptive parents a child with special needs is the "*right option and not second choice*" (1999, p. 72).

Special needs children who have a history of abuse often have emotional and behavioural difficulties that may create challenges for adoptive parents. Interestingly, a study on fostering empathy through stories for special needs adoptive families (Faver and Alanis, 2011) found that the use of stories to address the emotional difficulties adoptive parents of special needs children may encounter

helped parents to view the experience of adoption from their child's perspective.

For some parents the emotional and physical strain of facing the reality of life with a newly adopted child may manifest in feelings of depression. Research identifies the issue of post-adoption parental depression, suggesting this can be a challenging issue for adoptive parents (Schofield and Beek, 2008; Foli, 2010; McKay, Ross and Goldberg, 2010; Foli and Thompson, 2011; Mott, 2011). Bond (as cited in Foli and Thompson, 2011) coined the phrase "post adoption depression syndrome" and was a major force in the identification of this form of depression. The literature on post-adoption depression however, is limited. It could be argued that the experience of post-adoption depression finds its roots in attachment. If a mother's attachment needs are not met by her partner, who may be deemed as 'unresponsive or inaccessible' (Schofield and Beek, 2008; Foli and Thompson, 2011), depression may be triggered. Nevertheless, not all families have issues with attachment however post-adoption depression may be experienced. A central issue for some adoptive parents is feeling a loss of control in terms parenting their adoptive child and uncertainty for the future (Foli and Thompson, 2011).

### **Attachment and Loss**

Adopted children can present with many challenges, resulting from early traumatic experiences. The experience of difficult relationship histories may affect a child's emotional wellbeing and security. In terms of adoptive parenting the concept of attachment is a significant factor in understanding the impact of past experiences on present inter-personal relationships, both for the parent and the child. An adoptive child's attachment history may contribute to the difficulties experienced by adoptive

parents. Attachment is significant for the healthy development of the child and in terms of loving and effective adoptive parenting (Levy, 2003).

Attachment theory was initially developed by Bowlby (1969, 1979, 1980). The theory provides a solid base from which to understand and consider issues in relation to bonding and attachment between parent and child. Over the last fifty years the theory has expanded including works by Ainsworth, Blehar and Waters (1979) and Rholes and Simpson (2004), offering a social lifespan account of how close relationships are formed, influenced, maintained and dissolved. Attachment theory has particular relevance to adoption and adoptive parenting, understanding development, interpersonal behaviour, relationship functioning and attachment bonds.

There are different attachment styles that emerge in response to primary caregivers reactions to a child's attachment behaviour. Many children develop secure attachments through the safe, physical and emotional availability of the parent. Other children do not experience a sense of safety and availability and may develop an insecure attachment style. An overview of the various forms of attachment style is discussed by Howe and Fearnley (1999), Rholes and Simpson (2004), Schofield and Beek (2006) and Miller and Bentovin (2007). Various studies consider mother-infant bonding and attachment patterns between children of adoptive and non-adoptive mothers, including the study by Singer, Brodzinsky and Ramsey (1985). Moreover, a current short-term longitudinal study by Pace (2012) analysed the attachment patterns of adopted children and their adoptive mothers. Results

suggest a significant change in attachment behavioural patterns in the children that had been placed with mothers who presented with a secure-autonomous attachment style.

A large number of works can be related to adoption and the concept of bonding and attachment issues between adoptive parent and child. Jossellon's (1996) work on human relationships and what people need from others in terms of relatedness has relevance for the study of adoptive parent and child relationships. Also, Sluckin (1986) offers a study on how maternal and paternal attachments bonds are formed. Other works include Howes's (1999) study on attachment in relation to multiple caregivers and George and Solomon (1999) on the care-giving behavioural system and Kobak's (1999) discussion on the emotional effects of disruption in attachment relationships.

Children that have experienced difficult histories may find it painful and difficult to accept love from adoptive parents, often demonstrating emotional and behavioural difficulties (Hughes, 1997; Hughes, 2006). Several works address these issues, considering the adoptive parents perspective, the often fragile connection between parent and child and the demands adopted children can make on their parents' capabilities and commitment (Archer, 1999; Archer and Burnell, 1999; Cairns, 2008; Howe, 2005; Hughes, 1997; Hughes, 2006). Conversely, there are empirical findings that acknowledge many adoptive parents report positive family life experiences and do not function any more poorly than biological parents (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey and Stewart, 2004).

The experience of loss and emotional pain is highly relevant to adoptive parents who

may have their own profoundly painful issues of loss. Meltzer (as cited by Hindle and Shuman, 2008) posits the question "*Whose pain is it*" (2008 p.7). This serves as a useful consideration when attempting to untangle what feelings belong to whom and how the emotional pain experienced by both the child and the parent can profoundly impact relationships. The experience of loss is common to human existence and there are various studies that are particularly significant to adoption including Leon's (2002) discussion on naturally occurring and socially constructed loss within adoption. Duvert's (2004) work on separation and loss anxieties, considers the impact on the adoptive parents and child and how the child's experience of loss may resonate with unresolved trauma and loss of the adoptive parent. According to Schachter and Schachter (2011) adoption is founded on loss and "*without loss there would be no adoption*" (2011, p. 75). Several studies suggest that all within the adoption triad will experience a sense of loss including Lifton's (2010) work on unresolved grief, loss and trauma within adoption and Kirk (1984) who emphasized that the feelings of loss shared by both adopted child and adoptive parents can be healed by becoming a family.

The theme of loss appears to thread through a range of adoption literature, illustrating the sense of pain that may be experienced by those within the adoption triad. Loss may be experienced by adoptive parents for a variety of reasons and feelings of disenfranchisement may be experienced, which may impact on personal functioning (Schachter and Schachter, 2011). Often, even after successful adoption has taken place, women may experience the loss of not having a biological child, perhaps due to infertility, termination, still- birth or the death of a child (Hendry,2010).

However, in terms of infertility, there is evidence to support that there is no relationship between the nature of infertility and performance as a parent (Starr, 1970)

Interestingly, Kallus (as cited in Schachter and Schachter, 2011) and Miall (1985) write that childless families are often stigmatized, whether childlessness is due to infertility or for other reasons, and often the parents' lack of biological connection to the child may be questioned by others and their parenthood understood as not real. Their work highlights that some children may have experienced profound emotional and physical difficulties before adoption and due to the medical implications arising from these issues, parents may feel bereft when faced with the consequences of such problems.

## **Support**

An adoptive child may have experienced major challenges to their early development on many levels and this can manifest in destructive and self-destructive behaviours. Awareness of the complex feelings and needs of adoptive parents is clearly important in terms of support for adoptive parents, particularly from local authorities and adoption agencies. The issue of support is a significant theme within the literature on adoption. Wright (2009; 2012) suggests that post-adoption support for adoptive parents is inadequate and states that adoptive families need support. She comments *"the disruption rates of adoptive placements needs to become a key government target in order for adoptive parents and their children to receive the support they need"* (2012 p.123).

Sometimes adoptive parents experience mental health problems that may impact their capacity for adoptive parenthood (McKay, Ross and Goldberg, 2010) There is clearly a need for social services and health service providers to be aware and vigilant for the signs of mental and physical health issues and relationship problems during the post adoption period. The role of post-adoption services in helping adoptive parents negotiate the care of their children, preventing adoption breakdown, is essential (Zosky et al. 2005).

A reoccurring theme in the adoption experience is that of powerlessness. Helping professionals should recognise and be sensitive to feelings of powerlessness that may be experienced by adoptive parents. The adoptive parent may feel powerless to change the damaging impact of their children's early trauma especially if there is a deficit of information regarding their children's past histories (Hartman and Laird, 1990).

A common reason that parents seek help is due to the behavioural and emotional problems of their children, often finding themselves profoundly challenged by their children's behaviour and emotional complexities. Support for adoptive parents is essential so that they do not feel isolated or experience self doubt in terms of parenting their children. Clearly, support should help parents to feel empowered to be "good enough parents" (Miller and Bentovim, 2007). Further development of post-adoption support is crucial to help parents deal with their own feelings whilst parenting their adoptive children (Phillips and McWilliam, 1996; Miller and Bentovim, (2007). It is interesting to note that there is significant research that seeks to

discover the factors adoptive parents bring to adoption to assist them in coping with the challenges of parenting an adoptive child (Brodzinsky, 2002; Santona and Zavattini, 2005; Zosky, et al. 2005; Paczkowski, 2010).

Essential components of post-adoption support are discussed by Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1999, p.240). They acknowledge the need for “prompt response, confidentiality, sensitivity, availability of experienced staff and those with personal experience of adoption”. They advocate that the process of support should proceed at the pace of the adoptive parent who is making the enquiry and in accordance with their needs, as opposed to the needs of the agency. Common post-placement concerns of parents who had adopted older children are considered by Gill (1978).

## **Conclusion**

This literature review has considered various aspects of adoptive parenthood and offers the research study a theoretical insight into the experience of adoptive parenthood. Whilst there are many studies in relation to the adoption process and the adopted child it is clear there is less so on the adoptive parents. One of the aims for this study is to add to the research on the experience of adoptive parenthood, from the initial placement of the child through the journey to adulthood. Adoptive parenthood is a lifelong commitment and adoption related issues may surface at any time. Literature that aids understanding into the lived experience of adoptive parenthood, including the joys and the difficulties, can help inform others in terms of adoption related issues and post adoption support.

## *Methodology*

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“In heuristic methodology  
one seeks to obtain the qualitative depictions  
that are at the heart  
and depths of a person’s experience”  
(Moustakas, 1990)

### **Philosophical perspective and research design**

There are different approaches to research involving different ways of interpreting the world (McLeod, 2001). A quantitative study would focus on accurate, logical measurement, expressed objectively in numbers, probability, percentages, cause and effect (King and Horrocks, 2010; Wrobels and Neil, 2009). In contrast, qualitative research would undertake the use of broad, diverse approaches to the study of social phenomenon (Marshall and Rossman, 2011), expressed in ways that do not draw on such precise methods of analysis and interpretation (McLeod, 2001). Qualitative research is identified as socially constructed with multiple realities co-constructed between the researcher and participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; McLeod, 2001; Dallos and Vetere, 2005).

Naturalist enquiry is generally based upon theoretical perspectives originating from interpretivism and aims to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed.

Central to all approaches to methodology is epistemology, the philosophical theory of knowledge, how we know what we know (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Whilst undertaking this research study I aimed to strive for “epistemological integrity” (Marshall and Rossman, 2011), a term used to illustrate the thread between the essence of the research and all its components. According to McLeod (2001) decisions regarding qualitative studies can only be reconciled by an awareness of the “interconnection of methodology, epistemology and ontology” (2001, p. 55) and “an appreciation of the philosophical issues implicit to the research” (2001, p. 56).

I gave much thought and consideration to the methodology I should use for this research before deciding on a qualitative heuristic approach. Heuristic methodology finds its roots in phenomenological inquiry, but explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the researcher. At the core of heuristic inquiry and other personal experience methodologies is the place of the researcher in relation to the topic (McLeod, 2003). Heuristic inquiry requires the researcher’s “direct personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas 1990, p.14). This approach appealed to me rather than a methodology that required my detachment from the study, as the research topic is deeply personal in origin. I also liked the flexibility of heuristic inquiry, the looseness of the boundaries in terms of scope alongside a high degree of rigour. This particular form of inquiry also resonates with me as a therapist as there are similarities between heuristic inquiry and counselling and psychotherapy in terms of the use of self.

There are six phases within heuristic research. The phases are not linear and can be re-visited again and again (Moustakas, 1990).

- *Initial Engagement*  
Discovering the topic or question that is meaningful to the researcher.
- *Immersion*  
Becoming intimate with the topic and understanding the phenomenon.
- *Incubation*  
Retreating or setting aside, enabling the inner workings of the tacit dimension to reach its potential.
- *Illumination*  
The uncovering of new insights meanings and essences.
- *Explication*  
A deeper level of focusing and indwelling, gathering together discoveries of meaning.
- *Creative Synthesis*  
Mastering knowledge of the phenomenon that illuminates and explicates the essences and core themes culminating in a creative synthesis.

The task of the first phase *Initial Engagement* is to discover an interest that holds important meaning and personal implications. My personal connectedness to the research (Etherington, 2004) is evident throughout the study. As a heuristic researcher my voice is present, integrating my own experience within the research. My aim was to seek creative discovery, embracing “intuition and tacit understanding” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 39). The posture of “indwelling” helped me gain meaning

through tacit knowledge – the knowledge that is implicit to our actions and experience (Polanyi, 1966). A summary of the core processes of heuristic inquiry can be found in Appendix 2.

