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## Dancing my adoptive identity : An autoethnographic analysis of adoption narratives and performance of identity

Montana Jean Smith  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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DANCING MY ADOPTIVE IDENTITY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS  
OF ADOPTION NARRATIVES AND PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Montana Jean Smith  
University of Northern Iowa  
July, 2016

## ABSTRACT

Family storytelling helps individuals make sense of the world around them. Stories not only help people understand their familial relationships, but understand the development of their identity. For adoptive children, family narratives are crucial to the creation of the child's adoptive identity and how it intersects with the many other identities the child holds. This study considers the construction of identity from the adoptee's point of view by use of autoethnographic and performance methods.

Using a multi-methodological approach, this thesis uses interactive interviews, autoethnography, and performance methods as a way to assess what narratives are told within an adoptive family and how these stories aid in the construction of the adoptive child's identity. The following adoption themes are analyzed: openness about the adoption within the adoptive family, the stigmatization attached to the word *adoption*, the need for adopting a child, the contrast of being a parent figure versus being a legal parent, the significance of the child's biologically given name versus the adoptive name, what it means to be a "good" parent (distinctively a good mother), and the adoptive parents and adoptive child's feelings towards the biological family.

By way of autoethnography, a thorough analysis of the use of hands as a metaphor to thread all of these adoption narratives together and as a pre-text to aid in the creation of a dance performance to further analyze the way these stories create an adoptive identity. A description of the performance, as well as a link to a video of the performance, is provided. After the performance, a post-text was created to assess the

way embodiment helps to further understand my adoptive identity, as well as to empathize with the other individuals depicted in these stories.

This thesis concludes with a discussion of the research questions, personal implications from doing an autoethnographic study, and where future research in storytelling and adoptive family communication can aid in a better understanding of adoption from the perspective of the adoptive child as well as how performance and embodiment can be used as tools for understanding identity construction and adoption.

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This study by: Montana Jean Smith

Entitled: Dancing my Adoptive Identity: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Adoption Narratives and Performance of Identity

has been approved as meeting thesis requirement for the

Degree of: Communication Studies Master of Arts

_____	_____
Date	Dr. Danielle Dick McGeough, Chair, Thesis Committee
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Paul J. Siddens III, Thesis Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Tom Hall, Thesis Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Kavita R. Dhanwada, Dean, Graduate College

For the parents I am lucky enough to call mine.

For the adopted child who wonders of others stories.

For those who see family as built by love, rather than DNA.

For those who understand themselves through art.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever indebted to those who contributed, knowingly and unknowingly, to this work. Thank you to my parents for always putting me first and for sharing the stories that would lead to a better understanding of not only our family, but of the way I have grown and continue to grow as a person. I love you. I would like to thank Orchesis Dance Company and, in particular, Jason Schadt for helping me realize I have a passion for creating stories through dance. Thank you for helping me understand that dance, and life, are always about the process rather than the product. Thank you to Danielle Dick McGeough, Paul Siddens, and Tom Hall for their constant encouragement and emotional support throughout this study and graduate school. Without you, I would not be able to make sense of this crazy life as a graduate student. You all rock. A special thanks to Danielle for being my number one fan throughout this project and encouraging my creativity and love for dance to become the way I share my stories with the world. You have helped me countless ways as a mentor, colleague, and friend. I owe a great amount of gratitude to my friends and peers in my graduate program who have encouraged my work, talked through ideas with me on many late nights, and who knew exactly when I just needed a night away from school. I would also like to thank the Department of Communication Studies for being my home away from home for the last six years and for inspiring me to pursue a career in Performance Studies. Finally, I would like to thank my biological mother for providing me a chance at a successful future by giving me up for adoption. I hope I have made you proud.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Two different lives shaped to make yours one. The first gave you life, and the second taught you to live in it. One gave you emotions, the other calmed your fears. One saw your first sweet smile, the other dried your tears. One gave you up – it was all [they] could do. The other prayed for a child, and God led [them] straight to you. - Anonymous*

My parents and I planned the visit to Indiana the summer after my senior year of high school. It was going to be a family road trip, dogs and all, to meet my biological family. It seemed ironic that I was going on a family trip to meet the family that gave me life with the family that taught me how to live life. My parents and I had decided to camp just a few minutes outside of the town in which my biological family lived. As we got into the truck to drive to my biological mother's home, I sat in the back seat, scared and nervous. My stomach filled with butterflies as I imagined how the day would play out, and I began crying silently in the backseat. I was reminded of a quote (shown above) which was engraved on a plate my adoptive mother had got the day she adopted me. I realized I was captured right in the middle of it. I felt trapped between the feelings and emotions associated with a previous life with my biological family and a new life with my adoptive parents who had helped me come to terms with my adoption. This was a moment I had dreamt about, been scared about, and never knew if it would come. I was going to meet a family that had been developing and forming relationships without me for 18 years.

