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Christine K Anzur

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“To Meet Her, that Changed Everything”: Adult Adoptees’ Discursive Construction of
the Meaning of “Parent” Following Birth Parent Contact

Christine K. Anzur

Dissertation submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication Studies

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Dialectics Theory
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ABSTRACT

“To Meet Her, that Changed Everything”: Adult Adoptees’ Discursive Construction of the Meaning of “Parent” Following Birth Parent Contact

Christine K. Anzur

This dissertation examined the competing discourses that emerged as adult adoptees constructed the meaning of the term “parent” following contact with a birth parent. As a type of nontraditional family, adoptees have “dual membership” (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014) in both their adoptive and birth families. When making contact with a birth parent, adoptees may have to renegotiate the meaning of the term “parent” to include the birth parent. Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) was used because it is an interpretive theory that allows researchers to study contradictory feelings--or competing discourses--that emerge in nontraditional families. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 adult adoptees who had made contact with a birth parent. Contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011) uncovered two primary discourses that emerge as participants constructed a definition of “parent” following contact with their birth parent. The first discourse, *discourse of parent as a specific person* (DPSP), emerged when participants felt that “parent” referred exclusively to their adoptive parents; these participants did not change their definition of “parent” when they made contact with their birth parent. The second discourse, *discourse of parent as a label* (DPL), emerged when participants defined “parent” as a flexible role that could be filled by multiple people. These participants felt that their definition of “parent” changed only after making contact with their birth parent, and they included their birth parent in their definition of “parent.” These discourses demonstrated interplay through negating, countering, and entertaining. The results of this dissertation add to the body of literature on adoptive family communication and RDT, and have implications for adoption practitioners. Three primary limitations should be considered: the use of a sample recruited from an adoption forum, the use of a sample that is not representative of the adoptee population, and three assumptions of birth family contact that were made prior to data collection. Despite these limitations, the results offer potential avenues of research for adoptive family communication researchers.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The National Council for Adoption (NCFA; 2017) estimates that in 2014, approximately 110,000 infants were placed for domestic adoption. Although most domestic adoptions currently take the form of open adoption, adoptions before the 1990s were usually closed adoptions, meaning that adoptees had little, if any, information about their biological parents (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Thus, adoptees from closed adoptions are frequently unable to make contact with their birth parents until they reach adulthood (Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004), by which time they usually have created a family identity in relation to their adoptive family (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014). For these adoptees, birth family contact can be as challenging as it is fulfilling (Colaner et al., 2014; Colaner & Scharp, 2016).

Birth family contact is a complex process that evokes seemingly contradictory feelings for adoptees (Colaner et al., 2014; Docan-Morgan, 2017). Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT; Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) is a communication theory that provides a theoretical framework to examine these contradictory feelings that characterize complex family processes (Baxter, 2006). RDT is appropriate for the study of adoptees' contradictory feelings surrounding birth family contact because although it was created in response to the presence of conflicting needs in interpersonal relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), RDT has since been used to guide research conducted in family communication contexts (e.g., parent-child, sibling).

Although family communication researchers have used RDT to examine the complex process of meaning-making in adoptive families, the bulk of this work has

focused on the adoptive parent's construction of meaning surrounding adoption or family (e.g., Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, & Scharp, 2014; Harrigan, 2009). Less attention has been given to the perspective of the adoptee; this is problematic as adoptees and adoptive parents experience adoption differently--for this reason, Suter (2014) called for adoptive family communication researchers to conduct research from the adoptee perspective. For adoptive parents, adoption is a choice that allows them to achieve their goal of becoming parents. Adoptees, however, have no voice in their adoption and, as such, have a more diverse range of opinions about adoption. Several Facebook support groups (e.g., Adoptee Central, You Know You're an Adoptee When . . .) exist for adoptees only; many of these groups explicitly prohibit adoptive parents from joining in order to focus on adoptees' conflicting--and often negative--perspectives on adoption. This dissertation adds to the extant adoptive family literature by focusing on the unique experience of the adult adoptee. The use of RDT allows for an examination of the complex, conflicting feelings that adult adoptees feel as they make contact with a birth parent, allowing for a more complete understanding of this experience.

This dissertation uses RDT to study how adult adoptees discursively construct the meaning of the word "parent" as they make contact with their birth parents, thus requiring them to incorporate two "sets" of parents into their overarching idea of "parent." This chapter is comprised of four sections. The first section is an overview of adoptive family communication, with emphases on boundary management strategies and birth family contact. The second section provides a review of Relational Dialectics Theory. The third section details how RDT has been used to study adoptive family communication. The fourth section contains a rationale for this dissertation.

Adoptive Family Communication

The adoptive family form has been in existence for decades; however, within the past 20 years, the process of adoption has shifted from a clandestine affair to a more open arrangement in which adoptees have the potential to make contact and form relationships with their birth family members (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). For adoptees, making contact with one's birth family members can help develop adoptive identity, provide an opportunity for self-reflection and understanding, and strengthen relationships with adoptive parents (Colaner et al., 2014; Skinner-Drawz, Wrobel, Grotevant, & Von Korff, 2011). However, contact with birth family members also represents a threat to adoptive parents' sense of parental identity (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013); therefore, the communication between adoptees and their adoptive parents takes on new importance as adoptees begin to search for and make contact with their birth parents. As a nontraditional family type, adoptive families are discourse dependent, meaning that they use communication to construct their family identities and to address adoption-specific issues such as birth family contact (Galvin, 2006; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000). Adoptive families differ from traditional biologically-related families in that they (a) engage in internal and external boundary management strategies and (b) must negotiate birth family contact (Galvin, 2006; Grotevant et al., 2000).

Boundary Management Strategies

Internal and external boundary management strategies are used to not only define adoptive family members' relationships with one another, but also to communicate these relationships to individuals outside of the family (Galvin, 2006). Used from young childhood well into adulthood (Docan-Morgan, 2010), these strategies serve to remind

adoptive families of their differential status and the view of adoptive families as “less than” or “second to” genetically related families (Baxter et al., 2014; Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011). Conversations within the family, as well as interactions with those outside of the family, demonstrate the specific issues that adoptive families must address in light of their nontraditional status.

Internal boundary management strategies. Internal boundary management strategies consist of four strategies (i.e., ritualizing, narrating, discussing, and naming) through which nontraditional families construct a sense of identity with each other. For adoptive families, these strategies help make sense of the roles and relationships of individual members within the family (Galvin, 2006). *Ritualizing* helps develop and maintain a strong family identity through the creation and enactment of specific behaviors to commemorate special events (Galvin, 2006). Adoptive families may create rituals around significant adoption-related events such as “Adoption Day” or “Gotcha Day,” which celebrate the formalization of the adoption and represent it as an important event in the family (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Nelson & Colaner, 2018). Developing and enacting these rituals not only normalizes the adoption for the family, but also provides a natural opportunity for adoptees to ask questions about their adoption (Galvin, 2006). In addition, adoptive parents who ritualize “Adoption Day” or “Gotcha Day” tend to invoke known elements of their child’s adoption during the ritual, which provides the child with adoption-related information (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010).

Narrating is a complex process of telling adoption-related stories, such as entrance narratives or the child’s adoption story, which help family members learn about and make sense of their adoptive status (Galvin, 2006; Harrigan, 2010; Nelson &

Colaner, 2018). Adoption narratives commonly emphasize the permanence of the adoptive family, the sacrifice of the adoptee's birth parents, and the love that both adoptive and birth parents feel for the child (Harrigan, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). In these narratives, adoptive parents stress their *choice* to adopt, thus placing adoption as a voluntary action rather than a "last resort" prompted by an inability to reproduce biologically. The tone and openness within these narratives informs adoptees about the adoption-related communication they can expect from their adoptive parents in the future (Grotevant et al., 2000; Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003). These adoption narratives function as "practice" for adoptive parents, as telling adoption stories helps prepare them to answer the more difficult questions their children may have as they chronologically age (Harrigan, 2010; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). The way in which adoption stories are framed and told influences adoptees' self-esteem and feelings of family identity (Galvin, 2006; Harrigan, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011) and, for adoptees in open adoptions, can increase closeness between themselves and their birth parents (Hays, Horstman, Colaner, & Nelson, 2016).

Discussing occurs when adoptive family members address the aspects of their family that are different from traditional, biologically-related families (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Galvin, 2006; Nelson & Colaner, 2017). Adoptive parents often have access to information about their child's birth family members and the circumstances surrounding the adoption (Baxter, Suter, Thomas, & Seurer, 2015); however, regardless of the amount of information they possess, it is the adoptive parents' *willingness* to discuss adoption-related issues that is important (Brodzinsky, 2006). Adoption-related

communication with adoptive parents also is associated with more satisfying birth parent-adoptee relationships, demonstrating the importance of the adoptive parents' role in discussing adoption with their adopted child (Farr, Grant-Marsney, & Grotevant, 2014). Even if adoptive parents are unable to answer their adoptive child's questions, adoptees take note of their parents' willingness to discuss adoption-related issues (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991).

Naming is the way in which adoptive family members identify each other. Adoptees and their adoptive parents often draw a distinction between themselves as "Mom" and "Dad" and the biological parents as "birth mother" and "birth father" (Docan-Morgan, 2017; Horstman, Colaner, Nelson, Bish, & Hays, 2018; March, 1997; Suter, 2008). This distinction serves to emphasize the adoptive parents as fulfilling the role of parent, while also acknowledging the biological parent's part in giving birth to the child. For adoptees, the use of "Mom" and "Dad" is reserved for the parent who was actively involved in parenting the adoptee, and refraining from naming birth parents as "Mom" and "Dad" is intended to maintain distance between adoptees and their birth parents, reminding the birth parent that biological relatedness does not replace or trump the relationship that the adoptee has created with his or her adoptive parents (Docan-Morgan, 2017). International adoptees may choose to use their birth culture's language to refer to birth family members, thereby referencing their role as "parent" while still maintaining the distinction between birth and adoptive parents (Docan-Morgan, 2017). However, these adoptees noted that the English term "mom" carried more relational meaning for them than the cultural label. Interestingly, adoptees may avoid naming their birth parents at all, demonstrating not only an awareness of the relational meaning

associated with these names, but also drawing attention to the lack of a script for adoptees to use when interacting with birth family members (Docan-Morgan, 2017; Galvin, 2006).

External boundary management strategies. External boundary management strategies (i.e., labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending) communicate the family structure while simultaneously justifying the structure as valid, despite lacking biological ties (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Galvin, 2006; Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2010). *Labeling*, which parallels the internal boundary management strategy of naming, allows adoptive family members to describe their family relationships to outsiders by demonstrating how these bonds parallel those bonds in biologically-formed families (Galvin, 2006). By labeling an adoptive parent as “mom” or “dad,” adoptees are communicating to outsiders that the adoptive parent fulfills the roles associated with parenting (Powell & Afifi, 2005). This strategy works because it attaches an easily understood meaning to adoptive family relationships and can distinguish between the different roles that adoptive and biological parents play in an adoptee’s life. Comments from birth mothers reflect this distinction; for example, in speaking about her biological daughter, one birth mother noted, “I realized I was her biological mother, but I was not her mother” (March, 1997, p. 103).

Following the act of labeling, adoptive family members engage in *explaining*. This process occurs in response to non-challenging, genuine questioning from outsiders (Galvin, 2006). For individuals outside of the adoptive family, relationships between members can seem confusing, especially the adoptee’s connection to the biological and adoptive parents (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Suter & Ballard, 2009). Adoptive parents report being happy to answer outsiders’ questions about their family structure, provided that the

questions reflect positive attitudes toward adoption or expressed curiosity about the adoption process (Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009). For these parents, some interactions can be an opportunity to educate outsiders about their family structure; however, adoptive family members engage in explaining only when the outsider is genuine, curious, and nonthreatening (Suter et al., 2010; Suter & Ballard, 2009).

Legitimizing involves drawing on legal ties to present the adoptive family structure as valid (Galvin, 2006). Occasionally, outsiders make comments that communicate to adoptive family members that they should be biologically related to one another; such comments are challenging to both individual and family identity (Galvin, 2006; Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009). Challenging comments lead adoptive parents to feel stigmatized for violating the traditional form of biologically-related family members (Suter et al., 2011). When adoptive family members are confronted by these comments, legitimizing draws attention to the similarities that exist between adoptive and biologically-related families through their legal status (Galvin, 2006). Legitimizing also takes the form of making comparisons between adoptive family members' own families and other nontraditional family forms, such as single-parent families or stepfamilies (Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010). For some adoptive parents, comments from outsiders allow them to demonstrate the legitimacy of their family by educating outsiders about how adoptive bonds are formed, thus not only invoking legality but also teaching outsiders that adoptive family relationships are permanent and valid (Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009).

When outsiders' remarks are hostile or overtly challenging, adoptive family members may choose to use the *defending* strategy (Galvin, 2006). The use of this

strategy occurs when adoptive family members experience strong reactions to the outsider's comments and feel frustrated, angry, or hurt. In response to especially hurtful comments, adoptive parents view themselves as protectors who must defend their children and families (Suter et al., 2010). Comments that infringe upon the adoptee's or family's privacy, draw attention to physical differences between members, or position adoption as "second best" tend to prompt defensive responses (Suter & Ballard, 2009). Adoptive parents enact the defending strategy in a variety of ways, including ignoring the comment, responding in a sarcastic manner, using body language that clearly signals the end of conversation, or directly challenging the outsider's remark (Suter, 2008). When using the defending strategy, adoptive parents attempt to prevent outsiders from continuing to make challenging comments, while also communicating that these outsiders' behavior was unacceptable. In addition, adoptive parents hope to demonstrate to their children that the outsider's perspective on adoptive families is inconsequential and to prevent their children from internalizing negative messages or stereotypes about adoption (Suter, 2008).

The act of engaging in these four external boundary management strategies (i.e., labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending) can lead to the use of any of the four internal boundary management strategies within the family (i.e., ritualizing, narrating, discussing, and naming; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Galvin, 2006). Challenging interactions with outsiders prompt internal boundary management strategies as adoptive parents or adoptees may be motivated to discuss these interactions within the family (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Galvin, 2006; Grotevant, 2000). Throughout their lives, adoptees receive comments from others that denigrate or frame adoptive families in a negative way

(Docan-Morgan, 2010; Garber & Grotevant, 2015). These challenging comments may prompt adoptees to question their adoptive parents about their family type, leading to family discussions or an opportunity to retell entrance narratives (Galvin, 2006). In addition, adoptive parents are on the receiving end of inappropriate remarks from outsiders (Suter et al., 2011; Suter & Ballard, 2009). Upon hearing challenging comments from outsiders, adoptive parents may preemptively address certain topics within the family, in an attempt to provide the adoptive child with a potential response and to prevent the adoptive child from internalizing the message (Suter et al., 2010; Suter et al., 2011).

Yet another way in which adoptive families differ from traditional biologically-related families is that adoptive families often confront the decision to make contact with the adoptee's birth parents. As adoptees enter adolescence and emerging adulthood, they may begin to consider searching for and making contact with their birth family members (Wrobel et al., 2004).

Perspectives on Birth Family Contact

The following section provides a review of birth family contact from the perspective of (a) adoptees and (b) adoptive parents.

Adoptees' perspectives. For some adoptees, making birth family contact is essential to the development of their personal identity, as the physical and behavioral similarities that exist between themselves and their birth family members provide insight into their understanding of themselves (Colaner et al., 2014; Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010). Discovering shared physical characteristics can be an important event for adoptees, as they frequently do not share physical similarities with their adoptive family

members. Therefore, when they are confronted with others who share physical characteristics, adoptees may experience a connection to their birth family members (Colaner et al., 2014; Docan-Morgan, 2014; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). Moreover, many adoptees desire information about the adoption itself (i.e., why they were placed for adoption), details of their birth, and health-related information (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010).

Adoptive information-seeking is the result of an adoption information gap accompanied by adoption-related curiosity (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009). An adoption information gap occurs when adoptees have less information than they desire about some aspect of their adoption. Not all adoptees experience information gaps, as adoptees either may be satisfied with the amount of information they possess or unmotivated to learn more about their adoption (Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011; Wrobel & Dillon, 2009).

Although some adoptees express no interest in searching for or making contact with their birth family members, other adoptees--particularly those classified as "preoccupied"--do. Preoccupied adoptees feel that their adoptive status is central to their identity and spend a significant amount of time ruminating on their adoption (Grotevant et al., 2000; Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002). These preoccupied adoptees tend to come from families in which communication about their adoption is more limited, thus allowing them less opportunity to reflect on their adoptive status and how their adoption influences their identity (Horstman, Colaner, & Rittenour, 2016); these adoptees may also be more likely to be interested in searching for birth family members. Generally, adoptees become more interested in adoption and birth family-related information as they grow older, particularly for those adoptees who have spent time reflecting on their adoptive status.