There was a requirement for me to be grounded within the research and to rigorously undertake the process of self-searching, self-reflexivity and transparency (McLeod, 2001). Throughout the work I held an awareness for the need for honesty in the face of “self-dialogue” (Moustakas, 1990). In contrast to researchers using a positivist paradigm, heuristic researchers acquire self knowledge, thus the research becomes a vehicle for growth and development (Etherington, 2004). This was a significant factor for me when considering the methodology I would use for my research focus. Heuristic inquiry fits well with my personal and professional philosophy, which is underpinned by phenomenological principles emphasising the uniqueness of human experience and the individual in process. It is not unusual for the selection of methodology to be guided by the personal philosophy and values of the researcher (Moustakas, 1990)

Interestingly, many would interpret heuristic study as a product of the emergence of arts-based research. Finley (2005) asserts that heuristic research relates to “*creative process of discovery and invention*” and connects the methodologies of the arts to new practices of human social inquiry (2005, p. 684). This creative process appealed to me as researcher and I have integrated within the study, personal creative expressions, including journal extracts, letters and poetry, underpinned by sound theoretical rigour.

## Sample

I obtained a small purposive sample of six participants. A purposive sample is the selection of participants that have experience of the area being investigated (Maycut and Morehouse, 1994). The participants were defined by the following criteria:

- Therapists of any theoretical model or organisational setting. By selecting professionals for the sample it was my assumption that they will embody a high level of self-awareness, capacity to engage with the research and have access to professional and personal support.
- Adoptive parent of a child or children
- The participant has adopted as part of a heterosexual or homosexual couple, or as a single person
- A minimum of two years has elapsed since the placement of the child or children with the adoptive family.
- The participant will not be currently undertaking therapy in relation to adoption related issues.
- Access to personal therapy.

Initially I had requested responses from parents of adopted children under the age of sixteen at the time of the interview. The lack of response from participants meeting this guideline prompted me to change my initial inclusion criteria to encompass a broader age range of adoptive children.

I obtained my sample through the following methods:

- Advertising in the research section of the *Therapy Today* journal (Appendix 3),

- Contacting adoption agencies including Adoption UK (Appendix 4).
- Circulating flyers to appropriate organisations ( Appendix 5).
- The technique of snowballing (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This technique proved particularly successful.

I forwarded a research inclusion questionnaire (Appendix 6) and an information sheet (Appendix 7) to the respondents to determine if the criteria for the research was met and to offer respondents important information regarding their involvement and requirement as a participant.

All six participants are adoptive mothers, two counsellors, one counselling supervisor, two psychotherapists and one psychologist. Two of the participants already had their own birth children when they adopted their children. Two participants were adoptees. Two participants adopted their children as part of a mixed culture heritage marriage. Another participant adopted as a single person then later adopted as part of a couple.

### **Data Collection**

In terms of the collection of data I used digitally recorded telephone interviews. The interview is a widely used method of data collection in qualitative research and the methodology used will influence decisions regarding the structure of the interview. According to Dexter (as cited in Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 286) an interview is a “purposeful conversation”. I favour the informality of this description as it fits well with the “rhythm and flow” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47) of heuristic methodology and the search for meaning through dialogue.

There are three fundamental approaches to collecting data through dialogue appropriate for heuristic research. Firstly, the spontaneous generation of questions through dialogue between researcher and participant. This involves a conversation where questions and dialogue unfold in a spontaneous manner. The second approach seeks common information from all participants by the use of general guidelines, offering topics for exploration. Lastly, a formal interview which contains clear questions, that all the participants will be asked (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maycut and Morehouse, 1994; McLeod, 2001; Dallos and Vetere, 2005).

In line with the second approach I used semi structured interviews to obtain data. This method offered flexibility with an element of structure to gain common information from all the participants. There are advantages to using telephone interviews, for example the participants may feel more at ease speaking on the telephone, confidentiality is increased, voice level, tone and intonation can be used to add meaning to the data. In addition, participants can be obtained from a wider geographical area. There are also limitations to the telephone interview process, in that more information may be collected than can be used. Also, a lack of rich data gleaned from the participants' body language and posture is not available as an extra source of information. A telephone interview may reduce the spontaneity of responses from participants that a face to face interview may allow.

Prior to undertaking the interviews I conducted a pilot interview in order to gain a sense of the interview process and to receive constructive feedback regarding my interview style. I also engaged in a bracketing interview with a colleague. This was

beneficial in terms of understanding the role of the participant and was also useful in processing my feelings and thoughts regarding my role as adoptive parent.

I forwarded an interview guide to all the participants (Appendix 8) so they could familiarise themselves with the research and also to offer them the opportunity to withdraw from the research, if desired. Within heuristic interviewing the generation of information is dependent upon “*accurate empathic listening; being open to oneself and to the co-researcher...being skilful in creating a climate that encourages the co-researcher to respond comfortably, accurately, comprehensively, and honestly*” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 48). As researcher within this process I held a commitment to “empathic search” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 269). I was mindful however, as noted in chapter one, of the boundaries between research and counselling (Dallos and Vetere, 2005).

Whilst I used interview questions and prompts (Appendix 9) this was not a fixed process and I was aware of the importance of giving space to the participants so that their stories could emerge organically. I developed open ended questions that related to the focus of enquiry. The questions and prompts related to experience, feelings and thoughts (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). During the interview I explored the participants’ awareness and meaning of their experience and sought examples that were “vivid and alive” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 48).

In terms of the interview time structure and with the importance of flexible boundaries in mind, I concluded each interview within my preferred timescale of sixty minutes. I invited the participants to share any illustrative creative materials they felt may enhance the research. Within heuristic research rich creative depictions can offer

additional meaning and depth to the research (Moustakas, 1990). Two of the participants shared creative items. After each interview had taken place I set aside time for de-briefing with the participant.

When considering data collection, it is useful to keep in mind West's (2001) comments "*when using heuristics we need to be mindful that we are collecting stories about phenomena that have their own truth to participants*" (2001, p. 130). As researcher my intention was to be sensitive to the participants' standpoint and personal circumstances (Kvale, 1996). The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. Copies of the transcripts were forwarded to the participants to seek their reflections on the thoroughness of the verbatim transcribed data. This assisted me in establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. One participant made small changes to her transcript.

### **Data Analysis**

It was important that the theoretical framework for undertaking qualitative data analysis corresponded with my aim for the study. I agree with Braun and Clarke (2008) that there isn't one ideal. It is significant however, that the method used corresponds with the researcher's aims. My method of analysis was inductive in line with heuristic methodology, allowing my findings to emerge from the data. As researcher I recognise and acknowledge the selection of research data was my decision (Braun and Clarke, 2008) and my decisions have impacted the outcome of the research in some way.

The data analysis commenced with the process of transcription, a verbatim account

of the interview narrative. I used a pseudonym for each of the participants as this felt more authentic than using numbers or codes. I kept the narrative true to its original form, using punctuation appropriately to give a true account of the interview. According to Denscombe (2010) the process of transcription is “*laborious*”, (2010, p. 275). Clearly, transcribing the data was a lengthy process in that the recorded dialogue was sometimes unclear and difficult to understand. It was for me however, an essential aspect of the analysis process, as it helped my immersion with the data.

The *Immersion* stage of the process helped me engage and familiarize myself with the data. Immersing, organising and synthesising (Moustakas, 1990), I revisited the data again and again, listening to recorded interviews, reading and re-reading the transcripts. This was a key phase of the analysis process (Bird, as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2008) and a phase that required my deep concentration and self searching.

Deciding on a thematic approach to analysis I initially identified a preliminary broad brush selection of potential themes and sub-themes (Appendix 10). Data was set outside then revisited to check and identify the emerging qualities and themes to gain a sense of each participant’s experience. As heuristic research serves to “*retain the essence of the person in experience*” (Moustakas, 1990, pg 39), the participants remaining visible within the study and portrayed as ‘whole persons’ is paramount. Etherington (2004) describes this as ‘a window onto the person’s reality’ (2004, pg 112).

A period of *Incubation* was undertaken involving my retreat from the intense focus. This allowed expansion of knowledge to take place enabling the inner tacit dimension to clarify and increase my understanding. The immersion process

continued, revising and checking the data, searching for meanings and patterns. I identified an extensive list of ideas and key words (Appendix 11) from the data with a view to reducing and refining them into specific themes. The themes were inductive, data driven as opposed to theory driven (Braun and Clarke, 2008) as I did not have specific questions in mind and wanted the themes to emerge from the data organically. I used coloured paper for each of the narrative transcripts, making coloured copies to aid later groupings of the data extracts. I wrote notes and highlighted key patterns with marker pen on the master narrative transcript copies, revisited the data again and again to identify any potential patterns I may have overlooked.

I grouped together the data into potential themes and considered the relationships between the themes and sub-themes contained within. This was undertaken by cutting out individual extracts from the coloured copy transcripts, in the form of words or paragraphs, making sure to document page numbers and category upon the individual extracts, then placing them into data groupings. It was helpful to use a cork board for this purpose (Appendix 12). I also created a theme entitled miscellaneous (Braun and Clarke, 2008). This served to accommodate material that did not fit with any of the emerging dominant themes. I was careful not to abandon any of the data groupings at this point, the “miscellaneous” category was useful for this purpose.

The *Illumination* phase involved a breakthrough in the process, occurring naturally with an openness to new awareness. Some of the initial groupings were identified as potential main themes, others as possible sub-themes, others set aside. Repeated reading of all the data extracts within each category was important to

confirm that data corresponded with a particular theme. During this phase I was able to gain a sense of clarity, refining the main themes and concluding that some of the potential themes were not themes at all. I was aware that one of the dominant categories had formed part of my interview schedule. This category however was particularly significant for many participants and threaded through their interview narratives, naturally emerging from the data analysis process. In view of its dominance, I felt it could not be ignored and would therefore be included as a theme.

An important part of the analysis process was reaching the point when I understood my “thematic map” (Braun and Clarke, 2008) accurately, reflected the meanings and essence of each theme and sub-theme. During this stage of *Explication* I felt a sense of confidence that each theme corresponded with the data set as a whole and that all the data extracts I had selected captured the essence of meaning. This also assisted me in developing *Individual depictions* of the research participants’ experience (Moustakas, 1990).

Further immersion was undertaken to gain a *composite depiction* of the phenomenon. Following a phase of solitude and meditation (Moustakas, 1990), I developed a *Creative Synthesis* of meaning derived from the investigation of the phenomenon and demonstrating that this research study is imbued with my essence of discovery. I expressed the core themes in creative form (Moustakas, 1990), represented in the form of an abstract image.

## Validity

The concept of validity within heuristic research is influenced by the researcher and their engagement with participants (Willig, 2008), whereas the validity of quantitative measurement is greatly influenced by objective statistical guidelines (Moustakas, 1990; Oliver, 2008). There are guidelines however, shared by both paradigms, for example, explicit scientific context and purpose, appropriate methods, respect for participants, specification of methods, appropriate discussion, clarity of presentation and contribution to knowledge (Elliot, Fischer and Rennie, 1999). For meaning to be gained from the research, my openness, integrity, courage and commitment to the inquiry is essential (McLeod, 2001). Understanding the sensitivity of this research and the connection between personal validity and the person-centred conditions of empathy, congruence and acceptance were important factors considered when undertaking this study (McLeod, 2001).

There is a range of criteria for determining the validity of qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is generally accepted that qualitative methodology should be judged on the basis of its trustworthiness. Providing the readers of this study with transparent, coherent descriptions of the research process and outcomes has contributed to the trustworthiness of this work (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maycut and Morehouse, 1994). As a heuristic researcher I undertook the “*constant appraisal of significance...checking and judging*” to assist the process of attaining a valid trustworthy, portrayal of experience (Moustakas, 1990, p. 33).