As we pulled up to the house, my stomach dropped. My biological mother, the first person to ever see me smile, walked out of the house to greet us. I was not surprised

by her appearance, because my father had shown me pictures before. Still, I was taken aback by how similar we looked. We get out of the truck and my parents said hello as I stood silently behind them. Finally, my biological mother and I hesitantly shake hands, say hello, and begin to talk as we walk towards the house. Inside the house, everyone is there. There are so many people crammed in this small, unfamiliar house and all eyes are on me. My biological grandmother and grandfather greet me with a hug and say how nice it is to finally meet me. I did not consider that my biological family included more than a mysterious mom. My biological uncle says, “Hi Montana, it is so nice to see you!” My head spun and I noticed two other young girls standing quietly in the corner. It feels like I am looking into a mirror.

I have always been aware of my adoptive identity, even as a young child. My father told me, as a three year old, I would run around the house singing, “I’m adopted! I’m adopted!” My adoptive parents have always communicated openly with me about my adoption. They explained that I was not biologically related to my family and this did not matter to them. They loved and accepted me for who I was; an adopted blessing to a family that could not biologically conceive children. Because of this, my adoptive identity has never really stood out to me as different from the other identities I hold, such as daughter, only child, cousin, and friend. Around the age of fourteen I became curious about my biological family. In the first year of my graduate studies, my parents finalized their divorce. This event led me to question what constitutes “family” and the identity family members share. I also began to consider how my adoptive identity had influenced my other identities throughout the years.

Already curious about family communication and adoptive identity development, my interests in these topics caught fire in my Introduction to Graduate Studies course. As we were introduced to past graduate work in the field of communication studies, I became attracted to those that told stories of family, adoption, and narrative. With guidance from past graduate student work, my curiosity led me to find other scholars in the field that spoke about adoptive families and storytelling. I found that communication among adoptive parents and the adoptee is vital in how adoptees establish and maintain their adoptive identity; a concept I felt I thoroughly understood. I thought it was crucial for communication studies scholars to engage in and explore the communication within adoptive families and that I was in the perfect position to do so. It led me to understand that the main way adoptive parents communicate with their adopted children is through the use of storytelling because my adoptive parents have told me countless stories of my adoption as well as the process of adoption.

Storytelling provides a productive way for adoptive parents to inform adoptees about the adoption process, the entrance into their family, etc. Exploring storytelling as a form of communication within adoptive families and how this aids in identity development, specifically for the adoptee, is important. I wanted to explore this idea further, and relate it to how these stories have shaped my adoptive identity throughout the years. Seeing identity as ever-changing, I view my adoptive identity as coherent at a specific moment in time, but also as one that will change and shift over time as I, as well as other adoptees, live through new experiences. Because of this, it is essential to address how adoptees make sense of this adoptive identity in relation to the other identities they

may hold as well as how the identity shifts over time. After coming to the conclusion that I was in the perfect position to expand on this research further and offer a new perspective (from that of the adoptee) the following research questions began to emerge:

RQ1: What narratives do adoptive parents tell to an adoptive child?

RQ2: How do these narratives influence the construction of an adoptive child's identity?

Researchers in the field of adoption have focused primarily on issues of attachment to the adoptive parents in the development of an adoptive child, rather than the way the parents and children in adoptive families communicate with one another (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010, p. 238). As such, focus on the communication among adoptive families has been largely absent from the communication field, especially from the adoptive child's point of view. Scholars in other fields, such as psychology, have explored that family communication in adoptive families more than communication researchers themselves (Brodzinsky, 1987; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau 2000; Grotevant, 2003; Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006). However, Colaner and Kranstuber (2010) explain family communication researchers, in particular, are in an ideal position to pursue this research and inform others on the specific aspects of communication present in adoptive families (p. 238). I argue that performance studies scholars are also in a unique position to explore the communication among adoptive families and the identity development of the adoptee through embodiment.