Curiosity about adoption-related information, preoccupation with one's adoption, and chronological age are consistent predictors of search or contact behavior (Wrobel et al., 2004). Family functioning, however, is not a predictor of intent to search (Wrobel et al., 2004). Birth family contact is not a result of a poor relationship with one's adoptive parents; rather, it represents a desire to understand one's family history and personal identity and to form relationships with biologically-related individuals (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Wrobel et al., 2004).

Those individuals who choose not to search for their biological family members do so for a variety of reasons. Adoptees may be hesitant to initiate birth family contact because they fear rejection, concluding that being "unwanted" at birth translates to being "unwanted" in adolescence or adulthood (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). This fear of a "second rejection" leads some adoptees to refrain from seeking birth family altogether (Powell & Afifi, 2005). For other adoptees, their sense of personal identity has been constructed within the adoptive family and their positive relationships with their adoptive parents lead them to feel no "loss" associated with lack of birth family contact (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Powell & Afifi, 2005). In other cases, some adoptees may fear that making contact with birth parents might upset their adoptive parents (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; MacDonald & McSherry, 2013).

Although it is important to acknowledge that not all adoptees search for or make contact with birth family members, there are important outcomes for those who do. To date, research has found that generally, contact with birth parents is beneficial to adoptees (Colaner, Horstman, & Rittenour, 2018; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Farr, Grant-Marsney, Musante, Grotevant, & Wrobel, 2013). Adoptees who make contact with their

birth parents may feel that they have found answers to long-standing questions about their personalities, or that they have found a piece of themselves that they had felt they was “missing” (Colaner et al., 2014; Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Docan-Morgan, 2014; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Farr et al., 2013). Interacting with birth parents provides adoptees with an opportunity to learn about health issues, inherited traits, and biological siblings (Colaner et al., 2014; Powell & Afifi, 2005). For some adoptees, because their adoptive status is a source of great uncertainty and loss, making contact with birth families helps relieve these negative feelings and instills a sense of “belonging” to a family (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Powell & Afifi, 2005). Contact with birth family members also helps adoptees understand their place in their adoptive family, increases adoptees’ self-concept, and can strengthen adoptive family identity (Brodzinsky, 2006; Colaner et al., 2018; Grotevant et al., 2000; MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). In discussing contact with birth family members, adoptees mention the importance of being able to express gratitude for the sacrifice that their birth parents made in placing them for adoption and to demonstrate how their adoption led them to have opportunities and experiences that they otherwise may not have had (Colaner et al., 2014; Docan-Morgan, 2014).

Although birth family contact has many positive effects, it is not always beneficial for adoptees. For some individuals, the introduction to birth family members threatens the personal adoptive identity that they have built (Colaner et al., 2014). Adoptees whose identity is strongly linked to their adoptive family may be confused by the introduction of “outsiders” who feel entitled to a family bond (Docan-Morgan, 2014). In addition, adoptees may feel pressured to forge an immediate connection with their

birth family members (Colaner et al., 2014; Powell & Afifi, 2005). Feelings of frustration and anger can emerge for those adoptees who learn that their biological parents kept custody of subsequent siblings, but relinquished them for adoption (Docan-Morgan, 2014). Thus, the experience of meeting one's birth parents is not always positive, and it is not uncommon for adoptees to experience conflicting feelings about contact with birth parents (Depp, 1982; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004).

Furthermore, there are times when adoptees receive messages that communicate that their interest in searching for birth family members is wrong. In a qualitative interview of adoptees' sources of adoption-related uncertainty, one adoptee mentioned that other members of her adoptive family discouraged birth family contact, and explicitly stated that to seek contact would "hurt [her adoptive] mother" (Powell & Afifi, 2005, p. 141). Adoptive family members communicated about birth family contact in such a way that it seemed to be a taboo subject, leading these adoptees to remain silent about the importance of their biological family ties. A lack of adoption-related communication also can lead adoptees to perceive that their adoption is a subject best left untouched (Campbell et al., 1991; Powell & Afifi, 2005). Adoptees infer that their adoptive parents are threatened by this type of discussion and are less likely to search for their birth parents, regardless of their own interest (Powell & Afifi, 2005). As adoptees struggle with the decision of whether to make contact with birth family members, they often consider their adoptive parents' feelings as well as their own (Campbell et al., 1991; Powell & Afifi, 2005).

Overall, research on adoptive birth family contact demonstrates that adoptees who choose to make contact can experience a variety of positive outcomes (Colaner et al.,

2014; Docan-Morgan, 2014; MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). However, the decision to search for and make contact with birth family is complex. Adoptees consider many factors when deciding to search, including their own curiosity, the feasibility of contact, and their adoptive parents' attitudes and feelings toward birth family contact (Campbell et al., 1991).

Adoptive parents' perspectives. Adoptive parents are influential in their adopted child's decision to search for birth family members (Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011). Wrobel et al. (2004) asserted that adoptive parents are the most significant influence in adoptees' development of an adoptive identity and strong connection to the adoptive family. Adoptees' birth family search tends to occur when the adoptive family environment is positive as well as when adoptive family members encourage open communication about adoption-related topics (Brodzinsky, 2006; Wrobel et al., 2004). In addition, the communication that occurs between adoptees and their adoptive parents before and following birth family contact is important in the development and maintenance of adoptive identity (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Thus, adoptive parents communicate approval or disapproval with birth family contact, and their feelings have implications for adoptees' self-concept and sense of identity.

For adoptive parents, a birth parent's role in the family relationship is an uncertain one, with no schema or script from which they can draw (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; March, 1997; Siegel, 1993). This lack of schema can cause confusion for adoptive parents, who are unsure of how much information they should give to their adoptive child, how much contact is appropriate, or when contact should be made. Due, in part, to this uncertainty, adoptive parents vary in their level of comfort with their child's decision

to search for and make contact with birth parents (Berry, 1993; MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). Some adoptive parents are uncomfortable with birth family contact, whereas other adoptive parents support and may even encourage their adoptive child to make contact (March, 1997).

Adoptive parents may resist their adoptive child's decision to search for two reasons. First, adoptive parents often are aware of negative or undesirable information about their child's birth parents, such as a history of incarceration, abuse, drug use, or lack of interest in their biological child (Berry, 1993; Jones & Hackett, 2012; MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). These adoptive parents may fear that a search for or contact with their child's birth family members will be hurtful for their adopted child. For adoptees, the discovery of this information often is painful and difficult to incorporate into their identity (Colaner et al., 2014). Moreover, contact with birth family members may decrease in frequency following the initial meeting between adoptee and birth family member, resulting in feelings of anger and dissatisfaction (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Mendenhall, Berge, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004). Some birth mothers do not want contact with their biological children, and react with hostility when contacted (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). As such, some adoptive parents attempt to shield their adoptive child from the pain of this rejection.

Second, adoptive parents may fear being "replaced" by birth family members. The introduction of birth family members may increase the salience of the non-normative family structure and may threaten adoptive parents' sense of parenthood (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Siegel, 1993). Adoptive parents sometimes fear that the genetic ties between their child and the birth parent will overshadow the more tenuous, discourse-

dependent bond that they developed with their child (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Powell & Afifi, 2005; Siegel, 1993). This fear of replacement may result in adoptive parents' resistance to their child making contact with birth family members.

Not all adoptive parents are uncomfortable with their child's decision to search for birth family members, however. Not only are some adoptive parents quite supportive and encourage their adoptive children to make contact with their birth parents (Campbell et al., 1991; MacDonald & McSherry, 2013), but also some adoptive parents anticipate contact with birth families before the adoption process is completed (Depp, 1982; Norwood & Baxter, 2011). Some of these prospective adoptive parents express a desire for an interdependent relationship with their child's birth mother, acknowledging the possibility that the adopted child and birth mother might engage in contact in the future (Norwood & Baxter, 2011). Adoptive parents also recognize the sacrifice and pain of their child's birth mother, and choose open adoption to keep the birth mother informed about the child (Jones & Hackett, 2012; Siegel, 1993). Adoptive parents from closed adoptions who were not given the opportunity to meet their child's birth parents before may request to do so once their child has made contact (Campbell et al., 1991; March, 1997). Thus, some adoptive parents welcome birth family contact.

Regardless of how adoptive parents feel about their child making contact with birth family, it is the communication about birth parents and contact that is important (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Powell & Afifi, 2005). Adoptive parents' messages about birth family contact can lead adoptees to feel encouraged or discouraged from pursuing contact.

Summary

Through the use of internal and external boundary management strategies, adoptive family members create and strengthen their family identity and communicate their relationships to those individuals outside the family (Galvin, 2006). Adoptees and their adoptive parents must also communicate about the adoptee's birth family members. Although some adoptees desire no contact, other adoptees feel that making contact with birth family members helps to develop their sense of personal identity (Colaner et al., 2014; Powell & Afifi, 2005; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011) and can strengthen their bonds with adoptive family members (Mendenhall et al., 2004). Adoptive parents vary in their comfort with birth family contact and communicate these feelings to their adoptive children (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Powell & Afifi, 2005). Adoptees are sensitive to their adoptive parents' feelings on contact, and adoptive parents who discourage contact lead their adopted children to feel guilty about their desire to learn about their birth families (Powell & Afifi, 2005). Thus, adoptive family identity is influenced by all family members, which then is associated with the adoption-related communication within the family (Campbell et al., 1991).

Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT), which is an interpretive theory informed by Bakhtin's dialogism that conceptualized individuals' social lives as created through dialogue (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), is a theory commonly used to explore family communication (Baxter, 2006). Since its inception in 1996, RDT has undergone two iterations that have examined the discursive struggles that emerge across family communication contexts. These contexts include spousal relationships (Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, & Olson, 2002; Moore, Kienzle, &

Grady, 2015; Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009; Toller, 2005; Toller, 2008; Toller & Braithwaite, 2009), parent-child relationships (Harrigan & Miller-Ott, 2013; Scharp & Thomas, 2016), siblings (Halliwell, 2016; Halliwell & Franken, 2016), stepfamilies (Baxter et al., 2009; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite & Schrodtt, 2013; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008), and communication with in-laws (Prentice, 2009). Researchers also have applied RDT to issues that face families such as inheritance planning (Pitts, Fowler, Kaplan, Nussbaum, & Becker, 2009), transgender identification (Norwood, 2012), lesbian co-mothering (Suter, Seurer, Webb, Grewe, & Koenig Kellas, 2015), mental illness (Sporer & Toller, 2017), end-of-life decisions (Ohs, Trees, & Gibson, 2015), and forgiveness (Carr & Wang, 2012). Through these two iterations, RDT's focus remains centered on exploring how family members create their shared reality through ongoing interaction, with particular emphasis placed on the "tensions" (contradictions) that represent the different goals and desires of each member (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

RDT 1.0

The first iteration of RDT drew attention to the existence of partners' competing needs within relationships, and the struggle that these partners faced as they attempted to negotiate those needs. In an exploration of romantic relationship development, Baxter (1990) noted that her participants discussed their romantic relationships in terms of contradictions. That is, she observed that partners described experiencing seemingly opposing needs (e.g., the desire to have independence but also the desire to feel connected to a partner) rather than progressing through a series of stages. These opposing needs--contradictions--were incompatible with the relational theories in

existence at the time, which focused on explaining relational development as a series of movement through developmental and sequential stages, with clear “beginning” and “end” points of stasis or dissolution (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). From this, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) created the theory of relational dialectics, which allows researchers to study the complex “push” and “pull” of relationships, known as “discursive struggles” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). RDT focuses on how relational partners navigate the constant experience of contradictions across the lifespan of a relationship; in other words, how partners manage the “both/and” of oppositions, as it is the interplay of these discursive struggles that allows partners to make sense of their relationships (Baxter, 2006; Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

In this theory, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) proposed four primary components: contradiction, change, praxis, and totality. A *contradiction* (also known as a dialectical tension) is “the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 8), in which “oppositions” are competing forces that are incompatible and omnipresent in a relationship. *Change* is the fluctuation that occurs between periods of relative stability, and is a rejection of the idea of relationships as progressing through a series of stable, predictable stages. *Praxis* is the idea that people are simultaneously actors and are acted upon, meaning that not only do individuals act in ways that create contradictions, but also allow the simultaneous experience of these contradictions to affect them. *Totality* addresses the fact that these contradictions do not occur one at a time, or exist within a vacuum. Rather, contradictions co-occur with other contradictions, are influenced by other contradictions, and occur within the relationship dynamic.

As RDT research evolved, researchers redefined contradictions as “discursive struggles,” citing the need to focus on the act of discourse that is inherent as individuals experience these contradictions (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). Through communication, discourses emerge and relationships develop and change. Although Baxter and Montgomery (1996) posited that the types of discursive struggles individuals experience depends on the context (e.g., interpersonal, family) and qualities (e.g., long distance, geographically close) of a specific relationship, three discursive struggles repeatedly emerge across relationships. The first discursive struggle is *openness-closedness*, which centers on self-disclosure. “Openness” refers to engaging in self-disclosure within one’s relationship, whereas “closedness” refers to the act of intentionally not disclosing. Partners experiencing this struggle are caught between the desire to share information openly and the desire to avoid sharing certain topics or pieces of information. The second struggle is *certainty-uncertainty* (also termed *predictability-novelty*), which refers to the degree of repetitiveness in a relationship. “Predictability” refers to feelings of stability and certainty in making a relationship seem routine, whereas “novelty” refers to feelings of uncertainty or surprise, which prevent a relationship from becoming boring. Partners experiencing this struggle attempt to balance their consistent routine with exciting, different activities to avoid stagnation. The third struggle is *autonomy-connectedness*, which centers on independence. “Autonomy” refers to individuals’ desire for independence, whereas “connectedness” refers to the interdependence and closeness that relational partners feel with each other. Partners experiencing this struggle are caught between the desire to feel close and share activities with each other and the desire to have time to themselves.

The intent of RDT research is not to approach discursive struggles with an *a priori* determination in mind, but instead to allow the struggles to emerge from the data. The interplay of discursive struggles is what gives rise to the meanings of relationships (Baxter, 2006; Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and can be found in the utterance. The “utterance” is the point at which centripetal (i.e., discourses that emphasize similarity) and centrifugal (i.e., discourses that represent differences) forces meet, or the “boundary between consciousnesses” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 27). Surrounding the utterance are the conversational partner and the larger societal context. As individuals engage in dialogue, they create messages while considering not only their anticipated receivers in mind, but also the cultural and societal norms surrounding their communication (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Thus, a communication event is itself constructed by past interactions with the relational partner, the partner’s anticipated responses within the current interaction, and the influence of cultural norms (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Meaning-making can be viewed as a joint activity in which both partners are involved in the creation of shared meaning (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

RDT provides a framework through which scholars can identify discursive struggles that emerge as relational partners communicate with each other and experience competing desires, which then become the impetus for change in relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). To reduce the stress that relational partners feel when experiencing a dialectical tension, partners engage in “praxis patterns,” which represent individuals’ attempts to satisfy both their own and their partner’s conflicting desires. Praxis patterns do not seek to *erase* the experience of a contradiction; contradictions are, after all, natural

and not inherently negative. Instead, praxis patterns are the processes through which partners negotiate their discursive struggles and manage that contradiction in their relationship (see Table 1).

RDT 2.0

After years of research exploring and defining discursive struggles that are evident in family relationships, Baxter (2011) authored an “update” to the theory. This update, termed “RDT 2.0,” called for researchers to move beyond reporting the discursive struggles that emerged within interactions, and instead to focus on the *interplay* of how these discursive struggles work together to create shared meaning between relational partners (Baxter, 2011; Suter & Norwood, 2017). Research taking an RDT 2.0 approach focuses on identifying competing discourses *and* uncovering the patterns through which these discourses allow conversational partners to create shared meaning. Through its ability to identify multiple discourses, including marginalized discourses, RDT 2.0 also is useful for critical communication researchers, who seek to identify and draw attention to the ways in which marginalized voices compete with dominant discourses (Suter & Norwood, 2017).