In terms of achieving validity Moustakas (1990) posits the question “*Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive,*

*self searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, accurately the meanings and essences of the experience?"* (1990, p. 32). I have achieved validity in the following ways:

- I kept a research journal to assist self-reflexive analysis - including my emotional reactions, thoughts and research decisions. This helped me to identify any personal biases, personal values, motives and intentions and how they may influence the research process (Dallas and Vetere, 2005).
- Member checks, accurately conveying the meaning and essence of the research participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1990). – seeking participants' reflections as to the accuracy of the transcribed data.
- I have demonstrated an audit trail, allowing the readers of the research to track the thread of my documentation from the beginning to conclusion. This serves to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the work and how the outcomes of the study are based on solid methodological practice (Marshall and Rossman, 2011, p. 44).
- Grounding the data - Presenting a summary of data analysis to provide examples to demonstrate the analysis used and how meaning will be developed from the data.
- Conveying to the readers of the research study, interesting and credible information (Yardley, as cited in Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2000).

## **Ethical Issues**

As a practitioner and a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) I adhere to their Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2010). This suggests my ethical responsibility is supported by the principles of autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence, fidelity and trustworthiness, These principles are pertinent to the consideration of ethical issues in relation to this research, in particular the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence.

I adhere to the Ethical Guidelines for Researching Counselling and Psychotherapy (Bond, 2004) and have approached this research project, including all communications with research participants, with integrity, respect and competence. This demonstrates my commitment to the provision of sound ethical research practice. To ensure the ethical integrity of the research I have undertaken the following:

- All participants were given detailed information sheets setting out the purpose of the research and an assurance that confidentiality and anonymity would be rigorously maintained.
- The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research.
- Informed consent was obtained from all participants. This is central to the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Appendices 7C 7D)
- All data pertaining to the participants is stored in accordance with the requirements set down by the Data Protection Act 1998 and arrangements for the safe keeping of all records are in place. Information will be retained for

minimum of five years in accordance with the Department of Social Studies and Counselling's Guidelines

- Transparency of the process - participants were invited to examine verbatim transcripts for accuracy and amendment.
- I avoided dual relationships with participants.
- I was mindful of the sensitivity of the research and have conducted the research in a way that was sensitive and ethical, ensuring the anonymity of all participants.
- I took measures to exclude identifying factors in relation to children referred to within the research.

I held an ethical responsibility to consider the potential risks to the participants when engaging with this process (Bond, 2004). The potential sensitivity of the research, including the possibility of unexpected discoveries, may have been at times distressing for some participants. However, all the participants were made aware they could terminate the interview at any given point. Debriefing was empathically undertaken at the end of each interview and all the participants had access to personal support. Potential benefits for participants included, having their stories heard, increased understanding and knowledge, professional development and increased self-awareness. I was also aware that the risks and benefits also applied to me as heuristic researcher and understood the responsibilities to self within this process. There were times during the analysis process that I needed to keep myself safe and stand aside from the data for a period to reflect and sometimes document my own feelings and thoughts within my journal.

## **Limitations**

Clearly, there are limitations as the study was small in scale and a larger sample may have presented different outcomes. Also, the participants interviewed were all practitioners, therefore the sample precludes other variables. Other limitations include, gender and culture, as all participants were female and found within a particular cultural context.

Due to the diversity in age of the participants' children it might be argued that the participants were at different stages of their journey through adoptive parenthood, and this might be deemed as a limitation. It was my intention however, to seek out the lived experience of the adoptive parent in whatever form that would take.

## *Outcomes*

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The relationship between mother and child  
is by its very nature one of inequality,  
where one needs all the help,  
and the other gives it (Fromm, 1957)

This chapter presents individual portraits of the six research participants, followed by the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis process. Influenced by Etherington's (2004) creative representation of research outcomes, I have presented quotations in stanza form. The quotations are coded with the first letter of the participants' pseudonym and the page number from their individual transcript.

### ***Individual Portraits***

#### ***(Alice)***

Alice, with her partner, adopted two girls aged two and four - three years later they adopted a boy aged two. The children are now aged eleven, thirteen and eight. Alice's oldest daughter has profound complex needs and her son requires medical interventions. Alice was also adopted. She described the "*negatives and positives*" of her experience of adoptive parenthood, concluding the interview saying "even though it's been so difficult I wouldn't change a thing". Alice's sense of pride for her children was evident throughout the interview. Her sensitivity for her children's needs

was peppered with a steely resolve and a calm determination to do the best for the children. My admiration for Alice is immense.

**(Bella)**

Bella embarked on the adoption process with her partner. Wanting a younger child they adopted a daughter, aged one. Her daughter is now four. Bella is also an adoptee. She used the phrase “*we grow onions not apples*” to describe the layers of complexity encountered by the parents of adoptive children. Bella expressed her wish to be “*fully available*” for her daughter and her concerns in terms of “*connecting*” with her. The joy Bella receives through parenting her daughter was a privilege to encounter.

**(Carol)**

Carol and her partner already had a birth child but wanted to extend their family. They adopted a son, aged five. Carol explained that although she had experienced parenthood, her expectation of adoptive parenting was different. She understood there would be challenges and it would not be “*a bowl of roses*”. She was unprepared however, for the difficult times that lay ahead. Carol reflected on her son’s “*horrific*” experiences during the years prior to adoption, and how he had encountered difficulties all through his childhood into adult life. Carol’s poignant portrayal of adoptive parenthood was particularly touching.

**(Diana)**

Diana had a birth child but her strong sense of “*justice and injustice*” and her “*passion for people being given an opportunity in life*” prompted her to adopt a child.

She adopted her son, aged five, as a single parent. She later adopted, with her then partner, a little girl aged six months with Down's Syndrome. Her son and daughter are now adults. Diana described the profound challenges she had experienced as an adoptive parent. Reflecting on the interview process she said she had been "*close to tears several times*". Diana reflections were deeply moving and candidly portrayed in rich evocative language.

**(Ella)**

Ella had always wanted children, however due to fertility problems she decided to adopt. Ella and her husband adopted two children, two years apart and both babies at the time of placement. She said "*we were the only mixed race couple they had on their books at the time, so it meant we got babies*". Her daughters are now young adults. Ella described her experience of adoptive parenthood and how she had introduced the concept of adoption to her children, age appropriately. What she had not anticipated was her eldest daughter, at the age of fifteen, finding her birth mother through the internet and subsequent difficulties in relation to contact. My thanks to Ella for sharing her experience.

**(Fiona)**

Fiona already had four birth children before deciding, with her husband, to adopt her daughter. In a mixed cultural heritage marriage, Fiona was aware of how difficult it was for black children, in the care system, to find places with adoptive families. She always wanted a large family and believed it would be selfish to have another child of her own - she wanted to offer a child in care a family. Fiona's daughter was three years old when placed with her. Her daughter is now an adult. Fiona talked

about the “*rough times*” and “*healing happy times*” of adoptive parenthood. She said she had “never before spoken to another adopted parent” and welcomed the opportunity to talk, saying she felt a bond with me. I also felt that connection.

### *Themes*

**Table 2**

<b>Hard Times</b> <i>(The Difficulties of Adoptive Parenthood)</i>	<i>Exhaustion</i>	<i>Post-Adoption Depression</i>	<i>Rejection</i>	<i>The Impact of the Birth Family</i>	<i>Loss and Grief</i>	<i>Anger</i>
<b>‘Not a Bowl of Roses’</b> <i>(Behavioural Problems)</i>	<i>Feeling Abused</i>	<i>Isolation</i>				
<b>Attachment</b>						
<b>Special Needs</b>						
<b>Support and Understanding</b>	<i>Support from Partner</i>	<i>Unsupported</i>	<i>The Professionals</i>	<i>Putting up a fight</i>	<i>Therapy</i>	
<b>Training and Practice</b> <i>(How it Helped)</i>						
<b>Being Mum</b>	<i>Love</i>	<i>Joy</i>	<i>Pride</i>			
<b>Reflections on Sadness</b>						

## Hard Times

### (The Difficulties of Adoptive Parenthood)

Adopted children can be challenging to parent and caring for an adoptive child can prove extremely difficult. All the participants used powerful and dramatic language when reflecting upon their feelings surrounding the difficulties encountered as adoptive parents.

Huge enormous challenges,  
absolutely life changing  
- shattering, (D,2)

I think when she first came home  
I went completely bonkers (B,3)

It was difficult, very difficult,  
so that was my life actually, then. (C,4)

It feels like a tragedy,  
their lives are still  
so very, very hard... (D,10)

I tell you what it gets worse  
when they leave school,  
much worse. (D,10)

If there would have been difficulties  
when she was much younger  
it wouldn't have come as such a shock (F,9)

Some of the things she did  
I would suddenly see her as a stranger,  
even when she was little,  
which I probably barely admitted to myself,  
but I sometimes  
did have that feeling (F,5)

She was a little bit  
behind from the other kids  
and as you know  
with children within care  
you can find it difficult...  
being moved about,  
so that was hard. (A,2)

I was taking on someone  
with a lot of difficulties  
but they turned out to be far greater  
than I could have imagined (D,3)

### ***Exhaustion***

Some participants talked movingly about their feelings of tiredness and exhaustion.

Emotionally exhausting, physically exhausting,  
pushing one to the limits  
you never thought you had  
dredging up energy  
you never thought you had (D,2)

I was chronically tired for the first few years (E,8)

I think it has made us very tired  
probably less interested in sex  
because we are knackered. (A,5)

I would be so tired,  
I'm always one hundred per cent shattered....

I just wonder  
whether parenting an adoptive child  
is just a bit more tiring (B,6)

I spend a lot of time thinking about her  
which is exhausting. (B 6)

### ***Post-Adoption Depression***

With rich emotive language three of the participants reflected on their experience of post-adoption depression.

It was like post-natal depression (C,6)

I was never diagnosed  
but I was aware of it (B,8)

I believed I was quite strong  
and this wouldn't happen to me...  
but actually looking back  
I think I may have been (E,8)

Although Fiona did not herself experience post adoption depression, she expressed her feelings surrounding her birth son's experience of post adoption depression, triggered by her adoptive daughter's inability to bond with him.

I've got a son that is really quite quiet  
and she didn't bond with him the same  
and he said  
he actually felt depressed.  
He was about thirteen  
and that makes me really sad  
and really doubt myself (F,9)

### ***Rejection***

Bella and Alice's poignantly described their experience of rejection.

Rejection was a big word for me  
when she first came home (B,11)

Even today you know at times  
the rejection will kick in  
and I have to think well no  
this is not rejecting me for me (A,2)

My eldest daughter rejected me from the start. (A,2)

Ella reflected on her daughter's experience of rejection.

The [birth] mother was rejecting and hostile (E,2)

### ***The impact of the Birth Family***

Ella and Fiona described the profound difficulties experienced in relation to their children's birth family.

I found it quite hard to move forward  
when they were constantly  
bringing the birth family into the picture  
all of the time.

Because they were mixed race  
and a different cultural background  
the emphasis was all about giving the child  
the experience of the birth family.

Which made it quite hard  
to move forward  
and integrate them into  
our family (E,2)

I also felt very responsible to her [birth] mum  
who was alive at the time.....  
I really wanted to do a good job  
for her mum  
and that weighed quite heavily on me (F,5)

### ***Loss and Grief***

Using rich and vivid language Alice and Bella described their feelings of loss and grief.

The social worker who is not qualified..  
tried to put in her report I was depressed..  
it was more of a sense of loss (A,6)

I felt bereft because I could see,  
it was almost like we were losing our daughter (A,6)

I remember...  
coming into the bedroom  
and literally just falling on my knees  
and almost frothing at the mouth  
while I was crying,  
I don't know if it was grief... (B,8)

## **Anger**

During the interview Alice explained she felt it useful to acknowledge her feelings of anger. Ella reported feeling angry with her child's birth mother and Bella passionately reflected her feelings of anger in terms of her work.

I do get angry  
and I have felt angry (A,8)

I felt angry with the [birth mother]  
because she could have just said no...  
I don't want contact or  
please don't contact me again  
but she said things that were awful to read (E,3)

I'm still quite angry  
about having to go to work (B,9)

## **'Not a Bowl of Roses'** *(Behavioural Problems)*

Five participants found their children's emotional and behavioural problems extremely challenging. Using powerful and evocative descriptions they reflected on their experiences.

This is not a bowl of roses...  
maybe there will be some behavioural problems (C,6)

She would hit and slap, spit, kick, not sleep (D,6)

She was almost too good then she started acting up  
and then she regressed  
actually she wanted to be a baby a lot of the time  
which was quite difficult. (F,2)

She had a very difficult teenage time....  
she was drinking and stealing  
and it ended up that she became pregnant at fourteen  
and she had a little girl. (F,3)

His behaviour was such  
that he needed to be picked up from school at lunch time (C,2)

She had punched out at my husband,  
caught her hand on the banister,  
run out to school  
and then told the teacher at school  
that my husband had hurt her wrist. (A,4)

Even yesterday, he lies, he lies.  
I feel he does it to...  
it's almost fantasy. (C,2)

My adopted daughter was insanely jealous of [birth daughter] (F,5)

Some of his behaviour has pretty horrendous (D,3)

She can be a pain, but I wouldn't change it,  
but there were challenges (F,6)

He was stealing from all sorts of places  
and the police were knocking on the door.

Every time I turned around  
there was somebody,  
can I have money  
and that was a bit of a nightmare.

So it went on for a few years.  
I said when you are eighteen  
if it hasn't stopped  
you will have to leave home. (C,6)

## ***Feeling Abused***

The impact of their children's emotional and behavioural problems affected participants in various ways. Diana and Alice described feeling abused by their children. Other participants spoke of feeling isolated and alone.

I began to feel abused by this six year old (D,3)

She is violent...  
we are like victims of domestic violence  
but the perpetrator is a  
twelve year old child (A,2)

## ***Isolation***

We were quite isolated (E,5)

When I was going through the difficulties with her  
I did feel pretty much on my own (F,6)

Everything was a novelty at first  
come and see our new family  
and we were invited out  
to various places  
but when certain behaviours  
started to show  
and rear their ugly head  
then people started to withdraw a little bit  
and also we found ourselves isolated  
and I think we isolated ourselves  
because  
we didn't really want to take them,  
especially my older child,  
to places because  
of what might happen (A,5)

## **Attachment**

Attachment to new parents can be difficult for the adopted child, often caused by previous trauma and neglect. Alice and Bella's touchingly expressed their experience and awareness of attachment issues.

I had my own personal experience  
of attachment difficulties from my childhood  
so I was careful not to put my stuff on to them  
or try to analyse what was happening  
but was able to recognise  
when it was actually hitting home for me (A,2)

Although she is attached to me and my husband,  
she has got attachment difficulties  
and it is always on her terms  
and its always been like that  
from the start (A,2)

I remember.....  
you know being a bit paranoid  
has she got an attachment disorder  
– this was from work (B,4)

## **Special Needs**

With intense expressive language Alice, Diana and Carol described the emotional demands they had encountered parenting their children.

She now has a diagnosis  
of severe learning disabilities  
so she's at the severe end spectrum,  
she's autistic  
and she has complex epilepsy  
that can't be treated  
and that started when she was thirteen...  
I feel I live... life for her  
- it's a sort of parallel existence (D,7)

It's vast and it does feel vast  
but the good thing is that  
we feel as though  
we are winning (A,8)

Forever over the years  
I've been having to get myself well informed  
about what is possible  
what is current policy,  
what if you want something different,  
what arguments do I need to use  
to get the funding agreed. (D.11)

I don't think we were prepared  
for the difficulties it would bring...  
Although they said he might need a  
special needs school he was bright,  
above average.  
He didn't speak... he said a few words  
but he didn't know anything,  
whether it was night or it was day  
that was because he hadn't had the input really  
– about life (C,1)

## **Support and Understanding**

All the participants expressed their need for support and understanding. They reflected on the support received from friends, family, school, church and Adoption UK.

It's about support (C,5)

The good thing is that occasionally  
you find someone who helps,  
but they're few and far between...  
I got emotional support from one friend  
...who is very understanding (D,4)

The other support was I joined Adoption UK (D,4)

As the years went by we did get support from people (D,6)

We had some good advice on the adoption course  
and it worked really well (A,1)

Friends were very supportive,  
they were all very supportive (C,3)

It was an understanding school (C,2)

Making friends at the Church was a source of support (E,5)

I did go to an Adoption UK meeting,  
very local to where I live  
and the women were lovely  
and I made friends with some on face book....  
I belong to a group of virtual adoptive mums,  
it's brilliant  
because we all stay in touch  
sometimes to share photos (B,7)

### ***Support from Partner***

With poignant, moving language Alice reflected on the strength of her relationship with her partner.

We have a very strong relationship bond.  
We are saying we will get through this.....  
Sometimes it feels as though  
we are at fingertips,  
almost like you are reaching your arm out.  
Just touching each other's fingertips  
You're there,  
but we can't get any closer  
because there is all this stuff in between  
and that makes me feel sad. (A,6 )

Fiona spoke about her husband's support for her and Ella reflected on her friendship with her now ex-husband.

He would support anything I do  
because  
that's how he's always been with me (F,5)

I don't think the fact we were adopted parents  
contributed towards the fact  
that we are no longer together...  
we are best friends  
and I have a good relationship with my ex  
and we do things as a family still (E,6)

For Carol however, support from her partner was limited.

He didn't want to be involved  
and although we are divorced now  
he would say that too. (C,4)

### ***Unsupported***

Although participants felt supported in some way, almost all the participants also reported feeling dissatisfied in terms of support. Using powerful, emotive language they described their feelings.

I was thinking about the lack of support  
and that put me in a place  
where I was thinking quite negatively (A,11)

The reality is that it is very,very hard  
and also you are unsupported  
and I suppose I felt we could be more supported  
then we have been,...  
I was surprised that support wasn't there (A,9)

I felt really let down and so did my husband  
and I felt well where's the support (A,5)

The second time there was another expectation...  
there would be support (D,2)

The right kind of support has not been there  
ninety per cent of the time for both of them (D,2)

I was surprised that support wasn't there (A,9)

I didn't have a lot of support (E,5)

I did feel I didn't know where to turn for support (E,10)

I didn't have the same support network  
that I had when the others were going through their teenage years (F,6)

One of the difficulties was that  
they were not understanding at work. (F,2)

It would have been so helpful  
just to talk to somebody else that had been through it (F,8)

### ***The Professionals***

A significant sub-theme within this category was the lack of support received from professionals. Using emotive language the participants described their experiences.

You've been told that they have  
difficult backgrounds  
and that you know they will have...  
behavioural problems..  
you would think that you would get  
a bit more support.

And I think that's a let-down.  
I don't know why it was  
but for people to be so dishonest  
and not fulfil their role  
and do what they would say  
they would do (A,10)

It's hard enough parenting your children  
and then you have to manage the local authority (D,11)

No one has really sat down  
and helped me understand all of this,  
so everything around him  
was and still is  
it's always been very challenging (D,3)

When social services stepped out  
after he had been adopted,  
I hadn't seen a social worker  
since before he was adopted.  
But when the social worker came for a visit  
she said "well goodbye..I won't see you anymore"  
and I said "pardon, not even phoning  
to see how he is getting on  
or if he would like to contact you"  
"Well" she said  
"I shouldn't think so" (C,4/5)

We had from social services  
almost no follow up  
and when it was really difficult  
I didn't know what to do (E,4)

There was a lot of frustration  
about the way social services managed things (E,2)

It felt as though  
we were still being watched  
by social services (E,3)

Once you adopt it's almost like...  
oh well if the child had problems before  
it won't have them anymore  
because they're adopted now  
and we don't need  
to be involved (A,9)

When I went to a consultant's appointment  
and things like that  
I was treated like a foster parent  
I wanted to say..these are my babies  
these are mine  
and I'm an adoptive parent.  
That's different. (A,7)

Diana, had in general experienced a lack of support and understanding, however, she did speak warmly about support received from one professional.

Thankfully there was one professional  
who came into my life  
who was incredibly understanding  
and helpful  
and that was actually  
an educational psychologist  
and he really understood (D,3)

### ***Putting up a Fight***

Some of the participants spoke passionately about the lack of post-adoption support available and their plight in seeking help.

We had to fight for a post adoption support service.....(A,9)

We had to fight hard and get MPs involved and things like that. (A,10)

I hugely regret the battles  
I have had to fight on their behalf (D,2)

You know I will fight to the death  
for my children (D,12)

There is a fighter within me  
and the fighter within me says  
who's going to help,  
who's going to do something about this,  
his child needs help.  
Where's the help,  
I need help,  
come on do something  
so that's how I approach life (D,9)

### *Therapy*

Four participants described their thoughts and feelings about engaging with therapy.

In the end I went to counselling myself  
and talked things through there (E,12)

We were having family therapy  
that was once a month  
we would go as a family...  
I was having individual therapy (C,7)

This feeling of she's had a real rough time....

I can fix this  
or fill this gap that's she got  
and I think  
counselling helped me see  
that I wasn't going to be able  
to do that (F,7)

It was the support I didn't receive  
from my husband  
and I didn't realise at the time  
but you know therapy has helped (C,6)

My first experience of counselling for myself..  
was enormously helpful (D,13)

In therapy  
I learnt that until you hit rock bottom...  
you won't be able  
to come up again (C,7)

## **Training and Practice**

(How it Helped)

Diana, Fiona and Alice described how their practitioner training and their role as therapists had helped them as adoptive parents.

Thinking...about the choices we make  
and the careers we have  
and things  
and I thought it was interesting  
that counselling had helped me so much  
as an adoptive parent  
but being an adoptive parent  
has helped me be a counsellor  
because I've actually seen at first-hand  
what those very early experiences can do  
and how much can be healed  
and the realistic bit is that there are some things  
that maybe we can't heal. (F,8)

I just felt maybe  
I should think about doing some training,  
maybe I could offer something to counselling  
and I've often wondered whether  
I might have still become a counsellor....  
I may have decided to train anyway  
and move into counselling  
but I have sometimes wondered about that  
if I hadn't adopted.....  
It feels as though it was part of the process  
becoming a counsellor (D,13)

Because I have done my counselling training,  
that doesn't make me an expert  
in all of this but it gives me  
an understanding about things (D,11)

I actually started my counselling course  
at the time I adopted them  
so I was work in progress in a sense  
because I had,,,  
all these things coming at me  
and I was able to sort of recognise  
and maybe work with it a bit more  
than I would have going in cold...(A,2)

My counselling training really helped me  
to see yes I'd made choices  
but I didn't have to  
beat myself up forever  
about things not turning out the way...  
I had hoped they would (F,7)

## **Being Mum**

The challenges and difficulties of being mum were described by all the participants. Diana talked about teaching her son the notion of mother and Bella expressed her disappointment of being a working mum. Feelings of fulfilment and pride and the challenges of being an older mum were described by Alice. Carole spoke about her role as mother and lover. Fiona reflected upon her daughter's teenage years and being told she's the worse mother ever, and Ella spoke of her dismay at others' lack of awareness regarding mixed race families.

You become mum  
– you haven't got a name anymore....  
I feel fulfilled as a mum  
and I feel I am a good mum (A,3)

I am proud to be a mum (A,4)

Being an older mum  
I've encountered challenges (A,7)

I didn't like being a mum  
that had to work (B,5)

I was a mother and a lover,  
that was my role (C,4)

She's obviously going to say  
you're not my real mum at some point (B,11)

I have pictures of me sitting in the car with him  
saying "now listen  
- what is a mother?"

I had to teach him what mothers were  
because he didn't know  
he didn't have any concept of  
what mothers do.

I said "what is a mother -  
what do mothers do".

It was almost kind of you will  
learn by rote what mothers do. (D,7)

It was a complete lack of awareness  
that actually as a white mum  
I couldn't have a child  
that was a slightly different colour to me (E,5)

I don't consciously think about them being adopted  
I don't know if I ever thought I would,  
maybe in the early days but I don't think of them  
as anything other than mine (E,9)

I just had to keep going when she was so difficult  
and when everything was my fault...  
I think all children go through that a bit  
when they're teenagers  
- you know nothing  
- you're the worse mother ever (F,4)

Motherhood is hard for natural mothers  
never mind adoptive parents...  
you can't comment....  
unless you've walked a day in my shoes. (A,7)

## Love

With touching language the participants described expressions of love

I can't regret adopting them  
and I love them very much (C,2)

How fantastic it's been to just bring him on  
and celebrate his achievements  
every day  
and he's so lovely  
and everybody loves him (A,6)

I love her to absolute bits.  
She's my life,  
she's completely my life  
and I hate being away from her. (B,10)

He was a lovable child (C,3)

She's completely changed our lives  
I love her to bits...  
she is everything we wanted  
out of having a child  
– birth child or not. (B,2)

It felt a bit like having a baby,  
it felt a bit like falling in love,  
it was that sort of experience,  
getting to know her. (F,3)

But there is a love, a deep love  
and there is a reason for this.  
There is a reason why  
we got these children. (A,4)

I really love my children for who they are...  
they've enriched our lives  
and I know we enriched their lives  
– hopefully breaking the chain (A,11)

Alice tenderly described how 'love isn't enough' to help her child and Fiona reflected on how 'tough love' may have benefited her daughter.