Baxter’s RDT 2.0 represents a call for researchers to recognize the purpose of a dialectical approach as one that explores the process of communicatively constructing meaning (Baxter, 2011). In doing so, researchers focus also on identifying the communication praxis patterns at play in this process. Based on the body of literature generated by RDT, Baxter (2011) reconceptualized the praxis patterns from Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) original explanation (see Table 2). These reconceptualized patterns more thoroughly capture not only how partners attempt to manage the experience

Table 1

Praxis Patterns (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996)

Functional Praxis Patterns	
Spiraling Inversion/ Cyclic Alteration	Partners engage in a back-and-forth pattern that privileges a particular “side” of a discursive struggle at a given time.
Segmentation	Partners alternate topics or activities during which different sides of a discursive struggle are given attention.
Balance/Neutralization	Partners attempt to find a compromise for a discursive struggle by incorporating elements of each side.
Integration	Partners fully recognize and simultaneously enact elements of both sides in a way that satisfies both parties.
Recalibration	Partners transform or reframe contradictions in such a way that the sides of a discursive struggle are no longer perceived as opposing.
Reaffirmation	Partners accept that their conflicting needs are incompatible and cannot be easily reconciled, and frame discursive struggles in a way that emphasizes contradictions as a natural part of relational life.
Dysfunctional Praxis Patterns	
Denial	Partners attempt to ignore the dialectical nature of an experience or tension by only giving attention to one particular side of a contradiction, disregarding the opposite side and attempting to delegitimize it.
Disorientation	Partners perceive the experience of contradiction as a negative and insurmountable element of relational life and are paralyzed by the experience of different needs.

Table 2

Reconceptualized Praxis Patterns (Baxter, 2011)

Reconceptualized Praxis Patterns	Previous Conceptualization	
Diachronic Separation	Spiraling Inversion/ Cyclic Alteration or Segmentation	Partners privilege one side of a discourse over another at any given point.
Synchronic Interplay		Partners acknowledge both sides of a discourse, and both sides contribute to shared meaning through <i>negating</i> , <i>countering</i> , and <i>entertaining</i> .

of discursive struggles, but also the ways in which these competing discourses work together to create shared meaning. The spiraling inversion/cyclic alteration (Baxter, 1988) and segmentation patterns (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) were combined to form *diachronic separation*. Partners engaging in this pattern privilege one side of a discourse over another at a given moment (Baxter, 2011). *Synchronic interplay* refers to the process through which multiple discourses co-exist within utterances. Partners engaging in synchronic interplay acknowledge both sides of a discourse, and allow both sides to contribute to the creation of shared meaning between partners. This praxis pattern is inherently dialogic, as its nature involves two competing sides of a discursive struggle (Baxter, 2011).

RDT provides a theoretical framework for researchers to examine the discursive struggles that emerge as individuals in relationships experience competing needs and desires (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011). As they attempt to manage these discursive struggles, individuals create shared meaning and understanding through the use of praxis patterns (Baxter, 2011). This shared meaning is created not only by individual discursive struggles, but also by the history of the relationship between partners and their anticipated future interactions.

Relational Dialectics Theory and Adoptive Families

For families (e.g., adoptive) that are discourse dependent, the communication that helps members develop family identity and make sense of their relationships is multivocal and involves input from all family members. The discursive struggles evident in the adoptive family research conducted to date demonstrate that RDT is useful for examining the multivocalic nature of competing discourses that emerge in different

aspects of adoptive family life for two reasons. First, RDT allows researchers to identify the multitude of discursive struggles that occur as adoptive families discuss their adoption (Baxter et al., 2014; Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010) and create a definition of family (Suter, Baxter, Seurer, & Thomas, 2014). Second, taking a RDT perspective focuses not only on exploring the discourses that exist, but also on understanding how these discourses interact to create meaning in the adoptive family (Baxter, 2011). As such, the five RDT research studies conducted to date involving adoptive families center on creating a family identity in spite of their lack of biological normativity (Baxter et al., 2015; Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010; Suter et al., 2014).

Adoption communication researchers using a RDT perspective have identified struggles that emerge in defining “adoption,” “family,” and negotiating differences between family members. Harrigan (2009) first used RDT to study families with visibly adopted children, as these differences involuntarily and instantly communicate the family’s lack of biological ties. In interviews with 40 adoptive parents, she found that these parents negotiated six discursive struggles when discussing their family identities: (a) similarity and difference, which emphasized how their child, family, and role as parent is both similar and different to those of traditionally formed families; (b) invisibility and visibility, which focused on how the child’s differences become invisible to the adoptive parent, but are immediately visible to outsiders; (c) integration and distance, which represented the parent’s attempt to integrate the child’s birth culture into the adoptive family without forcing the child to identify with that birth culture; (d) fortune and loss, which emerged as adoptive parents attempted to balance their own feelings of luck and fortune with the birth parent’s and child’s loss of each other; (e)

openness and closedness, which highlighted adoptive parents' attempts to discuss adoption when necessary, but not at all times; and (f) community and privacy, which demonstrated adoptive parents' willingness to discuss adoption with individuals outside the family but also their frustration at receiving frequent questions about their families. These struggles represented the participants' attempts to address the differences within their family in a way that maintained a strong sense of family identity and refocused attention on the important similarities between their families and other, more traditional family types.

Harrigan and Braithwaite (2010) then used RDT to identify the discourses that emerged in adoptive parents' attempts to present adoption-related information to their child. The results of interviews conducted with 40 adoptive parents revealed that adoptive parents' attempts to make sense of adoption were characterized by four discursive struggles: (a) pride and imperfection, which occurred as adoptive parents balanced positive disclosures about their child's birth culture with negative information that the adoptive parent knew about the culture; (b) love, constraint, and sacrifice, in which adoptive parents represented the child's birth parent by discussing on the birth parent's love for the child, the constraints under which birth parents place children for adoption, and the sacrifice of adoption as one that is best for the child; (c) difference, pride, and enrichment, which emphasized how the differences between themselves and their children are complementary, and how this complementarity *enriched* their family, offering a uniqueness that would not occur in biologically related families; and (d) legitimacy, expansion, similarity, and difference, in which adoptive parents expressed that adoptive bonds are as valuable as biological bonds, resisting a narrow definition of

family. In addition, these participants felt that only by acknowledging all sides of the tensions within these discursive struggles could they accurately convey the adoption process to their child.

Baxter et al. (2014) used RDT within the adoptive family context to study the construction of the meaning of “adoption,” and how the discourses that emerged resisted the cultural stigmas of adoption as a “second best” option. In an analysis of 100 adoptive parents’ stories obtained from the adoption.com website, they uncovered two overarching discourses of adoptive narratives: adoption as a viable alternative to pregnancy and adoption as communal kinning. Within the *discourse of adoption as a viable alternative to pregnancy* were discourses of (a) adoption as a worthwhile struggle and (b) adoption as a smooth process. They concluded that narratives of adoption as a viable alternative to pregnancy challenge a commonly held stereotype of adoption as an easy and fast process as well as highlight the emotional struggle of adoption while also positioning adoptive family relationships as no less “real” or valid as biological family relationships. The *discourse of adoption as communal kinning* addressed that both biological (i.e., relationships with an adoptive child’s birth mother) and nonbiological (i.e., relationships with adoptive parents) relationships are involved in forming adoptive family bonds, and that adoptive family identity is constructed over time. As Baxter et al. (2014) concluded, these discourses occurred across narratives and represented how adoptive parents made sense of their family and adoption.

The fourth study to use RDT in adoptive families was Suter et al.’s (2014) examination of the narratives of foster adoptive parents and their construction of “family.” They sampled 100 narratives written by foster adoptive parents on adoption

discussion forums (e.g., adoptuskids.com, forums.adoption.com), and found that two discourses emerge in defining family: the discourse of biological normativity and the discourse of constitutive kinning. The *discourse of biological normativity* represented the narrative of the “typical” family as one that is bound by genetic ties, with foster parents aware that biological ties are viewed as more desirable than foster adoptive bonds; the *discourse of constitutive kinning* challenged the dominance of biological relatedness and instead represented a constitutive definition of family in which the importance is placed on the behaviors and the actions that position individuals as family members, regardless of biological ties. Suter et al. (2014) concluded that these two discourses interpenetrated foster adoptive parents’ narratives, with some parents giving privilege to one discourse over another, and some parents voicing both discourses.

Baxter et al. (2015) then investigated how foster adoptive parents construct the meaning of “adoption” in online narratives. From a sample of 100 foster adoptive parents’ narratives from adoption discussion forums (e.g., experienceproject.com, forums.adoption.com), two discourses emerged: *the discourse of utilitarian acquisition* and *the discourse of redemptive care*. The *discourse of utilitarian acquisition* reflected a negative view of foster adoption as one that is chosen when the foster parents are unable to reproduce biologically or because foster adoption is a less expensive method of adoption. This discourse was comprised of dialogue that focused on the foster adoptive parent’s motivations for foster adoption and the stress that is inherent in foster adoptive parenting. The *discourse of redemptive care*, however, placed emphasis on the positive outcomes of foster adoption for both the child and the parent. This discourse represented the foster adoptive parents’ desire to help children in need, including foster adopting

either older or multiple children to avoid separating sibling groups. From these results, Baxter et al. (2015) suggested that these two seemingly competing discourses surrounding foster adoption provide a more holistic understanding of the experience of foster adoption for these parents.

Summary

Relational Dialectics Theory provides a framework through which researchers can examine the discourses that emerge as individuals create shared meaning (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The first iteration of RDT (i.e., RDT 1.0; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) studied how individuals in relationships experience seemingly contradictory desires. The theory positioned contradictions, change, praxis, and totality as important components of relational life, as partners rarely experience a completely static relational state. The second iteration of RDT (RDT 2.0; Baxter, 2011) resulted in research that not only identified discursive struggles present in relationships, but also explored how these struggles work together to create shared meaning for partners. Both iterations of RDT have been applied in adoptive family research, and have highlighted the discursive tensions that emerge in these discourse-dependent families.

Rationale

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the competing discourses that characterize the meaning of “parent” as adult adoptees make contact with their birth parents. For adoptees, the introduction of a birth parent into the family system is an acknowledgement of their “dual membership” in both the adoptive and the biological family (Colaner et al., 2014). Taking a RDT perspective allows for the study of a multivocal construction of “parent,” which is useful because adult adoptees are invoking

their dual membership as they construct their definition of “parent.” Through this theoretical lens, it is possible to (a) examine the competing discourses that emerge as adoptees make sense of the integration of their birth family member and (b) analyze how these competing discourses interpenetrate to create a meaning of “parent.”

The context of birth family contact is unique in that it requires adjustment from the adoptee, the birth parent, and, in some cases, the adoptive parent as well (Colaner et al., 2014; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Horstman et al., 2018). Upon making contact, adoptees and birth parents negotiate “contact identities.” Adoptees and birth parents reject the idea of identifying as “strangers,” given their biological tie; however, they also resist identifying each other as “mother” or “child” (March, 1997). Thus, the contact identity is an ambiguous role in which adoptees and birth parents are negotiating the rules and expectations in their relationship with each other. During the period of initial contact, particularly, adoptees may struggle with their contact identities and with the incorporation of the birth parent into their existing family identity, as they have not had the opportunity to negotiate a more permanent role (Colaner et al., 2014).

The introduction of a birth family member into the family system requires a renegotiation of roles and identity for two reasons (Colaner et al., 2014; Colaner & Scharp, 2016). First, the adoptee-birth parent relationship is one that lacks a script or schema, meaning that adoptees do not have readily available terms with which to identify or refer to their birth parents (Docan-Morgan, 2017; Galvin, 2006; March, 1997). Adoptees frequently rely on the term “birth parent” when discussing a biological parent; however, upon making contact with the birth parent, some adoptees find that this term is insufficient and impersonal (Colaner et al., 2014; Docan-Morgan, 2017). What is notable

about this term is that it does acknowledge the biological family member as a “parent,” thus immediately drawing attention to the person’s claim to the title of “parent,” though not the claim to the more personal title of “mom” or “dad” (Docan-Morgan, 2017; March, 1997). In a study of adoptees who had made contact with their birth parents, Docan-Morgan (2017) found that adoptees “expressed that ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ could only connote and denote one specific person: their adopted mom or adopted dad” (p. 538); however, the same sentiment was not found for the term “parent.” In discussing the difficulty of labeling sets of parents as “real,” one of the adoptees in her study noted that “the definition of parent is so broad . . . it’s just not fair to give that kind of significance to, to one *or* the other” (p. 539). This excerpt demonstrates that although adoptees may clearly designate their adoptive parents as “Mom” or “Dad,” their sense of the term “parent” is less clear and likely influenced by the roles of both their adoptive and birth parents; the differential roles fulfilled by adoptive and birth parents may become more salient as the adoptee makes contact with the birth parent (Colaner et al., 2014).

Second, when contact is made, birth parents may communicate in such a way that draws attention to their biological bond by using terms such as “daughter” or “mother,” despite the fact that many adoptees reserve these labels to describe their adoptive family bonds (Colaner et al., 2014). Some birth parents express an immediate desire to be identified as the adoptee’s “mom” or communicate in a way that pressures the adoptee to identify with the birth family more quickly than the adoptee feels comfortable (Colaner et al., 2014; Docan-Morgan, 2017). For these adoptees, this experience serves to highlight the importance of adoptive family bonds (Colaner et al., 2014), and may give rise to different discourses as adoptees incorporate two “sets” of parents (i.e., biological,

adoptive) into a single, overarching definition of “parent.” The negotiation of these roles and relationships contributes to the adoptee’s sense of what it means to be a “parent.”

The interplay between competing discourses and the construction of “family” and “adoption” in previous literature (Baxter et al., 2014; Baxter et al., 2015; Suter et al., 2014) demonstrates the value in taking a RDT approach to the study of nontraditional families, given their discourse dependence (Suter & Norwood, 2017). From a RDT perspective, multiple discourses should emerge in constructing the meaning of “parent” as birth family members become integrated into the family system, as adoptees may struggle to reconcile a birth parent--who is essentially a stranger--with their adoptive parents, who have been present and involved in their lives (Colaner et al., 2014). In addition, adoptees receive messages from both their adoptive and birth parents that contribute to their sense of what “parent” means (Powell & Afifi, 2005).

The purpose of this dissertation, then, is to extend both the RDT and the adoptive communication literature by using a relational dialectics perspective to examine the communication that occurs as adoptees adjust to the presence of a birth parent and the discursive construction of the meaning of “parent” that follows. The focus on adoptees in this dissertation provides a perspective that has been underrepresented in the adoptive family communication literature (Suter, 2014). Taking a RDT perspective allows for multiple perspectives to emerge; this is particularly important given that adoptees’ experiences with adoption, and birth family contact, are diverse. Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What competing discourses emerge as adult adoptees make sense of the term “parent” as they contact a birth parent?

RQ2: How does the interplay of these discourses construct the meaning of the term “parent” for adult adoptees?

Summary

This dissertation uses Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) to examine how adult adoptees make sense of the meaning of the term “parent” as they make contact with their birth parents. Previous adoption research has found that birth family contact is associated with positive outcomes for all three members of the adoptive triad (i.e., the adoptee, birth parents, and adoptive parents) but can evoke contradictory--and sometimes negative--feelings for adoptees. RDT is an interpretive theory that is appropriate for the examination of contradictory feelings, as the theory posits that discursive struggles between competing discourses is central to the construction of meaning. The two research questions are posed to uncover the different discourses that emerge as adoptees attempt to make sense of “parent” and to discover how the combination of these discourses creates meaning surrounding “parent.”

CHAPTER II

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the methodology of this dissertation. This chapter reviews the participant demographics, the procedures used to conduct the study, and how the data were analyzed.

Participants

Participants were 32 adult adoptees¹ (22 female, 10 male) whose ages ranged from 21 to 56 years ($M = 35.9$, $SD = 10.0$). The majority of participants was Caucasian/White ($n = 26$) and most adoptions were domestic ($n = 31$). Information about the participants' siblings (i.e., whether they had siblings, whether these siblings were adopted or biologically related to them) can be found in Table 3. The participants' age at contact with their birth parents ranged from 16 to 50 years ($M = 27.87$, $SD = 8.62$). Table 4 identifies which birth parent (i.e., birth mother, birth father, or both) participants had contacted and whether the participant was in contact with that birth parent at the time of the interview.