It's almost like well we'll have two children  
and we'll try to live happily ever after  
and give them as much opportunity in life as we can  
– but that's not enough  
and love isn't enough. (A,3)

I think some tough love  
would have been better for her  
– but this feeling of she's had a real rough time  
and you know if I love her a lot  
I can make this better (F,7)

The following heart warming sub-themes emerged within this category.

### **Joy**

She's brought us so much joy  
and I wouldn't be without her (F,6)

### **Pride**

What I am responsible for is how they have developed  
and now how they are achieving in their lives (A,8)

She's wonderful (B,10)

## Reflections on Sadness

During the final stages of the interview process I asked participants if they could describe the feelings evoked within them as they had reflected upon their experience of adoptive parenthood. The participants' tender expressions of sadness were particularly poignant.

I feel it is very sad (C,7)

It is very sad  
you know he is my, my child,  
and the trust element is not one hundred per cent.  
I think that is very sad. (C,9)

I think there is some sadness about (E,9)

Sadness - I've been close to tears several times  
and that goes back to my basic stuff  
about people shouldn't have to go through this  
and I don't mean me  
I am talking about my children you know  
the terrible challenges they both still face in their life. (D,9)

Sadness...  
and anxiety about being a parent,  
whether I got it right. (F,8)

I think I was very sad (B,9)

A sense of sadness was also expressed by Alice in relation to her daughter's behaviour

She said my husband had done it the night before  
and this was the day after  
and she was in her room for a long time,  
the lines were there  
and I was thinking this is so sad  
that she felt she had to do this. (A, 4)

Clearly, all of the participants were at different stages of adoptive parenthood. It is my hope however, that the different dimensions of the participants' lived experience have been fully expressed. It is important to note that the layers of understanding and meaning that have emerged from the data analysis process are from my frame of reference and inevitably, some of the themes and sub-themes overlap.

Carol wanted to share a letter she had received from her adult adopted son, at a time when she was considering emigrating. It illustrates her son's love for her and is deeply moving (Appendix 13).

Following our interview Diana sent me a poem that she wanted to share. She had written the poem when her son was twelve. He had been with her for six years at that time (Appendix 14).

Finally, true to heuristic inquiry I have developed a *creative synthesis* that reflects my intuition, imagination and personal knowledge of meanings and essences of experience (Moustakas,1990).

## Creative Synthesis

The creative synthesis is essentially my perception of the participants' experience, represented in the form of an abstract image. The image entitled *Kaleidoscope* presents various forms and lines, shades and shapes. The composition symbolizes the realms of the participants' lived experience emerging through the research – coming together as a composite whole.

Through the creative process known as abstract expressionism I slowly applied colour to the canvas. An outpouring of emotion helped me to illustrate the meaning of the participants' experience in my own way - in keeping with the genre, there is no standard look or feel. The meaning of the work is subjective. Depending on the perspective from which the work is viewed, the image changes - similar to a child gazing through the lens of a kaleidoscope twisting the cylinder, mirrors reflecting the colours and shapes - the complex patterns of experience.

Surrendering to my sense of experience I observe expressions of deep emotion, shadows of sadness, pain, loss and grief. The lyrical thoughtful qualities of beauty, passion, goodness, joy and courage are evident within the work. At the heart of *Kaleidoscope* lies truth and unconditional love.

## *Discussion*

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The child on the broken catwalk  
Hearing the sounds of our hunger  
Without understanding throws echoes back  
To the earliest abandonments of love  
(Ben Okri, 1992)

The importance of adoptive parents having a voice is not just my view, there are many researchers who understand adoptive parents as central to the success of adoptions (Howe, 1996; Cairns, 2002; Howe 2005; Logan, 2009; McKay, Ross and Goldberg, 2010). Howe (1996) states there is a risk that adoptive parents are not understood as “*central characters*” and that in some cases they are seen as “*marginal players*” within adoption. The aim of this study was to provide an insight into the participants’ lived experience of adoptive parenthood and also to highlight that adoptive parents are very much at the heart of successful adoptions. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the various themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis process and consider them in relation to the theoretical literature.

The participants described their personal experience of adoptive parenthood. Their stories are unique and diverse, not only because of the participants’ rationales for adopting their children, but also in terms of the context of adoption. For example, Diana adopted as a single person; Ella and Fiona adopted as part of a mixed cultural

family; Both Diana and Fiona have birth children and Alice and Bella are adoptees. There were differences in the participants' narrative, but also similarities and many shared themes. It is apparent that all six participants who took part in the research encountered difficulties, some experienced more profound issues than others, particularly the participants who parent children with special needs.

It is important to state however, that although the participants clearly experienced difficulties, there were many positive aspects that surfaced from the research. All the participants' narratives contained a sense of optimism, hope and enjoyment. For example Fiona reported *"she has brought us so much joy and I would never be without her"*. Ella explained she had never wished that her experience could have been different, maintaining *"I don't live like that, I'm really happy how things have been"*. For Alice there were *"lots and lots of positives"*. When reflecting on her experience she said *"there have been lots of negatives in what I have said, but for me even though it's been difficult, I wouldn't change a thing"*. Positive aspects of adoptive parenting were also described by Bella who explained that overall she felt she had been *"very lucky"*. Also, Diana was keen to convey that she had not experienced any regrets in relation to adopting her children saying *"I can't regret adopting them...I love them very much"*. Much of the literature on adoptive parenting is sobering, powerful and often deeply moving and it is easy to become overwhelmed with the shadow side of adoptive parenting. It is useful to pause, take stock and view the experience of adoptive parenthood from an optimistic perspective, celebrating the joy, magic and humour contained within (Morris, 1999; Hirst, 2005; Kruger and Smolowe, 2005).

It is clear however, that within the course of adoptive parenthood difficulties will surface at various times in the child's development (Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997). The participants' difficult experiences manifested in various ways including, exhaustion, feelings of rejection, anger, loss and grief. Some of these aspects were more significant to some participants than others and all are consistent with the literature in relation to these themes (Gill, 1978; George and Soloman, 1999; Howes, 1999; Freundlich, 2000; Archer and Burnell, 2003; Hirst, 2005; Howe, 2005; Cairns, 2008; Lifton, 2010; Paczkowski, 2010).

A significant sub theme evident within the findings and experienced by three of the participants, was post adoption depression. This corresponds with work by Foli and Thompson (2004) and McKay et al. (2010) that suggests post adoption depression does appear to be relatively common. Moreover, McCarthy (as cited in Foli and Thompson, 2004) maintains that post adoption depression has a higher incidence than post-partum depression. McKay et al. (2010) on the other hand suggests that post-adoption depression is less prevalent than depression among biological parents. Interestingly, McCarthy understands post adoption depression as having a delayed onset, advocating that it does not begin immediately after the child has joined the family. She explains "*what happens initially is a sort of panic, like the parents have been hit on the side of the head with a boat-oar*". Whilst some participants may have described feelings similar to panic, there was no evidence to support this particular time frame for the onset of post adoption depression.

Another sub-theme in this category is loss and grief. Some of the participants expressed a sense of loss and grief and again this appears consistent with the

literature (Kirk, 1984; Leon, 2002; Lifton, 2010; Schachter and Schachter, 2011). It is interesting to note that Kupecky (as cited in Foli and Thompson, 2004) highlights that adoptive parents can experience a sense of loss over something that appears difficult to understand, almost elusive. This fits with Bella's experience "*I was crying I don't know if it was grief*".

The child's experience of abandonment and suffering may resonate with unresolved losses within the parent's past, maybe grief over infertility which in turn may trigger more grief (Duvert, 2004), or perhaps grief over the child's needs. This resonated with Bella "*I was worried about her loss... I think all of this loss resonates when they first come home*". Loss may be associated with missing the early years of their children's lives (Paczkowski, 2010) or unresolved grief and loss within the adoption process (Lifton, 2010). Alice also experienced a sense of loss "*I felt bereft*". Clearly there are layers of loss and grief with different meanings. It could be argued that the adoptive parent's feelings of loss could surface because their child is not the child they anticipated or even expected (Kupecky, as cited in Foli and Thompson, 2004).

Another major theme that emerged from the data was the adoptive children's challenging behaviours. Many of the participants' children had experienced major challenges to their early development on many levels and, for some of the participants' children, manifested in destructive and self-destructive behaviours (Wright, 2009; Parker, 1999). The participants described a range of behavioural problems. Alice, Diana and Carol faced profound difficulties in terms of their children's behaviour. Two of the participants reported feeling abused by their children, others experienced a sense of isolation due to their children's behavioural

problems. Alice also noticed others starting to withdraw from her family. Many of the participants however, appeared to demonstrate a deep sense of resilience when faced with their child's challenging behaviours.

Research undertaken by Quinton and Rushton (as cited in Parkes, 1999) highlights that adoptive parents who participated in the study requested support in relation to problems managing and controlling their children's disruptive behaviour. Interestingly, the research found that the parents within the study expressed less need in dealing with emotional problems that affected many of the adoptive children. Quinton and Rushton expressed concern that the emotional problems of the children may well be overlooked because of the desire by professionals to respond to the issues that take precedence for the adoptive parents. A point to note is that the rate of clinical disorder amongst the children in this particular study was nearly five times greater than one could expect to find in the general child population.

The concept of attachment was another theme that emerged through the analysis process, although only directly referred to by two of the participants. Understanding the impact of early life trauma and the impact of interruptions in the attachment process is important for adoptive parents when negotiating the effects of their children's difficulties. Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, and Waters, 1979; Bowlby, 1969, 1979, 1980) serves to aid understanding of how a child's previous experience of adversity impacts patterns of relating, thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Adults also require secure relationships (Hughes, 1997; Howe, 2005) and there may be additional challenges to encounter for parents with insecure attachments styles (Howe and Fearnley, 1999; Kobak, 1999; Levy, 2003; Rholes and

Simpson, 2004; Schofield and Beek, 2006; Pace, 2012). Parenthood may provoke profound feelings of loss and rejection, or difficulty in attuning to their child's emotions. The concept of attachment impacted both Alice and Bella in different ways. Alice was aware of her daughter's attachment difficulties but was also conscious of her own attachment style and how that may influence the dynamic between herself and her daughter. Bella expressed her concerns in terms of attachment, born out of her work environment. However, it is important to note the factors of a parent's current circumstances and history will influence individual experience (Schofield and Beek, 2008).

Parenting a child with special needs was another theme that emerged from the data. Not surprisingly the experience of participants with adoptive children with special needs was sometimes particularly stressful. This is consistent with research in this area, suggesting that special needs parenting can be a profound source of stress and anxiety for the adoptive parent (Perry and Henry, 2009). It is clear, in an effort to enhance "family functioning" (Triseloitis, et al., 1997), that much attention should be given to support adoptive parents and their children with special needs (Perry and Henry, 2009)

The majority of the participants expressed dissatisfaction in terms of post adoption support from professionals and this appears to dovetail with research by Luckock and Hart (2004), Wright (2009), Zosky et al. (2009) McKay, Ross and Goldberg (2010) and Timm (2011) highlighting the inadequacies of post adoption support for adoptive families. The profound deficit in terms of help and assistance emerged as a sub theme in this category. Both Alice and Diana felt it was necessary to fight for the

support required. At times Alice felt “*powerless*” in her plight to access appropriate support for her daughter but fought hard to involve a Member of Parliament and others that could help her. Alice made an important point regarding the importance of parents understanding what is the correct support required for their children. She highlighted the potential dangers for parents just to “*go along and not have any hassle*” with support services. Diana spoke of having to be well informed about policy and funding, “*what is the current policy, what if you want something different, what arguments do I need to use to get the funding agreed*”. The experience of informal support however, appeared more positive, in particular support received by some of the participants from Adoption UK, formerly Parent to Parent Information on Adoption Services (PPIAS).

When a child is placed with their new family it may take some time for the child to become officially adopted and are still deemed to be a ‘looked after’ and the local authority will still have some responsibility the child (Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997; Smith and Logan, 2004; Wright, 2009). After formal adoption the adoptive parents have the same rights as birth parents and social services relinquish responsibility the for child. It is clear from the findings that many of the participants required, and it is important to note, did not receive, empathic support to enable them to acknowledge and cope with their own emotionally depleting feelings, alongside their tasks as adoptive parents. This is highlighted by Miller and Bentovim (2007). However, it could be argued that some of the participants had adopted their children some time ago and maybe their experience would be different if they were to adopt at this time.

For many of the participants, accessing therapy, another sub theme that emerged from the data, helped them to understand and cope with the difficulties they encountered. Most of the participants engaged with personal therapy. Carol accessed both personal and family therapy.

The process of practitioner training and therapeutic practice and how it helped the participants was another major theme to emerge from the research. When undertaking the literature review there did not appear to be any specific studies on the how practitioner training and practice impacted adoptive parenthood. However, the very nature of practitioner training and practice and the requirement for theoretical understanding of loss, trauma and abuse and the ability to offer therapeutic conditions (Rogers, 1951) are factors that should have clearly enhanced the participants' capacity to parent their adoptive children. In fact, in Diana's case adoptive parenthood inspired her to undertake practitioner training. She believed she could offer something to counselling and she explained that she often wondered whether she would have taken that particular route if she had not adopted her children. Interestingly, Fiona advocated that adoptive parenthood actually helped her in her role as therapist.

Another theme that emerged through the analysis process was the participants' experience of 'Being Mum'. Some participants emphasized what was difficult about being mum, others expressed their joy and pride. There are significant challenges to negotiate when undertaking the role of adoptive parent and it is easy to let the positive experiences, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, go unrecognised. The many rewards and feelings of love can fall under the radar and are not

acknowledged. Love, however was clearly a significant sub-theme that emerged within this category. The heartfelt love for their children was a unifying factor for all participants. The mothers' unconditional love for their children, despite the experience of pain and heartache, threaded through all the participants' narratives.

It could be argued that a mother's love is usually held in high esteem, a special emotional bond. According to Fromm (1957) the real value of a mother's love "lies not in the mother's love for the small infant, but in her love for the growing child". He emphasises the capacity of the mother to give so much, yet to want little from the child but its happiness. This appears consistent with the participants' expressions of deep love for their children, often with very little reward. Sadness, another significant theme within the study, was described by the participants. For some participants' a sense of sadness was expressed in relation to their children, others for personal reasons.

It is clear from this research that stability, understanding and unconditional love will not necessarily override the effects of early trauma and adoptive children may present many difficulties for their parents. Parenting adoptive children is significantly different from parenting birth children and many of the widely used parenting strategies do not work and could even be deemed as potentially harmful (Wright, 2009). Bella expressed her thoughts in terms of adoptive parents not having the same worries as birth parents. She said "*we grow onions not apples*". This analogy also resonated with me and my experience of adoptive parenthood. Adoptive children who present with difficulties are also described by Cline (as cited in Triseliotis et al., 1997, pg 232) as being "onions".

*'Onions, in contrast to ' apples' whose quality of early nurturing allows them to develop a core of trust, some children whose early lives are characterised by abuse, frequent moves and whose pain and distress goes unrecognised, comprise a series of onion like layers. When they are peeled away there is no healthy core.'*

Cline maintains that parenting such children may have a devastating effect on their adoptive parents, who may find their children remain unattached and unresponsive as the years go by. Undoubtedly, this analogy may resonate with some of the participants who took part in this study. However, the rich, emotive material contained within their narratives also included satisfaction, happiness, pride and joy.

## *Heuristic Response*

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'In the heuristic process I am personally involved'

(Moustakas, 1990)

Deciding on a heuristic study of adoptive parenthood for my focus of inquiry was almost an eureka moment. "Why hadn't I thought of this before?" I asked myself. Reflecting on that question, I realised that for a long period of time, after my daughter had joined me, I felt overwhelmed with my role as an adoptive parent, in fact by anything connected with adoption. The trauma of introductions, interactions with foster carers and social workers, the madness and mayhem that forms part of the adoption process, had engulfed me. I felt I was drowning, desperately trying to come to terms with the deep emotional feelings the whole process had evoked within me, including, feelings of doubt and anxiety in terms of my ability to parent my child. I was stuck in the centre of an emotional maze with no strategy to find my way through it. I felt trapped, powerless and frightened that I might feel that way forever.

Slowly, over time, my life found a rhythm and a sense of order. I did not feel as though I was drowning any more, in fact I was now safely on the shore, sometimes basking in the sunshine and enjoying the special times. The feelings of doubt and fear left me a long time ago, freeing me to embark on this heuristic inquiry in the knowledge that I could safely enter the process of self searching and fully embracing the process of discovery. It is from a different emotional space that I write this

heuristic response.

I was excited about starting the research study and now that I have arrived at the finishing line I feel a deep sense of accomplishment. As a busy therapist and mother, short on time, I found the research demanding and, on occasion, experienced a sense of guilt, wondering whether I should be spending more time with my daughter and less on the research. The dissertation has undoubtedly involved more work than I had anticipated. I have also needed to take care of myself by finding time and space for me to process and reflect.

I enjoyed the interview process and felt a real connection with all of the participants. I was surprised at the intensity of feeling their material evoked within me. It is a regret that it has not been possible to include the full transcripts within this study, however, short extracts from each of the narrative transcripts are found within Appendix 15, hopefully offering the reader a sense of the interview process.

During the data analysis stage, reading and re-reading the transcripts, I often found myself nodding in agreement or in recognition, at other times I found myself seeking to find a different truth born out of my particular experience. I connected with the theme of being mum and the sub themes of love, joy and pride. Other sub themes that resonated with me included, exhaustion, post adoption depression, rejection and loss and grief. Sometimes, whilst immersing myself in the data, I recognised a feeling of sadness within, sadness for the participants and also for my own losses and my daughter's.

Like some of the participants I remember feeling constantly tired and emotionally

exhausted. In terms of post adoption depression, it was through this research study and reading literature on adoptive parenthood that I became aware of the concept. Reflecting on the early months with my daughter I may well have experienced post adoption depression, although not aware of this at that time. The reality of parenting my child did not remotely match my initial expectations and I was totally unprepared for the feelings of rejection and isolation I experienced. One of my daughter's initial fears was that I would reject her. Fortunately time, patience and commitment has helped her to heal and I feel proud to acknowledge that she not only views me as her loving mum but also as her hero (Appendix 16)

The experience of bonding was not without its difficulties and it was important that I took every opportunity to share emotional experiences with my daughter. Reading bedtime stories was one of the methods I employed to facilitate this bond. It also helped my daughter identify her feelings and thoughts, especially when she felt unable to communicate these to me. One particular pictorial story book entitled '*No Matter What*' (Gliori, 2005) became our favourite. The theme of the story was unconditional love. Initially my daughter rejected this book, overtime however she warmed to its narrative, reaching the stage when she would read it to me. This book is special to me as I believe it runs in tandem with the dynamics of our relationship from rejection to nurturing bond and settling comfortably into being a mother (Appendix 17).

I started my practitioner training some months before I adopted my daughter, and the course requirement for engagement with personal therapy, helped me enormously in negotiating transition and change. Interestingly, many of the problems that I had

anticipated before adopting my daughter have not, to date, materialised and other issues have surfaced unexpectedly.

Since adopting my daughter I have, at times, felt unsupported both emotionally and practically. I adopted as a single person and this has clearly had a bearing on my experience. In terms of professional support the local authority that placed my daughter put in place ten sessions of play therapy to help her negotiate the transition from foster care to forever family. In my view the sessions were unhelpful, tending to unsettle her, so I did not access the full quota. In terms of post adoption support I found it necessary to independently access an educational psychologist. I would have welcomed more support and understanding from my daughter's primary school.

I have gained so much professionally from embarking on the MA programme, in particular from this research process. It has also enhanced my understanding of my role as an adoptive parent. Time passes quickly and my daughter and I have travelled a long way from the early days that contained rejection and hurt for both of us. My journey through adoptive parenthood has inevitably contained many shadows, but the special times have more than compensated for this. Sharing experience and reflection has strengthened my capacity to parent my child with a greater intelligence and insight. My journey continues and the love for my daughter grows deeper.

## *Conclusion*

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A child, given the opportunity,  
has the gift of honest, forthright communication.  
A mother who is respected and accepted with dignity  
can also be sincerely expressive  
when she knows that she will not be criticized and blamed  
(Axline, 1964)

The aim of this qualitative heuristic research study was to provide an insight into the lived experience of adoptive parenthood. Through the personal accounts of six participants it is my hope this work conveys an understanding of the huge impact adoptive children can have on their families. As researcher and adoptive parent my voice was also found within the study.

Various themes and sub themes emerged from the data analysis process and the outcomes of this research are in line with much of the literature on adoption and adoptive parenting. Whilst reviewing the literature however, it was evident that there is less emphasis on the adoptive parent. It is my hope this research study will add to the literature and offer therapists a deeper insight into adoptive parenthood.

Some of the participants parent young children, others have children who are now adults with families of their own. The participants told their unique stories with honesty and integrity. I sensed that their experience of adoptive parenthood had instilled within them an inner strength and courage and my grateful thanks to them all for giving their time and support. It was a privilege to hear their stories.

The participants described the difficulties they encountered parenting their children. Many spoke of their children's challenging behaviour. Some voiced their feelings about birth families, post adoption depression, attachment, loss and grief. Thoughts were expressed on parenting children with special needs. Most of the participants reported that therapy and practitioner training and practice had helped them in their roles as adoptive parents.

With emotive language they talked about their role as mum, expressing feelings of joy, love and sadness. The issue of support was a major theme that threaded through the participants' narratives. Although this study does not offer a comprehensive view of the post adoption support services, it is clear that some of the participants were profoundly affected by the lack of provision.

It is my view that any of the themes and sub themes that emerged from this research are worthy of further research. However, the issue of post adoption support was of particular significance and concern to most of the participants. Clearly, the consistent availability and quality of adoption support services including social services, education and health, is essential to help adoptive parents address their children's needs.

Adoptive parenting and post adoption support is an area that should figure highly when considering adoption policy. One would assume if the right support is available for parents the more likely the adoption will be successful and not break down, as unfortunately some adoptions do. Therefore, the accurate assessment of support needs for adoptive parents and the accessibility of this support is essential.

Further research on post adoption support would help to influence current policy, shape support services and inform interventions.

Despite the many themes this study addresses there are also some important factors within the work that did not emerge as a specific theme, including the issues of bonding, identity and parental expectations. Similarly, this study did not explore in any great depth the reasons underpinning the participants' decision to adopt. Also, this study does not include adoptive parents who have experienced adoption break down.

Finally, the most significant message this study conveys is the importance and distinctiveness of adoptive parenthood. Undoubtedly this research gives an insight into the shadow side of adoptive parenthood, nevertheless it also embodies uplifting feelings of hope, joy, pride and love.

*“Perhaps there is more understanding and beauty in life when the glaring sunlight is softened by the patterns of shadows. Perhaps there is more depth in a relationship that has weathered some storms. Experience that never disappoints or saddens or stirs up feelings is a bland experience with little challenge or variation in colour” (Axline, 1964).*

Adoptive parenthood is clearly a process that contains sunshine and shadows, always developing and evolving as a result of experience.

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## Appendix 1

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### Search Strategies

At the proposal stage of the research and before undertaking data collection, I undertook preliminary literature searches using the PsycINFO data base. The search terms, adoption, adoptive parents, adoptive family, post adoption, yielded a range of results. There was extensive literature in terms of the adoptive child, less so on adoptive parenthood. Results also revealed studies on loss, bonding, attachment, identity and expectations.

Following the data analysis process my literature search focused on books sourced from the University of Chester and my personal resources. I accessed a wide range of journals from adoption, counselling, psychology and social work. Further searches using the University of Chester Library, Google Scholar and PsycINFO databases were undertaken. Using the search terms, post adoption support, special needs, post adoption depression, transition to adoptive parenthood, behavioural problems I identified various studies. The search terms adoptive mothers, positive and negative adoptive family impact, social services, attachment behaviour, adoption of older children, post placement problems, contact also revealed several significant research studies.