Procedures

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited from the adoption forum on Reddit.com. Reddit.com is a social media site that consists of various forums for different interests (e.g., adoption, politics). Users create anonymous accounts and engage in discussion on these forums. The adoption forum is open to adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents, and individuals considering adoption (i.e., both prospective adoptive parents and birth mothers considering adoption). Reddit

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Adoption Type	Number of Siblings	Contact Age
Abby	54	White	Domestic	1 Adopted 1 Not adopted	34
Alec	50	White	Domestic	1 Not adopted	28
Anna	34	Hispanic	International	1 Adopted	26
Carrie	33	White	Domestic	1 Adopted	27
Chelsea	38	White	Domestic	1 Not adopted	36
Danielle	28	White	Domestic	0	22
David	39	White	Domestic	2 Not adopted	18
Derek	38	White	Domestic	0	35
Emma	51	White	Domestic	1 Adopted	50
Grace	56	White	Domestic	1 Adopted 1 Not adopted	50
Gwen	36	White	Domestic	1 Not adopted	20
Heather	24	White	Domestic	0	18
Jacob	35	White	Domestic	1 Adopted	28
Julie	33	White	Domestic	0	33
Katie	21	White	Domestic	0	20
Kris	37	White	Domestic	1 Not adopted	37
Leah	27	White	Domestic	1 Not adopted	22
Mark	53	White	Domestic	1 Not adopted	51
Melanie	24	White	Domestic	1 Adopted	16
Nick	38	White	Domestic	0	28
Noah	30	Hispanic	Domestic	1 Adopted	30
Nicole	24	White	Domestic	1 Adopted	17
Olivia	26	Biracial	Domestic	2 Not adopted	26
Paul	54	White	Domestic	2 Not adopted	27
Rachel	31	White	Domestic	0	19
Reese	28	White	Domestic	0	28
Riley	28	Biracial	Domestic	2 Adopted	21
Rose	37	White	Domestic	1 Adopted	35
Stephanie	33	White	Domestic	1 Not adopted	19
Sylvia	55	White	Domestic	0	36
Troy	32	White	Domestic	1 Not adopted	29
Tyler	30	Biracial	Domestic	5 Adopted	29

Table 4

Participant and Birth Parent Information

Pseudonym	Birth Parent Contacted	Currently in Contact
Abby	Birth mother	No
Alec	Birth mother	No (Deceased)
Anna	Birth mother	Yes
Carrie	Birth father	Yes
	Birth mother	Yes
Chelsea	Birth father	Yes
	Birth mother	Yes
Danielle	Birth father	No
	Birth mother	Yes
David	Birth mother	Yes
Derek	Birth father	Yes
	Birth mother	Yes
Emma	Birth mother	Yes
Grace	Birth mother	No
Gwen	Birth mother	Yes
Heather	Birth father	Yes
	Birth mother	Yes
Jacob	Birth mother	Yes
Julie	Birth father	Yes
Katie	Birth father	Yes
Kris	Birth father	No
	Birth mother	Yes
Leah	Birth father	Yes
	Birth mother	Yes
Mark	Birth father	No
	Birth mother	Yes
Nick	Birth father	No
	Birth mother	Yes
Noah	Birth father	Yes
Olivia	Birth mother	Yes
Paul	Birth father	Yes
	Birth mother	No
Rachel	Birth father	No
	Birth mother	Yes

Table 4

Participant and Birth Parent Information (continued)

Pseudonym	Birth Parent Contacted	Currently in Contact
Riley	Birth father	Yes
	Birth mother	No
Rose	Birth father	Yes
	Birth mother	Yes
Stephanie	Birth mother	Yes
Sylvia	Birth father	No
Troy	Birth mother	Yes
Tyler	Birth mother	Yes

is a self-regulatory forum, meaning that participants can upvote posts that they enjoy or downvote posts that they find offensive or off-topic. In this way, the community regulates the posts they find worthy of their forum. Anzur and Rittenour (2017) used the adoption forum of Reddit.com to recruit adult adoptees for their study on adoptees' conversations with their adoptive parents about making birth family contact.

A description of the study (see Appendix A) was posted on the forum, along with an IRB-approved cover letter (see Appendix B). Interested participants were eligible if they (a) were at least 18 years of age, (b) had been adopted from birth by an individual other than a stepparent (Colaner et al., 2014), (c) had not had contact with birth family members during childhood (i.e., prior to age 18), and (d) lived in the United States. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were able to respond to the post or privately message the researcher to schedule an interview time.² The description was posted for three weeks until the desired number of interviews had been reached.³

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant (see Appendix C). This type of interview, which contains a list of prepared questions that address the topic and research questions, allows for the interviewer to ask unplanned probing questions stemming from the participants' responses, and is most appropriate when the researcher has prepared broad questions that address the research question but cannot anticipate participants' responses and desires flexibility to ask for clarification or elaboration (Moore, 2014). Interviews lasted between 19 minutes and 1 hour, 18 minutes ($M = 33.0$, $SD = 13.56$; $Mo = 19$). Saturation was reached at the 17th interview, as no new themes emerged in subsequent interviews.

Participants were able to choose the interview channel that worked best for them:

Table 5

Participant Method of Contact

Pseudonym	Method of Contact	Length of Interview
Abby	Phone	55:32
Alec	Skype	21:56
Anna	Phone	37:14
Carrie	Skype	33:21
Chelsea	Phone	38:06
Danielle	Phone	30:16
David	Phone	28:56
Derek	Phone	1:18:37
Emma	Phone	50:47
Grace	Phone	56:47
Gwen	Skype	38:36
Heather	Phone	19:25
Jacob	Skype	39:15
Julie	Phone	19:32
Katie	Phone	20:23
Kris	Phone	20:40
Leah	Phone	32:04
Mark	Skype	19:07
Nick	Phone	38:09
Noah	Phone	23:36
Olivia	Skype	33:38
Paul	Skype	32:39
Rachel	Skype	1:00:19
Reese	Phone	29:33
Riley	Phone	21:52
Rose	Skype	30:21
Stephanie	Skype	27:13
Sylvia	Phone	33:51
Troy	Phone	28:13
Tyler	Phone	27:43

face-to-face, Skype, or phone. Eleven participants chose to use Skype, whereas 21 participants chose to participate in the interview over the telephone (see Table 5). Previous researchers have used a combination of these channels depending on the participants' geographic location and preference (Docan-Morgan, 2017; Harrigan, 2009; Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010). All interviews were audio-recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed, resulting in 245 pages of single-spaced text. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned a pseudonym and any identifying information was changed in the transcription.

Following the interview, participants were asked to provide an e-mail address and were sent a link to a demographic survey in Qualtrics. In this demographic survey, participants were asked to provide their age, sex, race, race of adoptive parents, the age at which they made contact with their birth parent, and education level (see Appendix D). They also were asked whether their adoption was domestic or international, the number of people in their adoptive family, and, if they had siblings, whether these siblings were (a) adopted or (b) biologically related to the participant. Participants were offered a \$20 Amazon gift card for their time upon completion of the interview.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using contrapuntal analysis, which is a specific kind of discourse analysis created for RDT research (Baxter, 2011; Suter, 2018). Since Baxter's (2011) introduction of RDT 2.0, contrapuntal analysis has become the dominant method for analyzing RDT data (Baxter et al., 2014; Baxter et al., 2015; Suter, 2018; Suter et al., 2014). Contrapuntal analysis is dedicated to answering the question, "What are the competing discourses in the text and how is meaning constructed through their

interplay?” (Baxter, 2011, p. 152). There are three steps to contrapuntal analysis: identifying the discourses in the text, identifying the interplay of these discourses, and identifying whether discourses compete.

The first step of contrapuntal analysis, which is to identify the discourses at play, is most commonly completed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps of thematic analysis as these steps allow for the identification of multiple discourses within dialogue (Baxter, 2011). The purpose of thematic analysis is to identify and analyze patterns in a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step of thematic analysis is for the researcher to become familiar with the data through repeated, active reading of transcriptions. The second step is to generate initial codes by organizing pieces of data that relate to the research question in a similar way, thus creating “meaningful groups” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88) that provide the researcher with an idea of patterns in the data. The third step is to search for themes, which is informed by the initial codes identified in the second step, but is broader and focuses on extracting the essence of what the individual pieces of data--these pieces comprise the initial codes--have in common. The fourth step is to review and refine the themes, both at the level of the coded data derived in the second step (i.e., ensuring that each of the extracts, or individual pieces of data, in the theme are related to that theme) and at the level of the entire data set as a whole (i.e., ensuring that the themes reflect the larger meanings in the data set). The fifth step is to label themes that should identify the overall point of the theme without simply paraphrasing pieces of the data. The sixth step is to write the research report and select particularly compelling excerpts that provide a deeper understanding for the reader.

After identifying the discourses that emerge from this thematic analysis, the

second step of contrapuntal analysis is to determine whether interplay exists between discourses (Baxter, 2011). To do so, the researcher must identify which of the two praxis patterns (i.e., diachronic separation and synchronic interplay) are evident in the data.

Diachronic separation occurs when individuals privilege one “side” of a discourse at a time. This praxis pattern is evident in monologic texts that do not allow for the presence of competing perspectives; there is no interplay of discourses within the dialogue because only one discourse is recognized. *Synchronic interplay* occurs when multiple discourses co-exist at the same time and are recognized simultaneously. This praxis pattern is evident in dialogic texts that directly or indirectly acknowledge multiple discourses, and is characterized by an interplay of these discourses.

The third step in contrapuntal analysis is to determine whether these multiple discourses are in competition (Baxter, 2011). Discourses that invoke the praxis pattern of synchronic interplay do so in one of three ways: negating, countering, and entertaining. *Negating* occurs when individuals use a dominant discourse to reject an alternate discourse; that is, privilege is given to the dominant discourse and any alternative discourses are positioned as irrelevant. *Countering* occurs when individuals acknowledge that part of an alternate discourse is legitimate; however, the dominant discourse is positioned as superior to the alternate discourse. Unlike negating, discourses that counter do not fully reject the alternate discourse; instead, the alternate discourse is recognized as having some value, but ultimately still is perceived as less legitimate than the dominant discourse. *Entertaining* occurs when individuals acknowledge both sides of a discursive struggle and consider both sides as valid. Entertaining demonstrates participants’ willingness to accept other perspectives within a discourse as well as an

openness to multiple legitimate viewpoints.

Throughout the data collection process, I engaged in memo-writing, a reflective process in which researchers reflect on the data collection and analysis process (Saldaña, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this process, I noted key elements of interviews, attempted to identify my biases, and recorded any other important information about each interview, including comments from participants that were related to the research questions.

Following data analysis, I engaged in member checking as a method of validating the results of this dissertation. Member checking involves sharing results with participants to determine whether the themes of a qualitative study accurately represent their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2013). In this process, 11 participants were contacted. I specifically chose participants to represent both discourses and a variety of perspectives on adoption (i.e., those who perceived their adoption positively and those who viewed their adoption negatively). These participants were asked to read through a draft of the results and to comment on whether the results seemed consistent with their experiences (see Appendix E). These 11 participants agreed to serve as member checkers and were instructed to respond after one week. By this date, four participants had responded. I contacted the other seven participants and asked if they would still be willing to read through the results; three replied with their reactions to the results. These seven participants felt that the results were consistent with their experiences and, in some cases, with the experiences of other adoptees. One participant commented, “I’d say your results are consistent with what I’ve personally experienced and what I’ve heard from other adoptees I’m friends with.” Another participant said that

the results were “relevant and accurate conclusions.” Thus, those participants who completed member checking perceived that these results were consistent with their own experiences as well as the experiences of other adoptees that these participants had encountered.

Summary

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, 32 participants that met the inclusion criteria completed a semi-structured interview. These participants were recruited from the adoption discussion forum of Reddit.com, and were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. They then participated in interviews lasting, on average, 33 minutes, and completed a demographic survey in Qualtrics. The data were analyzed using contrapuntal analysis, a three step method of analysis that is designed to identify discourses, explore the interplay of those discourses, and determine whether competition exists between discourses (Baxter, 2011). In this analysis, the focus was on the discourses that emerged as adult adoptees constructed a meaning of “parent” after making contact with a birth parent. Member checking was used to validate the results; of the 11 participants selected for member checking, seven responded and indicated that the results were consistent with their experiences.

CHAPTER III

Results

This chapter discusses the results obtained from the analyses conducted for this dissertation. Thirty interviews were conducted to understand how adult adoptees construct the meaning of the term “parent” after they had made contact with a birth parent (recall that although 32 interviews were conducted, two interviews were not used because the participant failed to meet the inclusion criteria). Contrapuntal analysis was completed in three stages: a thematic analysis of the data to identify the discourses, an identification of interplay of these discourses, and an identification of how the discourses competed with each other.

Research Question 1

The first research question inquired about the competing discourses that emerge as participants make sense of the term “parent” after making contact with a birth parent. Two primary discourses emerged from the data: *discourse of parent as a specific person* (DPSP) and *discourse of parent as a label* (DPL; see Table 6).

Discourse #1: Discourse of parent as a specific person. Participants who voiced this discourse defined “parent” as the person or people responsible for raising the adoptee--that is, the adoptive parent(s). When asked to define “parent,” participants identified specific people; for example, participants repeatedly made comments such as, “to me, my adoptive parents are my parents,” or “I have two parents already, my adoptive mom and dad.” This discourse emerged when meeting one’s birth parent did not change how participants viewed and defined the term “parent.” For these participants, the title of “parent” was reserved for specific people, and was not negotiable. Some participants

Table 6

Discourses and Themes

Discourse/Theme	Definition
Discourse #1: Discourse of Parent as a Specific Person ($n = 26$)	“Parent” defined as the person or people responsible for raising the adoptee (i.e., the adoptive parent)
Theme #1: Parenting behaviors	Focused on the adoptive parent’s active role of raising the child
Theme #2: Relational history	Emphasized the adoptive parent’s presence and birth parent’s lack of presence
Theme #3: Deliberate exclusion of birth parent	Intentionally defined “parent” in a way that only included the adoptive parent
Discourse #2: Discourse of Parent as a Label ($n = 15$)	“Parent” defined as anyone who met the participant’s standards of parenting; not exclusive to the adoptive parent
Theme #1: Satisfying relationship	Focused on the satisfying nature of the current birth parent-adoptee relationship
Theme #2: Birth parent inclusion	Expanded definition of “parent” to include birth parent in some way
Theme #3: Surrender as a parenting behavior	Reevaluated “surrender” to perceive it as a parenting behavior

Note. Because some participants voiced both the DPSP and the DPL, the sum of the participants who voiced each discourse is greater than 30.

noted that meeting their birth parents reinforced their definition of parent in that it solidified their adoptive parents as “parents.” This discourse is largely consistent with what participants perceived to be the dominant societal narrative surrounding “parent” as it relates to adoption; that is, one’s adoptive parents *are* the adoptee’s parents. This discourse was comprised of three interrelated themes: parenting behaviors, relational history, and deliberate exclusion.

Parenting behaviors, or “I would define parents as the people who raised you.”

Constructing the definition of “parent” frequently involved identifying the behaviors involved in parenting. Central to the definition of “parent” was an emphasis placed on the active role of raising the adopted child. Some participants used the broad term “raising” to convey this sentiment concisely, whereas other participants identified the specific behaviors in which their adoptive parents had engaged. Regardless of whether they elaborated on the behaviors involved, participants stressed that their definition of “parent” referred to their adoptive parent(s) and did not change upon making contact with the birth parent.

Nick, a 38 male who has made contact with both of his birth parents, provided an example of the global term “raising” in defining “parent” as “someone that raised, that takes care of you and raises you . . . parents I consider, you know, the people that raised me.” Troy, a 32 year old male, has been in contact with his birth mother for approximately two years, and felt that he struggled with his definition of parent when he was a child: “When I was really young I had difficulty with the whole ‘is this my parent or are the people that gave me up my parents?’” However, these doubts ended as he grew older: “It started probably in my teenage years that the parent is the one that raised you . .

. my parents are the people that raised me.” Although neither Nick nor Troy discussed any specific behavior involved in parenting, they used the term “raised” to encompass the parenting work that their adoptive parents had completed throughout their childhood; their definition of parent was built, in part, around their adoptive parents’ enactment of this parenting work.

Other participants invoked specific behaviors in their definition of “parent.” For example, Julie, a 33 year old female, did not learn about her adoption until she was 12 years old. Following this revelation, she reflected on her definition of “parent,” and she ultimately concluded that behaviors were an important part of being a “parent:”

My [adoptive] mom and dad . . . had changed my diapers and cleaned up after me as a child, and took care of me when I was sick, and made sure I went to the best school that they could provide, and clothed me, and put me in a nice home and made sure that I had everything that I could have ever asked for . . . they still had done all of those things, even though they weren’t the ones that gave birth to me.

Similarly, Reese, a 28 year old female, strongly asserted that “the people who adopted me are my parents. I’ve never thought twice about that, ever.” In explaining her definition of “parent” and why it referred only to her adoptive parents, she drew on particular behaviors:

Parent doesn’t have to be the person who gave birth to you. I mean my parents were the ones who stayed up with me when I was sick at night, my mom was the one that rocked me to sleep, the ones who paid my way through college.

Julie emphasized the importance of the behaviors that constitute parenting, and how her adoptive parents engaged in these behaviors despite not having biological ties. Like

Julie, Reese directly acknowledged that a biological tie was not required to be considered a parent; instead, the actions and tasks that the adoptive parents performed solidified them as “parents” to these participants.

Relational history, or “You’re 50 years old, what are you gonna like have a mom all the sudden?.” In defining “parent,” participants focused on the adoptive parent’s literal presence throughout their lives, which simultaneously highlighted the birth parent’s *lack* of presence. For these participants, the stability of their definition of “parent”--and its application to their adoptive parent(s) alone--was due, in part, to the consistent presence of the adoptive parent in their childhood and the development of the adoptive parent-child relationship over time. This emphasis on relational history sometimes took the form of participants identifying their age at contact as justification for not including the birth parent in their definition of “parent,” but at other times emerged as general comments about the birth parent’s absence in the participant’s childhood.

Katie, a 21 year old female who has made contact with her birth father, provided an example of the importance of age at contact as she discussed how her definition of “parent” included only her adoptive parents: “I didn’t know my birth parents until I was 20, but I don’t feel like I’ve grown up all this time without a family, you know? . . . My adopters are my parents.” Derek, a 38 year old male, defined “parent” as the people responsible for raising a child, and identified his adoptive parents as consistent with this definition. He added that “my reunion with my birth parents hasn’t changed things . . . my birth parents do not feel like parents to me.” Derek later discussed how he had settled his definition of “parent” before he made contact with his birth parents:

My relationship with my [adoptive] parents, and my hypothetical relationship

with birth parents, if I ever found them, had been so set and ossified in my own mind after, you know, 35 years of kind of thinking about it, that really nothing was going to shake me.

Both Katie and Derek invoked their age at contact to demonstrate that they had spent a significant portion of their lives without their birth parents; because of this, they had constructed a definition of “parent” that included only their adoptive parents, and they did not change this definition upon making contact.

Other participants identified relational history with the child as an important element of “parent” in a general sense. For example, Mark, a 53 year old male, felt that his definition of “parent” closely aligned with his adoptive parents; his criteria not only included “the people who raise you, provide for you,” but also the stipulation that these individuals shared “the same household, like grew up together . . . it’s who you connect with when you’re younger.” As he identified the members of his family, Mark was careful to specify that he “didn’t find out who my bio parents were til a few years ago” as justification for their exclusion from his definition. Although he does not explicitly mention his age at contact, he does draw attention to the fact that he had made contact with his birth parents recently, and thus they did not fit an important part of his definition of “parent,” which is being present when the child is young.

Rachel, a 31 year old female, has been in contact with her birth mother for 12 years. She discussed her relationship with her birth mother as a distinct type of relationship: “I don’t consider her a parent the same way that I consider my--the people who raised me to be parents because of the history . . . I didn’t share my childhood with her.” Kris, a 37 year old male, made contact with his birth mother and birth father, but

has sustained contact only with his birth mother. His definition of “parent” distinguished the role of “birth parent” from “parent;” in discussing his adoptive parents, he stated that “parent . . . includes kind of the responsibility and ongoing relationship that we had . . . since there was not that relationship growing up, it kind of doesn’t fit the biological parents.” These participants did not draw attention to their age at contact, but they did note that a relational history, particularly during childhood, was an important part of their definition of “parent.”

Deliberate exclusion of birth parent, or “I just don’t think they see the disconnect between the raising of a person and providing DNA to a person.” Some participants constructed their definition of “parent” in such a way that intentionally excluded the birth parent, and this exclusion was often reinforced upon contact. For some participants, the exclusivity of their definition of “parent” was reinforced immediately when they made contact with their birth parents; other participants did not specify how long after contact the reinforcement occurred. In discussing this exclusion, some participants cited specific reasons (e.g., birth parent was not involved in raising, birth parent does not “feel” like a parent), and other participants simply stated that their birth parent was not a “parent.” Regardless of the reason, these participants felt that making contact with their birth parents not only failed to change their definition of “parent,” but it often strengthened their conviction that “parent” referred solely to their adoptive parents. Troy discussed how birth parent contact helped to clarify his definition of “parent:” “If anything, I think starting to talk to her [birth mother] helped to solidify birth parent versus real parent . . . It’s like, birth parent and then actual parent.” Rose, a 37 year old female, has made contact with both of her birth parents, and although she

mentioned feeling satisfied with those relationships, she was careful not to include them in her definitions of either “family” or “parent.”

I really like the idea that my family is my family, and these people who I’m blood related to are not my family. You know, I’m very--I’m kind of adamant about it . . . I don’t consider my birth parents to be any sort of parent. So, it didn’t change as soon as I found them and like “oh! Now I’ve got two sets!” you know? . . . I feel like I’m finding out how, like insanely loyal I am to these people who raised me, by finding my birth parents.

Later, Rose added that her definition of parent “changed somewhat over the years to almost exclude them [birth parents] from the definition.” Stephanie, a 33 year old female, was frustrated by her birth mother’s attempts to act as a parent: “I feel like she tries a little too hard to, like, mother me, and I’m kind of like, I don’t want you to act like my mother. Like, you sort of gave that up . . . you don’t get to do that.” Heather, a 24 year old female, has had contact with both of her birth parents, who married after placing her for adoption and had another child. Heather mentioned that her definition of “parent” inherently distinguished her adoptive parents from her birth parents through the labels she used while discussing her birth family with her adoptive parents:

The people that gave birth to me, you know, we never really called them parents . . . whereas you know the people who adopted me were my parents. They were the people who raised me. So I think that’s where it comes from, making that distinction between those two sets of people in my life . . . I guess if anything it [definition of parent] was probably more like reinforced.

These interview excerpts show that as participants were developing a definition of

“parent,” they did so in such a way that included their adoptive parents, but not their birth parents. This exclusion of birth parents from “parent” also was evident in the way that participants discussed their relationship with their birth parents. For example, several participants drew comparisons between the birth parent-child relationship and other familial relationships or close friendships. Riley, a 28 year old female, made contact with both her birth mother and birth father, but is only currently still in contact with her birth father. She felt that her relationship with him “kind of feels like an older brother though really more than anything else . . . I don’t see him the same way that I see my [adoptive] parents.” Danielle, a 28 year old female, experienced a similar feeling with her birth mother: “I do not see her [birth mother] as my mom . . . I have my mom, who is my adoptive mom . . . so it’s kind of like having a big sister, in a way.” Alec, a 50 year old male, was in contact with his birth mother for several years before she passed away. He enjoyed that relationship, but described it as a “good friendship. It was never parent-child . . . the best experience is friendship.” Thus, although these participants were happy with their birth parent-child relationships, they did not view them as a parent-child relationship.

Summary. The discourse of parent as a specific person emerged when participants identified their adoptive parent(s) as “parent.” This discourse was comprised of three themes: parenting behaviors, relational history, and deliberate exclusion. Because this discourse identified specific individuals--the adoptive parent(s)--as “parent,” participants noted that their definition did not change upon making contact with their birth parent. Instead, they felt that their definition remained static and, in some cases, was reinforced.

Discourse #2: Discourse of parent as a label. Participants who voiced this discourse defined “parent” as a mutable term that could be applied to anyone who met the participant’s standards of parenting and was not exclusively applied to the adoptive parent(s). That is, rather than referencing specific individuals, the term “parent” was viewed as a dynamic role--participants' idea of what parenting *is* was not stable, and they felt that what it *means* to parent can and does change over time. When asked to define “parent,” participants would make comments such as, “[parent is] whoever you’ve been molded by the most” or “anyone can be a parent.” This discourse emerged when adoptees felt that making contact with a birth parent had changed their definition of “parent” to include the birth parent. This discourse was comprised of three interrelated themes: satisfying relationship, birth parent inclusion, and surrender as a parenting behavior.

Satisfying relationship, or “Because of the relationship that we’ve cultivated over the past, what, 10, 15 years?”. For some participants, the nature of the adoptee-birth parent relationship prompted them to include the birth parent in their definition of “parent.” These participants felt that their definition of “parent” expanded following contact with their birth parent(s), and they attributed this expansion to the satisfying nature of the relationship that developed between themselves and the birth parent. Some participants felt an immediate connection with their birth parent; for other participants, the adoptee-birth parent relationship took time to develop. Participants who felt that the relationship had developed over time were careful to specify that it was the *current* state of the relationship that was important in the expansion of their definition of “parent” to include the birth parent. In other words, they explicitly acknowledged that although the

birth parent had not been a part of their life throughout childhood, it was the birth parent's current behavior that allowed them to be given the title of "parent."

Some participants stated their relationship with their birth parent began with a feeling of instant connection that prompted the expansion of the definition of "parent." Olivia, a 26 year old female, has only had contact with her birth mother and biological sister for a few months; however, she felt that her definition of "parent" changed during this contact:

I guess the biggest thing that changed was I realized that maybe it's just--it's not necessarily that they had to be there your whole life, it's not necessarily that they were a part of raising you, but maybe it's also about who enters your life and someone that you just instantly can connect with.

Carrie, a 33 year old female, recalled her experience meeting her birth mother: "To get to know her, to know her personality, and see the quirks, similar things that I felt disconnected from other people with, I felt the connection in her."

Other participants did not feel an immediate connection with their birth parent and instead discussed the development of the adoptee-birth parent relationship as crucial to their expansion of the definition of "parent." Chelsea, a 38 year old female, had a difficult relationship with her adoptive family members, and ceased contact with them. Several years later, she made contact with both her birth father and birth mother; since then, her relationship with her birth mother has developed such that Chelsea now includes her in the definition of "parent." As she stated:

Even though she [birth mother] wasn't there for me when I was growing up doesn't make her any less of a mother . . . the way that we interact and the things

that she shares with me and kind of helps me understand where she's coming from, she has kind of jumped into that role of wanting to check on me a lot and see how things are going and just touch base.

In this interview excerpt, Chelsea positions her birth mother as a parent because her birth mother currently behaves in a way that she believes is evident of parenting, despite not being present during Chelsea's childhood.

David, a 39 year old male who has had contact with his birth mother since age 18, believes the evolution of this relationship was central to considering her as "parent:"

At first I didn't call my birth mother Mom or anything, I called her by her name, but then the more we got to know each other, she just became Mom . . . my son calls her Grandma. They talk, I talk to her, so I would consider her a parent now.

Although David did not immediately consider his birth mother as a parent when making initial contact, the development of a satisfying relationship between the two led him to expand his definition of "parent" to include her. David's emphasis is placed on the relationship that he and his birth mother have in the present, rather than a focus on her absence in childhood. Leah, a 27 year old female, has been in contact with her birth mother for five years and with her birth father for six months. She included her birth mother in her definition of "parent" and drew specific attention to her birth mother's behavior. She explained why that behavior was important to her: "if I had met my birth mother and she . . . didn't wanna have a relationship with me or was just rude to me I probably would not consider her a parent." She described her relationship with her birth father as a friendship and noted that they plan to keep in touch; however, because that relationship has not had time to develop in the same way as her relationship with her birth

mother, she did not apply the label of “parent” to him. Thus, it was the development of the adoptee-birth parent relationship that was important to participant; in particular, whether participants were satisfied with the current status of the relationship.

Birth parent inclusion, or “I just have had to loosen my definition of parent so it’s very flexible.” As participants made contact with their birth parents, some consciously began to expand their definition of “parent” to include the birth parent in some way. Some participants expanded their definition because they began to recognize the biological tie with the birth parent. Other participants expanded their definition of “parent” to include the birth parent without them feeling the need to include the justification of biological ties; instead, the birth parent’s role as “birth parent” legitimized the birth parent’s inclusion in the role of “parent.”

As Anna, a 34 year old female adopted from Colombia, explained: “For me, there’s a biological parent, so I mean the parents that created me, physically . . . and then there’s the parents that raised me . . . so there’s people that can parent me in different ways.” Prior to making contact with her birth mother, Anna felt that her definition had been narrow, and her experiences with her birth mother made Anna expand how she defined “parent,” as she stated: “In the past it [definition of “parent”] was very tight and rigid, and so I try to be open-minded a lot.” Leah did not place importance on this biological tie until she met her birth parents:

I put very little focus on like DNA or biological connections before I met her and I didn’t really think that it was important and I think now I see that the thought of being someone that shares your biology and connects with you in that way is an important part of a parent.

Leah then explained how her definition of “parent” had expanded: “When I was younger I think it was pretty much defined as ‘these are my mom and dad, they live in my house, they take care of me and stuff, these are my parents,’” but she noted that her definition changed when she made contact with her birth parents. For both Anna and Leah, the biological link between their birth parent(s) and themselves became more salient after contact, to the point that it became included in their definition of parent in a way that it had not before contact.

Other participants deliberately expanded their definition of “parent” to include the birth parent, but did not include the recognition of a biological tie as justification. Abby, a 54 year old female, had been in contact with her birth mother for 16 years. Although they are no longer in contact, Abby felt that this experience had an impact on her definition of “parent,” as she stated: “Until I met my biological family that I connected with, I believed that your parents are the people who you grew up with. And that’s it. So I’ve expanded it to also include your biological parents.” Grace, a 56 year old female, also felt that making contact with her birth mother caused her to expand her definition of “parent” in a similar way: “Since I found both sides of my biological family, I’m kind of opening up a little bit, you know, broadening that definition.” Although these participants did not explicitly credit the biological tie as the motivation for expanding their definition of “parent,” they still began to consider their birth parent as a “parent” in some way following their contact.

For Rachel, the definition of “parent” expanded to include her in-laws and her birth parents, as she felt that these people all had a legitimate claim to being parental figures:

Since I met my biological parents and since I got married as well, I think both of those things may have expanded my definition a bit . . . I mentioned parents and I mentioned parental figures, and I think that's something that kind of came into my consciousness after I met my biological parents.

Rachel's definition of "parent" took the form of adding "parental figures" to include her in-laws and birth parents, but the need to expand her definition did not emerge for her until she had made contact with her birth parents. Regardless of the terms that participants used to include their birth parent, they were aware that their definition of "parent" had expanded in some way to include the birth parent after contact with the birth parent had been made.

Surrender as a parenting behavior, or "That's the first real choice she made as a mother, and I think it's the best one." In some cases, meeting a birth parent prompted adoptees to reevaluate either what "parenting" meant or the behaviors they considered to constitute parenting. It is important to note that the expansion of the definition of "parent" to include this behavior happened *only* after participants made contact with their birth parent. Prior to making contact with their birth parent, participants perceived surrender as a termination of the birth parent's parental status; however, following contact with a birth parent, some participants regarded surrender differently. These participants argued that part of parenting involved wanting the best for one's child, which sometimes could only be accomplished by parents placing them with individuals who could better provide for them. Thus, these participants expanded their definition of "parent" to also include their birth parents, because this behavior (i.e., surrender) was now perceived as one that was enacted with the participant's best interests in mind, and

therefore was consistent with what it meant to be a “parent.”

Stephanie phrased this succinctly: “She gave you up for adoption, so does that make you a good parent? Maybe. Maybe it makes you a better parent, because you acknowledge your, you know, what you can’t provide.” Tyler, a 30 year old male, was one of six visibly adopted children, and although his adoptive family discussed adoption frequently, Tyler felt that the contact with his birth mother had added something distinct to his idea of adoption: “All five of my siblings are all adopted but I had never met anybody who had actually given somebody up for adoption. So my only mindset on the matter was that my [birth] mom had screwed up somehow.” Tyler’s definition of “parent” prior to making contact with his birth mother had positioned surrender as a negative behavior that was indicative of having “screwed up;” following contact, his perceptions had changed:

I think also maybe another part of being a parent is sacrifices, making sacrifices for the benefit of your child, and I think perhaps she definitely fits that, because she didn’t want to have to give me up . . . and she definitely didn’t wanna have to do that, so she made the biggest sacrifice, one of the biggest sacrifices, giving me up in order for me to have a better life, so in that aspect I think she might have done more than what a lot of parents would do . . . if I hadn’t met her I probably wouldn’t have added that amendment that I did there, that the sacrifices that she made.

Tyler expanded his definition of parent to include his birth mother after he met her and changed his definition of “parent” to include surrendering a child. Carrie spoke with her birth mother about her adoption and commented that “I feel being put up for adoption

was in her mind in my best interests, and as a parent I think that was a good move . . . she wanted to do what was best for me.” Leah had similar thoughts: “My birth mother is a parent in that she made the parenting decision and gave me up for adoption . . . they didn’t have the resources to be parents . . . I think that can also fulfill the definition of taking responsibility.” Danielle’s definition of “parent” was simple: “Parents provide.” After making contact with her birth mother, Danielle began to include the act of surrender as way of providing for one’s child, as she commented:

When meeting her [birth mother], I realized she provided for me as well. It might not be in the way society might think, but she realized being a young teenager, there was no way she could give me the home . . . so she put me in a placed family that could.

These participants shifted the idea of “giving up” a child for adoption into a positive parenting behavior, but only after meeting the birth parent.