## Appendix 2

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**Table 1**

<b>Summary of the core processes of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990, pp15-27)</b>	
<b>Identify focus of inquiry</b>	
	The heuristic process involves getting inside the research question. This is achieved by open-ended inquiry, self-directed search and immersion in active experience
<b>Self dialogue</b>	
	Self dialogue is the critical beginning, allowing the phenomenon to speak directly to one's own experience. Knowledge grows out of direct human experience and discovery, involves self-inquiry, an openness to experience
<b>Tacit knowing</b>	
	In addition to the knowledge we can make explicit, there is knowledge that is implicit to our actions and experience. The tacit dimension is pure mystery in its focal nature, ineffable and unspecifiable and can guide the researcher into untapped directions and sources of meaning.
<b>Intuition</b>	
	Intuition provides a bridge between explicit and tacit knowledge. Intuition makes immediate knowledge possible without the intervening steps of logic and reasoning. Intuition makes it possible to perceive things as wholes.
<b>Indwelling</b>	
	The process of turning inward, seeking a deeper understanding of a quality or theme of human lived experience. To gaze with unwavering attention and concentration into some aspect of human experience in order to understand its wholeness.
<b>Focusing</b>	
	The clearing of an inward space to access thoughts and feelings, essential to the clarification of a question. A sustained process of systematically contacting the central meaning of an experience. To see something as it is and to make whatever shifts are necessary clarify and to make contact with necessary awarenesses and insights
<b>Internal frame of reference</b>	
	The outcomes of the heuristic process in terms of knowledge and experience must be placed in the context of the researcher's own frame of reference.

### **Advert in the research section of Therapy Today**

**Adoptive Parents.** Seeking counsellors/psychotherapists who are adoptive parents for MA research (University of Chester), exploring personal experience of adoptive parenthood. Audio recorded semi-structured interviews (approximately 1 hour). No travel necessary. Please contact .....

## Appendix 4

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### Letter to adoption agencies seeking research participants

Address of Agency

Date

Dear

#### Research Participants

I am a BACP accredited counsellor, currently studying for an M.A. in Counselling Studies at the University of Chester. My research interest is the lived experience of adoptive parents. I have an adopted daughter and my personal experience of adoptive parenthood underpins the rationale for my research.

I am seeking counsellors and psychotherapists, of any theoretical model or organisational setting, who are adoptive parents of a child or children. I should be grateful if you would consider displaying the enclosed flyer within your Agency or perhaps sending it to others you feel may be interested in the research.

If you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Kind regards,



# Adoptive Parents



**Seeking counsellors and psychotherapists who are adoptive parents, for University of Chester MA research study, exploring personal experiences of adoptive parenthood.**

**Audio recorded,  
semi-structured interviews  
(approximately 1 hour duration)**

*No travel necessary*

*Becoming an adoptive parent can be a life changing experience both for the adopter and adoptee, a special rewarding experience maybe*

*after years of waiting for a much longed for child.*

*Many researchers acknowledge it can be an emotionally challenging, complex experience*

*The aim of the research is to highlight and promote further understanding of the experience of adoptive parents.*



### RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### Research title

A heuristic study of adoptive parenthood

#### The researcher – Anna Constantine

I am a BACP accredited counsellor and I abide by the BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2010). I am currently studying for a M.A. in Counselling Studies at the University of Chester. My research interest is the lived experience of adoptive parents. I have an adopted daughter.

#### The research

Over the last thirty years there have been significant changes in adoption philosophy and practice, from recognising adoption as a way of meeting the needs of the childless, to understanding adoption as a way of offering children developmental opportunities (Howe, 1996). My personal experience of adoptive parenthood underpins the rationale for this research study. Through research I propose to give voice to counsellors and psychotherapists who wish to share their lived experience of adoptive parenthood. As a heuristic researcher my voice will also be present within the work. I do not propose to reduce the significance of the experience of the adopted child or birth family, but wish to acknowledge the value of research regarding the experience of adoptive parents. I believe the research is important to the counselling and social care professions and beyond. The research proposal has been approved by the University of Chester Department of Social Studies and Counselling Ethics committee.

#### The participants

I am seeking between four and six counsellors/ psychotherapists, of any theoretical model or organisational setting, who are adoptive parents of a child or children. It is required that participants are not currently undertaking therapy in relation to adoption related issues and a minimum of two years have elapsed since the placement of the child with the adoptive family. By selecting professionals for the sample it is my assumption that participants will embody a high level of self-awareness, capacity to engage with the research and access to professional and personal support, if required.

#### What does it involve?

I will interview all participants. The interview will be audio recorded and last approximately

one hour. The interview will be conducted by telephone, no travel is necessary. Before interviews are undertaken I will forward to you an interview guide detailing the areas of focus together with consent forms for signature. A short amount of time will be required following the interview for the purpose of de-briefing. This process will include checking that participants are happy for me to proceed to the data analysis stage of the research and understand their right to withdraw if they should wish. After I have completed the transcribing process, participants will have the opportunity to peruse their transcript and make amendments, if necessary.

### **Creative materials**

Participants are welcome to share any creative materials they feel relevant to their experience, including painting, drawings, poetry, journal entries and other material. **Please note this is not a requirement for participation with the research.**

### **How will creative items be used?**

The creative material may be photographed or transcribed and included within the research study. Any material taken away for reproduction will be handled with the utmost care, respect and confidentiality and will be returned to you securely and safely immediately after reproduction.

### **Confidentiality**

Participants' confidentiality will be protected at all times. The research will be carried out in accordance with the University of Chester's guidelines and I will abide by the BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy (Bond, 2004). All data will be anonymised and stored in accordance with the requirements set down by the Data Protection Act 1998. The researcher, research supervisor, university internal markers and external examiners will have access to the anonymised data.

### **What will happen to the data?**

All data will be retained for five years, with the exception of audio recordings, which will be destroyed on completion of the MA award. The completed research study will be available for viewing at the University of Chester and may be available electronically through ChesterRep, the University's on-line research repository. The research may also be used in future presentations or journal articles

### **What are the risks to participants?**

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, including the possibility of unexpected discoveries, there is the potential for emotional distress to be experienced by participants. For this reason it is important that participants have access to personal therapy should the need arise.

### **What are the benefits to participants?**

The potential benefits for research participants include the opportunity to have their stories heard, personal development and increased self awareness.

**Can I withdraw from the study ?**

**Participants have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without having to offer an explanation or experiencing adverse consequences. Any data obtained up to the date of withdrawal will be returned to the participant or destroyed accordingly.**

**Where can I obtain further information?**

For further information please call ..... or email.....

**Research Supervisor**

If you have any concerns in relation to the management of this research study, please contact my research supervisor, Dr. Rita Mintz

Thank you for your interest in this study

## Appendix 7 (A)

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### Letter to Potential Respondents

Address

Date

Dear

#### **A Heuristic Study of Adoptive Parenthood**

Thank you for contacting me in response to my advert seeking research participants.

Please find enclosed an information sheet and brief questionnaire. If you feel you are interested in participating in the research study I should be grateful if you would complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it to me in the envelope provided.

It is my intention to invite the first six respondents to take part in the research study. I will contact respondents by telephone to arrange a date, time and preferred venue for the interview. Also, prior to the interview taking place I will forward to you a pre-interview guide and relevant consent forms.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information.

Kind regards

## Appendix 7 (B)

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### Letter inviting respondents to take part in the research

Address

Date

Dear

Thank you for completing and returning the research questionnaire. I would like to invite you to take part in an interview which will form part of my research study. Please find enclosed two copies of the Research Consent Form, which I should be grateful if you would sign; retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to me.

It is necessary for me to audio record the interview, from which I will compile a full written transcript, in order to analyse the data. Your anonymity will be upheld throughout this process and you will be offered the opportunity to review the interview transcript. It is your right to ask for any part of the transcript to be removed or amended, if you should wish. I enclose two copies of the Consent Form for audio-taping the interview for signature; please retain one copy and return the other to me.

I should be grateful if you would contact me to arrange the date and time of the interview and to discuss any pre-interview queries you may have. Prior to the interview, I will send you a guide detailing the areas of focus to be covered.

I look forward to hearing from you and thank you for your interest.

Best regards,

**RESEARCH CONSENT FORM**

Title of study: A heuristic study of adoptive parenthood

Name of Researcher: Anna Constantine

Name of Participant: .....

I confirm the above research study has been explained to me.

I confirm that an information sheet was provided which outlined the details of the research study.

I confirm I have been offered the opportunity, by the researcher, for further explanation of the details of the study.

I believe that I have been given sufficient information about this research study to give my informed consent to participate.

I understand it is my right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason or explanation.

Signature of participant: .....

Date: .....

## Appendix 7(D)

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### M. A. in Counselling Studies Research

#### University of Chester

#### Consent Form: Audio/Digital Recording of Interview

**Title : A heuristic study of adoptive parenthood**

I .....hereby give consent for the details of a written transcript based on an audio/digital recorded interview with myself and Anna Constantine, the researcher, to be used in preparation and as part of a research dissertation for the M.A. in Counselling Studies at the University of Chester. I understand my identity will remain anonymous and that all personally identifiable information will remain confidential and separate from the research data. I understand that the transcript may be seen by Counselling Tutors and the External Examiner for the purpose of assessment and moderation and understand that all these individuals are bound by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy. I will have access to the transcribed material and will be able to delete or amend any part of it. I am aware that I can stop the interview at any time or ultimately withdraw from the interview, without giving a reason or explanation, at any point before the submission of the dissertation. Upon satisfactory completion of the M.A. in Counselling Studies the recording will be securely destroyed. The transcripts and related data will be securely stored by the researcher for a period of five years and then destroyed.

Excerpts from the transcript may be included in the dissertation. A copy of the dissertation will be held in the Department of Social Studies and Counselling and may be made available electronically through Chester Rep, the University's online research repository. Some of the material may be used for publication and/or presentations at conferences and seminars. Every effort will be made to ensure complete anonymity.

I confirm I have read and understood the research information sheet and have been offered the opportunity for further explanation by the researcher. I believe I have received sufficient information regarding the nature of this research, including any possible risks, to give my informed consent to participate.

**Signed [Participant].....**

**Name.....**

**Date .....**

**Signed [Researcher] .....**

**Name.....**

**Date.....**

### **Participant Interview Guide**

#### ***A heuristic study of adoptive parenthood***

The aim of the interview is to capture the lived experience of being an adoptive parent.

You are invited to share your feelings and thoughts in relation to your experience of adoptive parenthood.

The interview will be semi-structured. I will ask questions during the interview; I am mindful however of allowing time and space for you to convey your unique understanding and experience.

### ***Research Interview Questions/Prompts***

- Begin the Interview by acknowledging the participants circumstances and also voicing my own. Thanking the participant for agreeing to the interview and re-assuring participant that she/he can stop or take a break at any time during the interview
- Short statement regarding the ethical research guidelines to which I adhere (Ethical guidelines for researching counselling and psychotherapy and University of Chester guidelines) – statement regarding limits of confidentiality
- Briefly what were the reasons surrounding your decision to adopt your child/children?
- Briefly what expectations of adoptive parenthood did you hold before adopting your child/children?
- What is your experience of adoptive parenthood?

#### Potential sub-questions and/or prompts:-

What challenges have you encountered?

What has gone well?

What was the turning point?

What was your experience of bonding with your child/children?

How did your experience affect your sense of identity?

As you discuss your experience what feelings are evoked within you?

- How has the reality of adoptive parenting differed from your initial expectations?
- Do you have any creative items that you wish to share? What prompted these?
- We're coming to the end of the interview is there anything you want to say that we haven't discussed?

DEBRIEF

## Appendix 10

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### **Preliminary list of ideas and key words**

Hard - Behaviours - Loss – Contact - Shock - Fears - Anger – Painful - Joy  
Belief - Luck - Rejection - Anger – Emotional Support - Defensive - Birth Mother -  
Availability – Touching Fingertips – What is a Mother - Transitions – Culture – Mixed  
Race - Difficulties – Special Needs - Social Services

### Potential themes and key words

Behaviours - Feeling alone - Tiredness - Depression - Birth Parents  
Trauma - Difficulties - Special Needs - Exhaustion - Feeling Abused -  
Nightmare - Disappointment - Anticipating Problems – Isolation - Withdrawal  
Frustration - Sadness - Loss – Bereft - Grief - Fears - Availability - In Love  
Enriching Lives - Love – Pride - Making a difference - Protective - Fight to the  
death – Joy - Fulfilled - Defensive - Strong/Strength - Passionate - Family  
Shifts - Lucky - Relief - Rejection - Attachment - Regret - Transitions - Telling  
Others - Responsibility - Opportunity - Up against it - Understanding -  
Support - Personal Therapy - Wounded Healer - Social Services - Lack of  
support - Frustration - Policy - Emotional Support - Powerless - Coping  
Isolation - "Love - Is it enough?" Miscellaneous - Hard times - Challenging  
Behaviours - We grow onions - Great Expectations - Not a Bowl of Roses - Is  
love enough - Reflections on joy - Reflections on sadness - Reflections on love

**Cork Board**

## Appendix 13

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### CAROL'S LETTER FROM HER SON

Dear Mum

I think writing a letter is the best way to say how I feel about you, so you know before you leave. It is obvious that our relationship hasn't been very.... even for the last year or so (*but it was longer than that*). You and I both know so there is no point going over and over that and there is a reason for it I sometimes remember things about when I was younger and I was such a disappointment to you. You had such high hopes and I let you down. I don't want you to think that I hate you for what has happened in the past you did everything you could and in the end you couldn't give any more, so what I want to say Mum is that I am sorry for all that I did and that hopefully one day you will be proud of me and hopefully remember the good times that we did have together. I hope that whatever you do you will be happy and reach your goal in life. I will never forget all you have done for me over the years. I will never forget you Mum, I love you.