Summary. The discourse of parent as a label emerged when participants perceived that “parent” was a flexible term that could be applied to individuals other than the adoptive parent (i.e., the birth parent). This discourse was comprised of three themes: satisfying relationship, birth parent inclusion, and surrender as a parenting behavior. Participants felt that making contact with their birth parent had caused their definition of “parent” to expand in these ways; prior to contact, they had not included their birth parent in their definition of “parent.”

Research Question 2

The second research question asked how the interplay of the competing discourses constructed the meaning of “parent” for participants as they made contact with

a birth parent. The competition of discourses was evident within interviews. Diachronic separation was not present in any of the interviews, as participants' construction of "parent" was never monologic. Instead, the dialogic nature of this construction of meaning was evident as adoptees acknowledged both discourses as they made sense of the term "parent". These discourses demonstrated synchronic interplay through negating, countering, and entertaining. Some participants only used one form of synchronic interplay in their meaning-making process; other participants used two or three forms (see Table 7).

Negating. Negating is a form of synchronic interplay in which individuals use a dominant discourse to reject an alternate discourse (Baxter, 2011). It exists as an "either-or" tactic, in which one discourse is clearly favored and is presented as the only legitimate discourse. Negating occurred in two forms in this dissertation.

In the first form of negating, the *discourse of parent as a specific person* (DPSP) negated the *discourse of parent as a label* (DPL). In this form, participants gave voice to the DPL in order to assert either that it was not consistent with their experiences or to argue that their definition of parent (i.e., parent as a static definition referring to one's adoptive parents) was a more legitimate representation of "parent" than a role-based, dynamic definition. One example of this negation emerged as Jacob, a 35 year old male, discussed his thoughts before *and* after making contact with his birth mother:

I was more up for the idea that she could become a parent figure, or was a parent figure in some way, but that quickly went away. I think it made me realize just how much more my [adoptive] parents were actually parents as opposed to somebody who popped up one day thirty years after I was born.

Table 7

Interplay of Discourses by Participant

Pseudonym	Synchronic Interplay
Abby	Negating Entertaining
Alec	Entertaining
Anna	Negating Entertaining
Carrie	Countering Entertaining
Chelsea	Negating Countering Entertaining
Danielle	Entertaining
David	Entertaining
Derek	Negating
Emma	Negating Countering
Grace	Negating
Gwen	Countering
Heather	Negating
Jacob	Negating
Julie	Negating
Katie	Countering
Kris	Negating
Leah	Negating Entertaining
Mark	Countering
Nick	Countering Entertaining
Noah	Negating Countering
Olivia	Countering
Paul	Negating
Rachel	Countering Entertaining
Reese	Negating Countering
Riley	Negating
Rose	Negating
Stephanie	Countering Entertaining

Table 7

Interplay of Discourses by Participant (continued)

Pseudonym	Synchronic Interplay
Sylvia	Negating
Troy	Negating
Tyler	Entertaining

Jacob gave voice to the DPL in acknowledging that he had once considered the possibility of his birth mother becoming a parental figure, but rejected this discourse upon making contact with her. His endorsement of the DPSP was evident in that he excluded his birth mother from this definition because she “popped up” after 30 years; thus, the lack of an established relational history prevented Jacob from including her in his definition of “parent.” This negation of the DPL is also evident from Julie’s perspective:

People tend to still see these biological people as these mythical people that are so innately connected to you . . . society’s general idea of what an adoption reunion looks like is what they see on Lifetime movies. And that everyone’s so happy and we all live happily ever after and you know we have this innate connection, we’re the same person, and my experiences with my birth father have--while it has been a very good experience, has not been that at all. Like, we both make terrible dad jokes, and that’s like the extent of how closely we match up together personality-wise. I mean I have his nose, I have his asthma, I have his allergies, but I’m not him. I’m more of an amalgamation of my mom and dad. So I think for society’s definition, like, I just don’t think they see the disconnect between the raising of a person and providing DNA to a person.

Julie felt that society views adoption reunions as consistent with the DPL--that contact with birth parents results in an “innate connection”--however, she rejected this discourse in favor of voicing the DPSP as evidenced by her claim that “the raising of a person” is more consistent with how she defines parent. Both Jacob and Julie acknowledged the potential for birth parents to be considered a “parent,” but neither of them felt that they,

based on their criteria of “parent,” would include their birth parents in their definition of “parent.”

In the second form, the DPL negated the DPSP. In this case, participants recalled times that they had been explicitly told, by individuals outside their family, that the term “parent” referred to their adoptive parents. However, participants would then reject that idea, preferring to define “parent” as a dynamic role that could apply to more individuals than only the adoptive parents. Grace discussed how she negotiated the meaning of “parent” as she conducted her search for her birth parents:

When people find out, would find out I was searching, they would automatically assume that my adoptive family was going to be replaced by my biological family once I found them and I would say, why can't I have both? Are you only allowed one set of grandparents? Are you only allowed one child? Are you only allowed one sibling? No! You can have four sets of grandparents, you can have six. You can have ten children, you can have stepparents, you can have--you know. You can have in-laws, you can have all these people, and all these people are acceptable, but me having my biological family and my adoptive family both, it isn't acceptable to you? One has to replace the other? No. There's room for everybody.

Grace expressed frustration with “people’s” (i.e., individuals outside her family) notion that her adoptive parents would be “replaced” by her biological parents. This idea is consistent with the DPSP, in that “parent” is a static definition that refers to a specific set of individuals. The term “replaced” is consistent with the stable nature of the DPSP that does not allow for an expansion of “parent” or the inclusion of others into the role of

“parent.” Participants felt that these outsiders embraced the stability of the DPSP to such a degree that the outsiders did not consider the possibility of extending the definition of “parent” to other individuals; instead, one set (i.e., the biological parents) would displace the other set (i.e., the adoptive parents). Grace rejected this discourse by drawing attention to other familial roles that can be filled by multiple individuals and arguing that she has “room” for both her adoptive and biological parents without one “replacing” the other. Leah rejected the DPSP similarly when she stated:

There are some people that react like “well, why do you need to find these people, because they’re not really your family” or because “they didn’t raise you, what connection do you really have to them” or they’d say DNA doesn’t really matter and I think that makes me feel like I have to justify it to myself, why I made those choices or even if it feels right for me, it makes me feel like defensive or something . . . to me it can be different things it can be the person that raised you or the people that biologically created you and for all people those two things are not always the same and some people don’t really understand.

Like Grace, Leah felt that the DPSP was voiced by outsiders as they commented on her decision to search for her birth parents. These outsiders invoked the DPSP by positioning Leah’s birth parents as “not really” family because they had not raised her and by downplaying the importance of the biological connection. Leah rejected this discourse in favor of the DPL as she discussed the “different things” that constitute parenting, including both raising the child and biologically creating the child. She specifically noted that these behaviors are not always enacted by the same people (i.e., “those two things are not always the same”), but both behaviors are part of what it means to be a “parent” to

her.

Countering. Countering is a form of synchronic interplay in which individuals acknowledge that part of an alternate discourse is legitimate; however, the dominant discourse is positioned as superior to the alternate discourse (Baxter, 2011). This form of interplay is less rigid than negating, which grants no legitimacy to opposing discourses; however, countering still positions one discourse as more legitimate than the other. Countering occurred in two forms in this dissertation.

In the first form, the DPSP countered the DPL. Participants would give voice to the DPL, recognize parts of the discourse as legitimate, but ultimately would align with the DPSP. This countering is evident as Nick discusses his relationship with his birth parents:

Especially now that it's maybe been distant, you know, in a way it's always kind of been distant, but if I felt like it was going to get like a really good bond, I might have been more open to the idea of considering them parents, that'd have been one of those things like where, I mean like some of these people meet their birth parents and they're like so connected and see each other every day for 30 years, I probably would change the definition in my brain. In that case. But mine's been the way it is, you know, it's distant.

In this interview excerpt, Nick grants legitimacy to the DPL by acknowledging that some adoptees have positive relationships with their birth parents and that, had his contact progressed in this way, he would have considered identifying his birth parents as "parent." However, because Nick did not feel that contact with his birth mother and birth father had been positive, he ultimately rejected the DPL in favor of the DPSP, in that he

deliberately excluded his birth mother and birth father from his definition of “parent.”

Similarly, Olivia countered the DPL as she reflected on her birth mother’s choice to surrender her for adoption:

When I do talk to her, it makes me really cautious because she, you know just the way she talks to me it sounds like she’s just kind of feigning nice . . . you know, “I thought it was what was best for you” . . . she had a daughter after me . . . we’re not that far apart--so to me it’s like well why would you say that if you kept someone who was born so short after me, you know, I mean and why wouldn’t it be best for them too?

Olivia invoked the DPL in acknowledging that her birth mother felt that surrendering her for adoption was best for Olivia, but Olivia countered that claim by challenging her birth mother’s sincerity. Given that her birth mother kept another child that was born shortly after Olivia, Olivia felt that her birth mother did not actually view surrender as in the child’s best interest, and was instead acting selfishly, thus Olivia deliberately excluded her birth mother from being considered a “parent” in a way that is consistent with the DPSP. Both Nick and Olivia acknowledged that parts of the DPL are legitimate, but under their specific circumstances, they ultimately favored the DPSP as they construct their definition of “parent.”

The second form of countering was the DPL countering the DPSP. In this form, participants would acknowledge elements of the DPSP that would exclude their birth parent from the definition of “parent,” but ultimately reject the DPSP in favor of allowing the birth parent to be included. For example, Stephanie invoked parts of the DPSP as she constructed her definition of parent:

I kinda think that makes you a good parent if you can say, like, this is not something I can deal with, maybe someone else can do this better than me. I mean, on the one hand it's like, incredibly terrible parenting, because you're just like giving away your whole ability to parent, but on the other hand I think it's also pretty solid to be able to have that, you know, that mental fortitude to be able to say this is not something I can do.

Here, Stephanie voiced an idea that is consistent with the DPSP: that to surrender one's child for adoption is "incredibly terrible parenting;" however, she countered this idea by deciding that a birth parent's awareness of their shortcomings and limitations constitutes good parenting, consistent with the DPL. Chelsea provided another example of the DPL countering the DPSP, as she commented:

Basically once I found out that my adoptive family [wasn't] my actual birth family, to me that shifted the dialogue a ton, that they really to me turned more into "these are the people that raised me" versus "these are my actual family." I think had I had a different experience with them and things hadn't fallen out as they did, that may be a little bit different, but unfortunately that just wasn't how things landed with me in that.

Chelsea acknowledged the DPSP in identifying her adoptive parents as the people who had raised her, and granted some legitimacy to the DPSP in stating that she may have defined "parent" differently had her relationships with her adoptive parents been more positive. Ultimately, however, Chelsea favored the DPL, as she applied the term "actual" to her birth family--in particular, her birth mother, who Chelsea felt "definitely displays some of those other facets of parenting, which would make practical sense, where both

parties are adults.” Thus, Chelsea allowed her birth mother to be considered a “parent” in part because she expanded her definition to include “actual” parent and in part due to the relationship that she and her birth mother have built since contact. Both Stephanie and Chelsea recognized elements of the DPSP that they perceived to be legitimate, but they countered these claims to favor the DPL.

Entertaining. Entertaining is a form of synchronic interplay in which individuals acknowledge both sides of a discursive struggle and consider both sides as valid (Baxter, 2011). In this dissertation, participants engaged in entertaining by acknowledging both discourses without favoring one over another. Rachel entertained both the DPSP and the DPL as she considered her definition of “parent:”

I realize it’s not everybody’s reality, you know, some people feel like the parents who raised you are the only ones who deserve to be called parent, but from my experience, anyone who provides you with the types of things that parents do for a person can be considered parental figures, like parental role models almost.

And that doesn’t need to conflict with the parents who raised you, they don’t have to be in competition with each other.

Here, Rachel acknowledged the assumption of the DPSP that “parent” often refers specifically to the individuals responsible for raising a child (i.e., the adoptive parents), but she also invoked the DPL in identifying parental figures that could be individuals other than one’s adoptive parents. In doing so, she carefully specified that her feelings did not represent “everybody’s reality,” allowing for the existence of multiple other, equally valid viewpoints.

Anna used elements of both the DPSP and the DPL in constructing her definition

of “parent.” During a particularly difficult time in her life, she began to dissect the different parts of her complex definition:

Part of my own journey has been learning that there were certain rules and expectations that I assigned to parent . . . you know with my birth parents was . . . you don’t give your child away, and you’re supposed to raise your child, and no matter what, and love them and whatever, or if you can’t raise them you shouldn’t have them . . . I had all those very extreme thoughts and you know, but in that token I said you know I could see it from the other way, how my mother made the choice that she did, and then going with my adoptive parents, I could say oh, well, I could make rules for them, for parents that are choosing to raise children and say oh well parents should be attentive, they should be honest, they should instill moral values in a child.

Anna’s criteria for defining “parent” differed depending on which set of parents she was discussing. When she referred to her birth mother, Anna originally invoked the DPSP in excluding her from the definition of “parent” because she had surrendered Anna for adoption; however, Anna then attempted to view her birth mother through the DPL to understand the decision that her birth mother had made. For her adoptive parents, Anna applied the DPSP, focusing on the behaviors she felt parents should enact. Thus, Anna balanced both the DPSP and the DPL as she contemplated each person.

Abby also attempted to balance both discourses in her definition of parent:

Because I was told that the parent is the one who is there for you in the middle of the night. Well, I definitely got gifts from my biological parents even though they weren’t there for me ever. So I would like to count them both.

For Abby, the presence of her adoptive parents and the behaviors they enacted throughout her childhood granted them inclusion into her definition of “parent;” however, the “gifts” from her birth parents prompted her to also include her birth parents in her definition. These “gifts” referred to biological attributes (e.g., creativity, intelligence) that Abby felt were positive; she recognized the importance of the biological tie in a way that is consistent with the DPL. Privileging one discourse over another would not accurately represent “parent” as she desired; thus, Abby invoked both the DPSP and the DPL as she constructed her definition to “count them both.” She acknowledged and accepted that one facet of parenting involves the behaviors and actions involved in raising her, but also allowed her definition to expand to include her biological parents as well.

Summary

The results of the contrapuntal analysis conducted in this dissertation revealed that two discourses emerged as participants made sense of the word “parent” after making contact with a birth parent. The first--*discourse of parent as a specific person*--defined “parent” as the person or people responsible for raising the child; it emphasized that the title of “parent” referred to specific individuals and this definition did not change when adoptees made contact with their birth parent. The second--*discourse of parent as a label*--defined “parent” as a role that could apply to multiple individuals, provided they meet the criteria of parenting. This discourse allowed the definition to expand and change as adoptees made contact with their birth parent. These two discourses demonstrated interplay through negating, in which one discourse rejected another; countering, in which elements of one discourse were considered but ultimately rejected; and entertaining, in which both discourses were acknowledged as valid.

CHAPTER IV

Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion and interpretation of the results of this dissertation. After interviewing 30 adult adoptees, the results of a contrapuntal analysis determined that there are two primary discourses that emerge as dissertation participants construct their definition of “parent” after making contact with a birth parent. The first is *discourse of parent as a specific person* (DPSP), which positioned “parent” as referring to specific people (i.e., the adoptive parents). This definition was stable throughout contact, as participants did not change their definition of “parent” to include the birth parent, regardless of the nature of the relationship. The second is *discourse of parent as a label* (DPL), which allowed for individuals other than the adoptive parents to be considered “parent;” this definition was dynamic and expanded to include the birth parent after contact was made. The two discourses discovered in this dissertation contribute to both the adoptive family communication literature and RDT literature. This chapter includes a discussion of the results in light of family communication research and Relational Dialectics Theory research, the implications for adoption practitioners based on the findings obtained in this dissertation, several limitations of the dissertation, and some future directions for family communication researchers.

Discussion

This section explicates how adult adoptees’ construction of a definition of “parent” contributes to adoptive family literature and Relational Dialectics Theory literature. Two points from this construction emerged in this dissertation, which are (a) defining parent and adoptive family communication literature and (b) defining parent and

relational dialectics theory literature.

Defining “parent” and adoptive family communication literature. The results of this dissertation provide insight into how adult adoptees construct the meaning of the term “parent” after they have made contact with a birth parent. This definition may be influenced by adoptees’ sense of adoptive identity (Grotevant et al., 2000) and can be interpreted in light of Galvin’s (2006) internal and external boundary management strategies.

One question that arises from the data is why some participants’ definitions of “parent” were so firmly set when other participants’ definitions were malleable. It is possible that the participant’s source of adoptive identity was influential in his or her development of a definition of “parent.” Adoptive identity--an adoptee’s sense of who he or she is as an adopted person--involves a negotiation of one’s ties to both the adoptive and biological family (Grotevant et al., 2000). Colaner et al. (2014) explored identity layers in adoptive identity and found that some adoptees felt that their adoptive identity was influenced by both their birth and adoptive families, whereas other adoptees’ identities were shaped by their adoptive family. Participants in this dissertation who voiced the DPSP may have drawn from their experiences with their adoptive family in creating their adoptive identity, which also may have led to the development of an immutable definition of “parent” in reference to their adoptive parent. In support of this argument, Colaner et al. (2014) found that adoptees whose identity was more strongly rooted in the adoptive family “created identification with their adoptive family through shared characteristics, knowledge, and experiences” (p. 478). These methods of identity creation--shared characteristics, knowledge, and experiences--are largely consistent with

the *relational history* theme of the DPSP.

Some participants in this dissertation invoked the DPL because they experienced a feeling of “instant connection,” which prompted them to expand their definition of “parent.” This feeling of connection is not unusual for adoptees in reunion with a birth parent, and often takes the form of drawing attention to similarities in physical appearance, personality, or mannerisms, which then increases adoptees’ feelings of closeness between adoptees and their birth parent (Colaner et al., 2014; Docan-Morgan, 2014; Powell & Afifi, 2005). For example, in this dissertation, Carrie mentioned that upon meeting her birth mother, one of the first things she noticed was “she looked just like me . . . I felt the connection in her.” These similarities have been found to be important in the development of adoptive identity (Colaner et al., 2014) as well as the reduction of adoption-related uncertainty (Docan-Morgan, 2017; Powell & Afifi, 2005); however, the results of this dissertation suggest that for some participants, these similarities also impacted their definition of “parent.”

The two discourses that emerged in this dissertation are relevant to Galvin’s (2006) internal and external boundary management strategies; in particular, the internal strategies of naming and discussing, and the external strategies of labeling and explaining. The relevance of these discourses to boundary management strategies was unexpected, but important for adoptive family communication researchers, as Suter (2014) observed that boundary management strategies have primarily been studied from the perspective of adoptive parents. Internal boundary management strategies are the strategies through which adoptive family members make sense of their relationships with each other (Galvin, 2006). Adoptees’ use of the naming strategy for birth parents may be

influenced, in part, by their underlying definition of “parent.” Naming is how adoptive family members identify each other; names communicate the nature of the relationship within the family. Previous research has determined that some adoptees are comfortable addressing their birth parents with terms such as “Mom” or “Dad,” which communicate a close relationship; other adoptees use the birth parent’s first name or avoid addressing them by name completely, relying instead on gestures or eye contact (Docan-Morgan, 2017). An adoptee’s use of different names to address the birth parent may be related to the adoptee’s underlying definition of “parent” and whether the birth parent is included in that definition.

Discussing helps family members make sense of their unique family form (Galvin, 2006), and a commonly discussed topic in adoptive families is the birth mother’s surrender of the child for adoption (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011). For some participants in this dissertation, the DPL emerged as participants expanded their definition of “parent” to include their birth parent because they had reevaluated the behaviors that they felt constituted parenting. Specifically, these participants allowed their birth parents to be considered as a “parent” because the act of surrender was no longer viewed as a voluntary termination of parental status. Adoptive parents often frame this decision as “an act of love” (Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 134) and create entrance narratives that speak to the sacrifice of the birth parent (Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011). In previous studies, adoptees internalized these comments, describing their adoption as prompted by the fact that their birth parents could not properly care for them, and in some cases, describing themselves as “chosen” (Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011). Thus, for many adoptees, the act of surrender is

already viewed positively, as a choice that was made to provide for the child. However, despite the positive attitudes that adoptees may have toward surrender, participants in this dissertation did not perceive surrender as a *parenting* behavior until they had made contact with their birth parent.

The results from this dissertation can also be interpreted in light of Galvin's (2006) external boundary management strategies, which are the strategies that adoptive family members use to communicate their family relationships to individuals outside of the family. The findings are particularly relevant to the strategies of labeling and explaining. Labeling is similar to the internal boundary management strategy of naming, and occurs when adoptive family members describe their family relationships to individuals outside of the family (Galvin, 2006). The deliberate exclusion of the birth parent from some participants' definition of "parent" illustrates the importance of labels. As Galvin (2006) stated, "because language serves as a constituent feature of cultural patterns embedded within a relationship, changing the language alters the relationship . . . labeling establishes expectations" (p. 10). Although many of the participants who voiced the DPSP felt positively about their relationships with their birth parents, they were not willing to use language that conveyed a parental relationship. Participants who voiced the DPL, though, experienced a change in their definition of "parent" which led them to change the label they applied to the birth parent. Interestingly, in contrast to Galvin's (2006) assertion that language influences the relationship, in this dissertation, it was the relationship that changed the participant's label, not the language that changed the relationship.

Labeling is frequently followed by explaining, as members of nontraditional

families must provide further explication of the labeled relationship (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Galvin, 2006). Participants in this dissertation provided an explanation for the *lack* of parental label--and invocation of the DPSP--by using different labels that they felt more accurately described their perception of the birth parent-child relationship, which was not the technical term for their biological tie. This is evident in comments from several participants (e.g., Riley, Danielle, and Alec) who described the birth parent-child relationship as more akin to that of a sibling relationship or a friendship. These participants then explained how the birth parent failed to meet their criteria for being defined as “parent;” they justified this exclusion by invoking other familial ties--for example, a sibling tie--to explain the relationship. This explanation further demonstrates the complex nature of nontraditional family types as these participants felt compelled to give a rationale for why this person--who fit the biological definition of “parent”--did not fit the participant’s definition of “parent” and was not granted the label of “parent.”

Defining “Parent” and Relational Dialectics Literature. This dissertation complements existing RDT literature on adoptive parents’ sense-making regarding adoption and family by examining the experiences of adoptees themselves, rather than adoptive parents. The use of RDT allowed for multiple perspectives to emerge--the DPSP, which is commonly invoked in adoption literature, and the DPL, which provides an alternative to the DPSP and is often overlooked in adoption literature.

The emergence of competing discourses in this dissertation provides further evidence that birth family contact is a complex and unique experience for each adoptee (Colaner et al., 2014; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). Much of the literature on birth family contact is focused on the positive outcomes of contact for adoptees, adoptive parents, and

birth parents (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Farr et al., 2013), but fewer studies have focused on how this contact can be both confusing and challenging for adoptees (Suter, 2014). Thus, one strength of this dissertation is that the dialogic nature of RDT uncovered differing perspectives surrounding adoptees' construction of the meaning of "parent," which were captured in the two discourses (i.e., DPSP, DPL) and their interplay that emerged between them. This finding demonstrates the utility of RDT in giving voice to marginalized perspectives (Suter & Norwood, 2017).

The DPSP is consistent with a popular idea in adoptive families, which is that, as an adoptee, one's "parents" are the adoptive parents. This idea emerges in much of the existing adoptive family communication literature, and is voiced by all members of the adoptive triad--adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents. For example, an adopted participant in Colaner and Kranstuber's (2010) study of adoption-related uncertainty experienced little uncertainty about his adoption, because his "[adoptive parents] raised me . . . they *are* your parents" (p. 250). In Colaner et al.'s (2014) study of adoptive identity gaps, a participant felt a relational gap because "Cathleen [adoptive mother] raised me, not Laura [birth mother]" (p. 482). Adoptive parents assert the "realness" of their family structure--and, by default, their "parenthood"--by positioning biological ties as less important than the behaviors and actions associated with parenting (Suter et al., 2014). The birth mothers in March's (1997) study of birth parent contact also communicated that the adoptive parents were their biological child's "parents." Participants in this dissertation also voiced this idea, although some (e.g., Abby, Grace) did so in frustration, as they felt constrained and unable to recognize their birth parents as "parents."

In contrast to this idea--and the DPSP--the DPL allowed participants to include both “sets” of parents in their definitions. As Colaner et al. (2014) found, some adoptees find their dual membership in both the adoptive and birth family to be particularly salient; for these adoptees, having a flexible definition that can accommodate all of the adoptee’s “parents” may help reduce feelings of conflict or confusion. Adoptees who feel connected to their birth families often experience feelings of guilt associated with the fear of “betraying” their adoptive parents and, sometimes, outsiders explicitly communicate to adoptees that searching for their birth family members is a betrayal of their adoptive families (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Powell & Afifi, 2005). When participants in this dissertation voiced the DPL, they often directly challenged this notion of betrayal, instead asserting that the flexibility of their definitions of “parent” allowed for both the birth and adoptive parents to be included in their definition, without one replacing the other. The emergence of the DPL gives voice to participants who also consider their birth parents to be a “parent,” expressing the complex adoptive family structure in a way that has not appeared in previous studies of birth parent contact.

The results of this dissertation are also informative when taken in combination with existing studies of adoptive family communication that have utilized RDT. As discussed in Chapter 1, five studies to date have used RDT in the adoptive family context, and all five studies have been conducted from the perspective of the adoptive parents. A consistent theme across these five studies is the acknowledgement of--and resistance to--the dominant societal assumption of the superiority of biological family ties (Baxter et al., 2014; Suter et al., 2014). In making sense of adoption or family, adoptive parents acknowledged adoption as a “second best” option to creating a family (Baxter et

al., 2014) and voiced a discourse of constitutive kinning in resistance to a discourse of biological normativity (Suter et al., 2014). These findings are consistent with studies of birth family contact that have documented adoptive parents' fear of replacement (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Powell & Afifi, 2005). From these studies, it is evident that adoptive parents are aware of their nontraditional family status and that they feel the need to justify the validity of their family bonds as they construct meaning surrounding "adoption" and "family."

The adoptee's perspective, as Suter (2014) asserted, is quite different. As participants in this dissertation constructed their definitions of "parent," the dominant discourse--the DPSP--was constructed based on the legitimacy of adoptive bonds and placed the adoptive parent as the referent for "parent." Although adoptive parents appear somewhat preoccupied over their constitutive bond, the participants in this dissertation did not appear to perceive that bond as any less legitimate than a biological bond. And, for those participants voicing the DPSP, that constitutive bond was *more* important. Participants whose definitions of "parent" changed (i.e., voiced the DPL) after meeting the birth parent felt that their definitions had changed in a way that expanded their definition to include the birth parent, but did not replace the adoptive parents. A key difference that emerged in this dissertation is that while adoptive parents constructed their definitions of family in spite of a lack of biological ties (Baxter et al., 2014; Suter et al., 2014), participants constructed their definitions of "parent" to reflect the constitutive nature of their adoptive parent-child bond, and only some participants chose to extend their definition to include those with whom they shared a biological bond.

Summary. The results of this dissertation highlight two different perspectives of

“parent” for adoptees. These two perspectives represent a dominant idea in adoptive literature (i.e., the DPSP) and a competing perspective that is often overlooked (i.e., the DPL). This dissertation demonstrates the utility of RDT, as it allows for marginalized or alternate perspectives to emerge (Suter & Norwood, 2017). In addition, this dissertation provided the adoptee’s perspective, which to date had not been examined using RDT 2.0. In so doing, this dissertation complements existing RDT research on adoptive families.

Implications for Adoption Practitioners

The results of this dissertation offer two implications for adoption agencies and practitioners, who are tasked with preparing prospective adoptive parents for adoption-related issues that may emerge as their child grows older and begins asking questions about his or her birth family. Individuals who work for adoption agencies should recognize that children in discourse dependent families may not construct the definitions of specific familial roles in the same way that children in nontraditional families do; in addition, the experience of being a member of a nontraditional family is different for parents and children. For parents in nontraditional families, the formation of a unique family type takes place in adulthood and may require a reevaluation of what is “normal,” but for the children of nontraditional families, their status as “other” *is* normal. When adoptive parents are open and comfortable discussing their child’s adoption, they normalize adoption, leading their adoptive children to perceive adoption as more natural (Farr et al., 2014; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011). In addition, adoptive parents often tell entrance narratives to their children that detail the birth parent’s role in placing the child with a family that could care for the adoptee; thus, from a young age, adoptees distinguish between “birth parents” and “adoptive parents” (Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas,

2011).

Although participants in this dissertation did not make contact with their birth parents until adulthood, they were aware of their birth parents' existence and had discussed the birth parent with their adoptive parents. The consistent knowledge that individuals have another "set" of parents may be influential in adoptees' construction of a definition of "parent" from childhood. Creating a definition with the knowledge of the birth parent's existence in mind may lead to a definition that deliberately excludes the birth parent (i.e., the DPSP) or to a definition that is less rigid and may change more easily upon contact (i.e., the DPL). For children in traditional, two-parent families, the definition of "parent" may not come under such scrutiny. Thus, practitioners may want to prepare adoptive parents that adoptees may construct the definition of "parent" differently than the adoptive parents did.

Adoptees are a diverse group of people who have varying responses and experiences with birth parent contact, and these diverse perspectives emerged in this dissertation. For some participants, the definition of "parent" was stable and unchanging, despite making contact with the birth parent. For others, "parent" referred to a role that could be filled by multiple people, including both the adoptive and birth parents. Regardless of which discourse participants voiced, they also discussed a concern for their adoptive parents' feelings. Adoptive parents can communicate discomfort or disapproval toward their adopted child's search for birth parents (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Powell & Afifi, 2005), of which some participants in this dissertation were aware. For example, several participants commented that their adoptive parents felt "replaced" or "threatened" by their decision to make contact with their birth parent, particularly when

contact was positive. Adoption practitioners should address these threatening feelings with adoptive parents, and may find it helpful to draw from the results of this dissertation. Neither discourse positioned adoptive parents as less important or less “real” than their birth parents; in fact, those participants who voiced the DPSP rejected their birth parents as “parents” completely. For those participants who voiced the DPL, the birth parent was viewed as an additional “parent” in that while the definition of parent expanded, this expansion never occurred at the expense of the adoptive parents. Adoptive parents should be aware that although their adopted child may come to include their birth parent in their definition of “parent,” adoptive parents should not fear this inclusion nor question their own role as “parent.”

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this dissertation adds to the bodies of literature in adoptive family communication and relational dialectics theory, the results should be interpreted with three limitations in mind. The first limitation centers on the recruitment of the sample. Although researchers are beginning more and more to recruit participants from online forums, the participants in these samples often are biased due to their ability to self-select into the study (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004) and because discussion forum users tend to be individuals who are motivated to join and participate in the forum because they have a vested interest and strong opinions--both positive and negative--toward the subject. Thus, this sample likely is not representative of the adoptee population in general; however, the intent of this dissertation is not to generalize but to represent these participants’ experiences as accurately as possible.

The second limitation is related to the aforementioned limitation, although it

centers more so on the representativeness of the sample used in this dissertation to the adoptee population in general. As Kraut et al. (2004) noted, the average Internet user tends to be young, White, and relatively educated. In this dissertation, although the sample was relatively diverse in age (21 to 56 years), participants were mostly White ($n = 24$) and educated, with 84% of the sample holding at least a baccalaureate degree. The majority of the sample was domestic adoptees with same-race parents; three participants were transracial adoptees and one was an international adoptee. Because visibly adopted individuals tend to have different experiences than adoptees whose parents are the same race as themselves (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Galvin, 2003; Nelson & Colaner, 2018), it is possible that international and transracial adoptees may have different experiences as they construct their definitions of “parent.”

The third limitation, which emerged during data collection, concerns the nature of the participants’ contact with the birth parent. Three assumptions were made prior to data collection: (a) that participants would have made contact primarily with birth mothers, (b) participants would have made contact with only one birth parent, and (c) participants would have initiated the contact. The assumption that participants would have made contact primarily with birth mothers was made based on previous adoption research, which tends to position birth parent contact as birth *mother* contact (Affleck & Steed, 2001; March, 1997; Suter, 2014). Over half of the current sample in this dissertation ($n = 17$) had made contact with their birth father; to address this, interview questions regarding the birth parent had to be reworded from “person who gave birth to you” to “person responsible for your birth” as a way to make the interview questions applicable to both birth mothers and birth fathers. This assumption required flexibility on

the part of the interviewer, but could have been problematic if the research design had required multiple interviewers. The second assumption was that participants would have made contact with only one birth parent; however, some participants ($n = 13$) had made contact with both their birth mother and birth father. Further complicating this issue, it was common for participants to have had different experiences with their birth mothers and birth fathers. For these participants, the definition of “parent” may have been expanded to include one birth parent but not the other. This possibility had not been considered prior to conducting this dissertation, but the nature of RDT allowed for participants to voice both discourses in constructing their definitions of “parent.” The third assumption was that participants would have initiated contact. For some participants ($n = 7$), this was not the case, as they were contacted by biological grandparents or siblings. Because individuals who do not purposely seek contact may feel differently about their definition of “parent,” future researchers should distinguish between those participants who chose contact and those participants who did not.