@@@

## Appendix 14

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### DIANA'S POEM

Following our interview Diana sent me a poem she had written when her son was twelve. He had been with her for six years.

#### *Not Enough*

I'm not your social worker or psychologist  
I'm not your counsellor or psychotherapist  
I'm not your judge or your jury  
I'm not your jailor or inquisitor.

I'm not your abuser or playground bully  
I'm not your tormentor or your enemy  
I'm not your doctor, nurse or care worker  
I'm not your speech therapist or learning support teacher.

I'm not your birth parent

Often, in the space of an hour, you need me to be  
All of these.

You need to hate me, love me, reject me.

You need to cling to me, fight me, learn from me, despise me.

But I'm only your adoptive mother

And all you get is me.

## Appendix 15

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### Interview Transcript Extracts

(Alice)

**Alice.** The reality is that it is very, very hard and, and also you are unsupported and I suppose I felt we could be more supported than we have been, even you know we had to fight for a post adoption support service.

**A.** You had to fight for it

**Alice.** Yes and more recently there is one that's been set up. We spent ages, a couple of years fighting for it with the local authority and now they have set up a post adoption support team so I just felt as though, I felt let down by the fact that once a child is adopted then all its problems disappear, you know it's whilst it's a looked after child and whilst you haven't been to the adoption panel

**A.** Its full on

**Alice.** Yeah, everything yes schools are given the heads up, everyone is there to help and as much as they can do for you. I suppose it's a bit like a natural pregnancy maybe in a sense that everyone is there and surrounds you, and mum is okay and when the baby is born you're on your own in a sense and the baby becomes the centre of attention. I don't know really it's just something that came in to my mind then. I don't know if that right but once you adopt it's almost like then, oh well if the child had problems before it won't have them anymore because they're adopted now and we don't need to be involved.

**A.** Yes

**Alice.** That' s really difficult you know, adopted children, as you know, their problems aren't going to go away in fact it's more like after the honeymoon period then things are going to kick in

**A.** And at various times in the life span you need that support?

**Alice.** Yes and I was surprised that support wasn't there and little things like just giving the schools the head up and help with schools and not having to fight about everything, but I think that could be the same for some parents anyway, you know fighting for services.

**A.** Is sounds as though from what you're saying that your expectation was that you were not expecting to fight that hard or as hard as you have.

**Alice.** No, I didn't expect it to take so much out of you and other people not to. I don't know why it was, but for people to be so dishonest and not fulfil their role and do what they would say they would do.

**(Bella)**

**Bella.** ...I felt very impatient and thinking within the first couple of months, I wish it was a year down the line. And a year down the line I did feel better and it was, you know, I cried at times, I would take myself out of the room - I was definitely a lot more wobbly than @@@@, who is very patient anyway. Yes it takes time and it did for me and it had happened if you like

**A.** Thanks for that - how has your experience of adoptive parenting affected your sense of identity?

**Bella.** Not in some ways because I'm adopted, so the only way it has affected it is, am I an adoptee or am I an adoptive parent? If you ask that now well I'm more of an adoptive parent, but maybe not as well. I mean I think I have known for so long that I would have to adopt and you process the fact that you're not going to be able to carry a child in my tummy and things like that. I still miss that - I wish it could have been her you know - I do wish I could have had my own birth child but I wish it could have been her if that makes sense.

**A.** Yes, it does make sense, it does.

**Bella.** I want her and I wish it had been her.

**A.** You wish you could have given birth to her?

**Bella.** Yes and I tell her that as well – what was the question again?

**A.** Has the experience of adoptive parenting affected your sense of identity in any way?

**Bella.** Not adoptive parenting as such, I expect for the reasons I've just explained, I am very comfortable with the concept of adoption, it's my life really. But parenting per se, I didn't like being a mum that had to work - you can tell (*laughs*) that is painful and that is difficult and I've never wanted it to be like that and so I don't think it affected my sense of identity in that I became someone's mum because I was at work. I wasn't I suppose so freely able to experience what other mum's experience when they moan about being well I'm just @@@@'s mum now, well I never had that so yes I mean, I don't particularly feel it's affected my identity in terms of being an adoptive, in inverted commas, parent I don't think so just because I'm adopted it's always been, it's my world.

**A.** But has it affected your identity being a parent?

**Bella.** Probably not as much as I would have liked it too.

**A.** Right

**Bella.** That's an interesting question because what I was going to say I would have loved to have done the whole mother and toddler group scene, but actually that's where I think it could have affected my sense of identity maybe, because we are fairly circumspect in who we tell I don't go, you know, wailing from the treetops that my daughter is adopted. We don't tell many people. Partly because where we live, we moved just before we adopted her so I wouldn't say that locally, I wouldn't say

locally we had any particular close friends and as a couple I said to @@@@  
“should we say to others”. But because we are moving there is no point. We are  
moving back to @@@@ because that is where are friends and family are but  
certainly all my friends know and work colleagues and yeah, no one has ever - they  
haven’t made me feel inadequate or haven’t asked rude questions about @@@@ or  
nosey questions just because they are quite skilled up if you like. I don’t know how I  
will feel the first time.

**(Carol)**

**A.** Did it create conflict in your relationship with @@@@ ?

**Carol.** Well yes, it did because my husband was not at home during the evenings and it was difficult if @@@@ was in trouble. @@@@ was always in bed when he came home, so it was hard for him to be part of the discipline. So I felt it was a good idea for my husband to do something with @@@@. But that didn't happen because he didn't want to be involved.

**A.** Are you saying that you took the burden of your little boy?

**Carol.** Yes, absolutely and although we are divorced now, he would say that too.

**A.** And do you feel that contributed to difficulties?

**Carol.** Yes, that was hard, that was difficult.

**A.** How did it affect your relationship with your birth child?

**Carol.** I think it was very much the same as having, as if it was his natural brother and relationship with family yes that didn't change. It could have been the same or worse or different. It could have been different with a girl maybe, but just because he was adopted I think that's the way it was.

**(Diana)**

**Diana.** It is about policy which links to the third one which is about funding. Well where's the money coming from, what's the current policy. Well the current policy is residential care, no its not it's care in the community, oh no its not they should have their own flat, oh the current policy is special school, oh no its not its main stream school. It doesn't really matter what the policy is the bit that's important is that it's all attached to money and so yes that has been the other huge challenge. Forever over the years I've been forever having to get myself well informed about what is possible, what is the current policy, what if you want something different, what arguments do I need to use to get the funding agreed.

**A.** Yes

**Diana.** So for me it's about, if you're lucky you get that right individual and but the funding well you have to do most of that work yourself to build up your argument that's been hard hard, hard work, you know really hard work. Hard enough parenting your children and then you have to manage the local authority.

**A.** There's a layer on top to negotiate.

**Diana.** Dreadful, absolutely dreadful and of course one thing I haven't talked about but will touch on that quickly while I'm talking about that is I have found, well I've just talked about the @@@ @@@ who when I did break down at a meeting suddenly became supportive, what I have learnt is that most of these professionals whatever profession you're talking about do not like the "clever" parent.

**A.** Right

**Diana.** If they're dealing with an intelligent articulate parent who even knows a bit because I've done my counselling training, that doesn't make me an expert in all of this but it gives me more of an understanding about things. I've always been involved in disability issues and I know a lot about that I can get information, I know where to go. They don't like that because I think there is something about we can cope with a dysfunctional family but we can't cope with a functional family

**A.** Almost threatening to them

**Diana.** Does that make sense?

**A.** Yes it does make sense, it does make sense.

**Diana.** And I have learnt that to my costs over the years and even now I did mention this really good social worker the other day - something about my daughters care because of her behaviour which challenges other people, this organisation wants to do this this and this I won't go into with details. I said that's really scary I said you know that would mean her being left on her own and I said you know might she feel abandoned again, she's already been through that and she said "Oh no I don't think we need to bring all that in here" and that's a really, really good social worker and I thought sorry I disagree with you and you have to learn to shut up you know and the team leader last week when I was visiting my daughter was sort of saying "well I know you want to know these things so you'll feel better" and I was trying to say no it's not about me feeling better it's about what my daughter needs, so I tried to say that and she just smiled and said "I know you'll feel better if you know this is happening and I thought shut up."

**(Ella)**

**Ella.** *(pause)* I think in some way it makes me more aware I don't know whether this is me as a therapist or as an adoptive parent but I know when we got married certainly from my ex's family it was like isn't she pregnant yet when's she going to be pregnant. There were a lot of expectations and assumptions that we would start a family and I think, you know I personally don't ever ask or I don't think I ever make that assumption. I think it's a personal thing some people might choose never to have children so I think with other couples or with other people there's some kind of expectation, maybe from the friends I don't know. I kind of think people will think Oh you've been married a couple of years are you going to have a family soon which I don't think is appropriate. I may be because I'm over sensitive but I don't feel it's appropriate anyway

**A.** To have that assumption - you're together so it goes without saying that you will be producing a child.

**Ella.** Yes, I don't think that the fact we were adoptive parents contributed towards the fact that we are no longer together, I mean we are best friends and I have a good relationship with my ex and we do things as a family still. He's back in @@@@ but I'll go out with the girls and we'll spend time with him but there's no animosity there it could have been different but that's how it is and the fact that we can be friends I think is a bonus for the girls. I don't think there is anything in terms of.... maybe actually when people - because if they know that we've got children and if they don't know that they're adopted then sometimes when woman talk about pregnancy and I

think early on I perhaps would have felt uncomfortable and thought because I hadn't actually had that experience, but there was an assumption that I had and I didn't always want to tell people especially if they weren't that close but they kind of just assumed you've been through it if you've got children. Is that just awareness or being insensitive I don't know about feeling protective towards them I felt very protective towards them @@@@ and @@@@ and I don't know whether that was because they were adopted or I would be anyway, it's hard to know....

**A.** If you haven't got a birth child you can't make that comparison?

**Ella.** No, but I did feel very protective towards them like I wanted them to - I kind of, I suppose I did think about I wonder how they would feel about being adopted and they are both very different.

**(Fiona)**

**Fiona.** ...the thing is I had worked with children and worked troubled children and people within the @@@@ so I knew quite a bit about child development and the damaged child and all of that, so that helped but it hindered as well but I think what I did was make a lot of allowances when I should have been putting in a lot more boundaries and I saw that in myself and it was almost as though I was trying to compensate for things that she had missed out on – over compensate and probably I was a lot less tough on her than I was on the others and that's something I feel I got wrong

**A.** That you may have done things differently then, with the benefit of hindsight?

**Fiona.** Yeah I think some tough love would have been better for her - but this feeling of she's had a real rough time and you know if I love her a lot I can make this better or I can fix this or fill this gap that she's got and I think counselling helped me see that I wasn't going to be able to do that and you know I did make a lot of mistakes and that, that is another thing my children have told me now they've grown up, that she got away with all sorts that they would never have got away with, so I can see, I can see that the counselling helped me see that part of myself really that was relating to a little child even when she was a big teenager when she was stroppy and I still related to that little toddler.

## Appendix 16

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A couple of years ago my daughter was asked, whilst at school, to identify and write about her hero. This is what she wrote...

My hero is my mum because she is the one person who believes in me. Firstly, she gave me a home and a loving family to come home to everyday. Secondly, she is kind and gives me a family who will be there forever. She leads by example and gives me lots of different rules and sayings to help me along. She doesn't do anything bad. She likes to be polite and to show me how good life can be. My mum gave me a second chance of having a family. An Aunty, an Uncle, even Grandparents. My mum loves me as well.

No matter what

(Debi Glori, 2003)