Despite these limitations, this dissertation meets Tracy’s (2010) criteria for “good qualitative research” (p. 837), which are standards that ensure that a piece of qualitative work is of high quality. These eight criteria are (a) selection of a worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. This dissertation meets these criteria through (a) the examination of a significant topic and an understudied perspective, (b) the use of a theoretical perspective (i.e., RDT 2.0) and the conduction of in-depth interviews until saturation was reached, (c) transparency about the research objectives and the researcher’s membership in the adoptive community, and (d) a thorough description of

the themes and the inclusion of interview excerpts for clarity as well as engaging in seven member checks for accuracy. Furthermore, this dissertation does not (e) attempt to generalize these findings to other populations, but does (f) provide future research avenues for family adoptive communication researchers and identify several practical implications for adoption practitioners. Throughout the study and by receiving IRB approval, I (g) met the standards of human subjects research by ensuring participant confidentiality and honoring the payment of a \$20 gift card. The methodology of this dissertation (h) was appropriate for this topic and allowed for the examination of the construction of the definition of “parent.”

Based on the results obtained in this dissertation, four avenues for future research into adoptive family communication can be identified. First, family communication researchers might consider using a mixed-method design to identify characteristics associated with adoptees who voice the DPSP or the DPL. For example, researchers may be interested in the extent to which adoptees’ sense of shared identity with their adoptive and birth parents influences the definition of “parent.” Researchers also may be interested in the maintenance of the adoptee-birth parent relationship as it relates to an adoptee’s inclusion of the birth parent as a “parent.” Given that the use of any maintenance behavior is likely to differ based on the relationship type (i.e., friendship, familial relationship; see Ragsdale & Brandau-Brown, 2004), it is possible that adoptees who view their birth parent as a “parent” may engage in different maintenance behaviors than adoptees who perceive the relationship as more akin to a friendship or sibling relationship. Dindia and Canary (1993) posited that, based on the relationship, individuals have four reasons for engaging in relational maintenance: to keep a

relationship in existence, to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition, to keep a relationship in a satisfactory condition, and to keep a relationship in repair. It is possible, then, that some adoptees may use these behaviors to keep the relationship in a satisfactory condition, whereas other adoptees may use relational maintenance behaviors--or refrain from using them--to keep the relationship in a specific condition or in a state of repair. Adoptees who do not view their birth parent as a "parent" may deliberately not engage in specific behaviors to prevent the relationship from becoming more close than the adoptee desires.

Second, this dissertation focused on adoptees who had not been in contact with their birth parents during childhood. The birth parent's lack of presence during childhood was a key theme of the DPSP, as participants highlighted that the term "parent" referred solely to their adoptive parents because the adoptee had not known the birth parent until adulthood. In addition, participants who voiced the DPL felt that contact with their birth parent was the catalyst for the change in their definition of "parent." As Tyler mentioned, "to meet her, that changed everything." Thus, family communication researchers should study the definition of "parent" for adoptees who have had consistent birth parent contact throughout childhood. This population is likely to increase, as open adoptions have become the dominant type of adoption within the past 20 years (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). (Open adoption is a form of adoption in which the adoptee has information about their birth parents and may be in contact with the birth parent throughout childhood.) The presence of the birth parent during childhood may influence adoptees' construction of the definition of the term "parent," because the birth parent was present from the time adoptees began to create that definition. Relatedly, it also may

influence the ways in which they maintain these new parent-child relationships.

Third, recall that over half of the participants in this dissertation had made contact with their birth father. This was surprising given that research on adoptee-birth family contact has found that more adoptees make contact with birth mothers than birth fathers (Campbell et al., 1991; Farr et al., 2013). In fact, the adoption triad--a term frequently used to describe the relationships between the adoptee, adoptive parents, and birth mother--often ignores the role of the birth father (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Miall & March, 2005; Suter, 2014); however, the increased prevalence of DNA testing kits may allow adoptees to make contact with their birth fathers much more easily than in previous decades. Several participants in this dissertation had used these kits to find birth family members; this may be indicative of a trend toward using DNA kits rather than relying on adoptive agencies for birth family information and, as a result, an increase in adoptee-birth father contact. Adoptive communication researchers may turn their attention to studying characteristics of birth father-adoptee interactions, which have not been given as much attention in adoption literature as the birth mother-adoptee relationship (Freeark et al., 2005; Miall & March, 2005). Some participants in this dissertation mentioned that their birth fathers had not been in favor of the adoption, and one participant commented that her birth father had not been aware that he had a child placed for adoption. The experiences of birth fathers in contact with their biological children are likely much different than the experiences of birth mothers, particularly given that birth fathers are more likely to feel removed from the adoption process and their surrendered child (Deykin, Patti, & Ryan, 1998; Freeark et al., 2005).

Fourth, the same technology that allows adoptees the ability to contact their birth

fathers also enables members of the biological family to contact the adoptee, which can result in unwanted contact and feelings of felt obligation. Much of the existing literature on adoption reunion assumes that birth family contact is initiated by the adoptee (Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011; Wrobel & Dillon, 2009); however, several participants in this dissertation were contacted by a birth parent, a biological sibling, a biological grandparent, or other extended family member. Some participants were surprised by messages they received from biological family members on Facebook or Instagram; this unexpected and sometimes unwelcome contact might provide a future avenue for adoptive communication researchers. Adoptees who are surprised by contact may feel a sense of familial obligation to birth family members and may feel pressured into contact, unable to create boundaries that they feel are appropriate, or obligated to share personal information about themselves (Colaner et al., 2014; Stein, 1992). For example, one participant in this dissertation was contacted by her biological grandparents. Although she did not initially desire birth family contact, she felt pressured to respond because “these people are getting older;” now, she has made contact with her birth father and his family as well. As such, because this felt obligation may motivate adoptees to engage in and maintain contact when they otherwise would not have, future researchers might focus their efforts on these effects of unwanted contact and the degree of felt obligation that adoptees feel in their relationships with their birth parents.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand how adult adoptees constructed the meaning of the term “parent” after they had made contact with a birth parent. Given that the birth parent has a legitimate biological claim to the term “parent,” making contact

with a birth parent could cause adoptees to reevaluate their definition of “parent.” The use of RDT 2.0 (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011) allowed for the emergence of competing perspectives (i.e., discourses) and an examination of how the interplay of discourses creates meaning. In this dissertation, two discourses emerged: the *discourse of parent as a specific person* (DPSP) and the *discourse of parent as a label*. The DPSP was voiced by participants who felt that “parent” referred only to their adoptive parents, and this definition did not change upon making contact with the birth parent. This discourse was comprised of three themes: parenting behaviors, relational history, and deliberate exclusion. The DPL was voiced by participants who felt that “parent” was a term that could be applied to adoptive parents and birth parents; this definition only expanded upon contact with the birth parent. This discourse was comprised of three themes: satisfying relationship, birth parent inclusion, and surrender as a parenting behavior. The two discourses demonstrated synchronic interplay through negating, when one discourse rejected the other; countering, when participants considered elements of one discourse but ultimately favored the other; and entertaining, when participants acknowledged that both discourses were legitimate. This dissertation adds to the adoptive family communication and RDT literature on adoptive families by providing the adoptee’s perspective and also by uncovering the DPL, a perspective that has been largely ignored in adoption literature. Future research should continue to examine the complex experiences of adoptees as they make contact with birth parents.

Notes

1. A sample size of 32 interviewees is consistent with other adoption research (e.g., $n = 19$, Docan-Morgan, 2017; $n = 40$, Harrigan, 2009; $n = 18$, Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001) as well as previous RDT research conducted on families (e.g., $n = 16$, Halliwell, 2016; $n = 20$, Sporer & Toller, 2017).
2. Of the 32 participants, two (i.e., Nicole, Melanie; see Table 3) did not meet the criteria (i.e., had not had contact with birth family members prior to age 18). This was not discovered until during the interviews; although the interviews were conducted, they were not used in data analysis.
3. The study description was posted three times. As other users submitted content to the forum, the description was moved to the second page of the forum. Each time that the study description “fell” to the second page, it was reposted so that it would remain visible.

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Appendix A

Description of Study

Hello r/adoption,

I am a Ph.D. candidate at West Virginia University studying communication within adoptive families. I am currently working on my dissertation, a research study which will examine how adoptees make sense of having birth family contact. I am specifically interested in hearing from adoptees who have recently (within the past year) made contact with a birth parent. The process consists of a short interview (approximately 30 minutes) and a demographic survey. I can conduct interviews face to face, through Skype, or over the phone. For your time, you will be given a \$20 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview.

To be eligible for the interview, you must (a) be at least 18 years old, (b) live in the U.S., (c) have been adopted from birth by an individual other than a stepparent, (d) not have had contact with birth family members in childhood, and (e) have had contact with at least one birth parent. I will be asking questions about how you think of the term “parent” now that you have had contact with a birth parent in addition to your adoptive parents. These interviews will be audiotaped.

Your confidentiality will be ensured during the process. I will not ask for your name or other identifying information. Before I write the dissertation, I will assign pseudonyms to all interviewees. Participation is completely voluntary and you can choose to stop at any time. Any question may be skipped. This study is on file with the West Virginia University Institutional Review Board (Protocol 1802983750).

If you choose to participate, I will send you more detailed information about myself and the project. You will receive a cover letter that includes my contact information as well as the contact information of my Principal Investigator.

If you're interested in participating, please send me a PM. I'm happy to give more detailed information about myself/my credentials via PM, but will not post that information publicly. I look forward to hearing your different perspectives. Thank you!

Appendix B

Cover Letter

March 12, 2018

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Principal Investigator Dr. Scott Myers, Professor of Communication Studies at West Virginia University, and Co-Investigator Christine Anzur, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. This research is part of the co-investigator's dissertation as a requirement for graduation. This project is designed to explore how adult adoptees make sense of the meaning of "parent" after they have made contact with a birth parent. For your participation, you will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card.

In order to participate, you must be at least 18 years old, live in the U.S., have been adopted from birth by someone other than a stepparent, not have had contact with a birth parent during childhood, and have had contact with at least one birth parent.

Participation in this study involves an interview (approximately 30 minutes) and a short demographic survey. Should you agree to be interviewed, your interview will be audio recorded.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may discontinue your participation at any time without fear of penalty. Any questions may be skipped. Your involvement in this project will be completely confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used to identify you. Interviews will be audiotaped and the pseudonym will be used in the transcript.

This study is on file with the West Virginia University Institutional Review Board (Protocol 1802983750). If you would like more information regarding this research project, feel free to contact Co-Investigator Christine Anzur at ckanzur@mix.wvu.edu. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Scott A. Myers, Ph.D.
Professor
Principal Investigator
scott.myers@mail.wvu.edu

Christine K. Anzur, M.A.
Ph.D. Candidate
Co-Investigator
ckanzur@mix.wvu.edu

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Introduction: I am going to ask you a few questions about your experiences as an adopted person. There are no right or wrong answers; I am looking to hear your unique perspective. This interview will be used as part of my dissertation. I'd like to record this interview, but I will be the only person who will have the recording and I will not share it with anyone else. Before I write the dissertation, I'll assign you a pseudonym that I will use in the transcription and the dissertation, so no one will be able to identify you. Do you agree to be interviewed? In the interview, I'll be asking you questions about the person/people who adopted you and the person who gave birth to you, and I'll use that language so that my questions are clear. Again, I'm not looking for any specific answers, just for your honest experiences and thoughts. I'll start by asking you some general questions about how you view family, and then I'll ask about your family.

1. How do you define family? That is, what does the term "family" mean to you?
 - a. Who is in a family?
 - b. What are the criteria for deciding who belongs to a family?
 - c. Has this always been your definition of "family"? If no, what changed?
2. How does society define family?
 - a. What do you think about how society defines family?
 - b. Would you consider your definition/description to be unique?
3. Define "parent." What does the term "parent" mean to you? What role does a parent play in a family?
 - a. What is a parent?
 - b. What should parents do?
 - c. Where did your definition of parent come from? How did you arrive at this definition? Is it based on your experiences growing up with the person/people who adopted you?
 - d. Has this always been your definition of "parent"? If no, what changed?
 - e. How do you feel about your definition of "parent"?
4. Do you have anything else you want to say about your definition of family or parent before we talk a bit about the person/people who raised you?
 - a. Who raised you?
 - b. Are you still in contact?
 - c. How would you describe your relationship today?
5. Tell me about when you made contact with the person who gave birth to you.
 - a. How long ago did you first make contact?
 - b. How did you make contact (e.g., letter, email, phone, face-to-face)?
 - c. Are you still in contact? If yes, approximately how often do you have contact?
 - d. At this point in your life, how would you describe your relationship with the person who gave birth to you?
6. Thinking back to your definition of parent, how closely does that definition fit the person who adopted you?
 - a. How closely does this person fit, or not fit, with society's definition of parent?

7. Thinking back to your definition of parent, how closely does that definition fit the person who gave birth to you?

a. How closely does this person fit, or not fit, with society's definition of parent?

8. How, if at all, did your feelings about your definition of "parent" change when you met the person who gave birth to you?

9. Is there any other information that you think is important for me to know? Is there anything you would like to add? You can talk about your definition of family/parent, important people in your family, or anything you think will help me understand your experience.

[End recording] Now I'm going to give you a 3-digit code for the demographics survey. You'll enter this code when you begin the survey, and it allows me to link your demographic information with your interview. You can complete the survey on your own time, so you don't have to do it now, but I would appreciate if you could do it within the next 48 hours. Can you give me the email address you would like to use? I will also include the information for your gift card in the email. Thank you again for your participation.

Appendix D

Demographic Survey

Please enter the 3-digit code that was included in your email. _____

This set of questions will ask demographic information about yourself.

What is your age? _____

What is your sex? (select one)

- ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Male to Female Transgender
 - ☐ Female to Male Transgender
 - ☐ Nonbinary
 - ☐ Prefer not to answer
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

What is your race? (select one)

- ☐ African American/Black
 - ☐ Asian/Asian American
 - ☐ Biracial
 - ☐ Caucasian/White
 - ☐ Hispanic
 - ☐ Middle Eastern
 - ☐ Native American
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

- ☐ High school diploma/GED, or equivalent
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Trade/technical/vocational training
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Professional degree
- ☐ Doctorate degree

How old were you when you **first** made contact with your birth parent? _____

The next set of questions will ask about your adoption and your adoptive family.

Was your adoption domestic or international?

- ☐ Domestic
☐ International

What is the race of your adoptive mother?

- ☐ African American/Black
☐ Asian/Asian American
☐ Biracial
☐ Caucasian/White
☐ Hispanic
☐ Middle Eastern
☐ Native American
☐ Other (please specify)
-

What is the race of your adoptive father?

- ☐ African American/Black
☐ Asian/Asian American
☐ Biracial
☐ Caucasian/White
☐ Hispanic
☐ Middle Eastern
☐ Native American
☐ Other (please specify)
-

Including yourself and your adoptive parent(s), how many people are in your **adoptive** family? _____

Do you have siblings in your adoptive family?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

If "Do you have siblings in your adoptive family? = Yes":

How many siblings do you have? _____

Are your siblings also adopted?

- ☐ Yes, all are
☐ Some are, some are not
☐ No, all are not
☐ Don't know

If "Are your siblings also adopted? = Some are, some are not":

Of your siblings, how many are adopted and how many are not?

Adopted: _____

Not adopted: _____

If "Do you have siblings in your adoptive family? = Yes":

Are these siblings biologically related to you?

- ☐ Yes, all are
- ☐ Some are, some are not
- ☐ No, all are not
- ☐ Don't know

If "Are these siblings biologically related to you?" = Some are, some are not":

Of your siblings, how many are biologically related to you and how many are not?

Biologically related:

Not biologically related:

Appendix E

Invitation to Participate in Member-Checking

Hi there!

Back in March, you participated in an interview for my dissertation. We talked about when you made contact with your birth parent, and how you defined “family” and “parent.”

I’m excited to say that I’m very nearly done with the project! Before I move on, though, I want to make sure that what I’m writing is consistent with your experiences. In other words, I don’t want to misrepresent people in the project.

To do that, I am reaching out to some of the individuals that I interviewed and asking them to read through a draft of my results and provide me with some feedback--in particular, I’m looking to determine if these results seem to match what you’ve experienced.

If you’d be interested in helping me with this portion of the project, I would greatly appreciate it. I don’t have anything to offer you in return, and I understand that you may not have time (or interest!) in doing so. I only ask that you let me know so that I can ask others to help with this portion.

If you are interested, please provide me with an email address and I will send you a copy of the results for you to read. After you have finished, let me know if you feel that these results are consistent with your experiences. I ask that you get back to me no later than June 22, so that I can finalize the document.

Thanks again for taking the time to be interviewed. I am about a month away from graduation, and truly could not have done this without your participation!

-Christine