I have always seen performance as a way to share stories and personal experiences with others. Beginning at a young age, I was enrolled in dance classes as a way to "grow out of my shell" as my mother would say. As an only child, I became very

shy in social settings and dance became a way for me to meet others and potentially make friends. Although dance served as a successful way for me to “grow out of my shell,” it became more than that. Dance became my passion and a creative way for me to express myself and to tell stories, both communal and intimate. As I grew older, I began choreographing my own dance pieces for Orchesis Dance Company, a student organization on campus at the University of Northern Iowa. After my parents’ divorce, I began using dance as a way to work through troubling events in my life and to share my perspective with others. Recently, I have used dance as a way to work through my experience as an adoptive child and to further understand myself and my identity in relation to my adoptive family as well as my biological family. Dance, to me, is one of the most beautiful and emotionally captivating forms of communication and storytelling.

To expand on previous research about the communication among adoptive families, I begin with a review of literature concerning the concepts of identity construction and storytelling. First, I explain how identity is constructed for each individual and how these identities are in flux due to evolving personal experiences, how families develop their sense of identity, and how adoptive families construct their identities in relation to the other individuals within their cohort. Then, I discuss storytelling and narratives, family storytelling and its relation to family identity development, the stigmatization of adoption in the United States that results from cultural storytelling, and the use of adoption and entrance narratives among adoptive families to combat these false perceptions of adoption in the United States. I end by highlighting the

gap in research in relation to adoption and identity development from the adoptive child's point of view.

Stories help individuals make sense of the world and are essential to human understanding. By sharing my personal experience of forming my adoptive identity I expand on the role of communication between adoptive children and their adoptive parents in the field of communication studies. Specifically, with the use of conversations, which serve as interactive interviews, between my parents and myself I am able to expand on the process of identity development from the perspective of an adoptive child. In Chapter 3, I argue that a multi-methodological approach of autoethnographic methods, interactive interviews, and performance is useful in determining how both personal and family identity are established through adoption narratives. *Autoethnography* refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. Through autoethnographic methods, readers take on an active role as they are invited into the author's world, which stimulates readers to use what they have learned from the author and apply it to understand and relate the story to their own experiences (Ellis, 2004).

Interactive interviews allow me to explore the adoption narratives present in my own adoptive family in Chapter 4. These narratives include the following themes:

- Openness about the adoption within the adoptive family
- The stigmatization attached to the word "adoption"
- The need for adopting a child
- The contrast of being a parent figure versus being a legal parent

- The significance of the child's biologically given name versus the adoptive name
- What it means to be a "good" parent (specifically a good mother) and
- The adoptive parents and adoptive child's feelings towards the biological family

Through understanding how these adoption narratives have led to the development of my adoptive identity, I am able to further understand how my adoptive identity begins to intersect with my other identities. I contribute to adoptive research by sharing adoption narratives as seen through the lens of the adoptee.

After analyzing the many adoption stories which aided in the construction of my adoptive identity, I provide an analysis of an overarching theme present in all of the stories told within my adoptive family: the use of hands from the biological family, the adoptive family, and the adoptive child. This analysis starts with a pre-text, which is an autoethnographic text used to analyze the use of hands by all parties listed above. This pre-text was then used to develop a dance performance, which enabled the embodiment of my adoptive identity,<sup>1</sup> as well as my biological mother and adoptive parents, through movement. After the performance, I created a post-text, also autoethnographic in nature, to explain how the embodiment of my adoptive identity through performance allowed me to further understand my identity as an adopted child. A description of the pre-text, performance, and post-text are all presented in Chapter 5.

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<sup>1</sup> A video documentation of this performance can be found at the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhje5\\_FgA3I&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhje5_FgA3I&feature=youtu.be)

I conclude with a summary of the implications of further exploring adoption through the adoptive child's lens. Analyzing the use of storytelling in adoptive families and how these narratives construct the child's adoptive identity can be found in a variety of different disciplines and seen through varying viewpoints. I seek not to answer all questions regarding the topic of adoption narratives, but to offer new insight and understanding from my own personal experience as an adoptive child.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This thesis explores the adoption and entrance narratives told by the adoptive parents to their children and how these stories influence the adoptee's identity. To illuminate this phenomenon, I will first review past research concerning identity construction and narratives, specifically among adoptive families. I begin by exploring the social construction of identity, how families develop their identity in general, and specifically how adoptive families construct their identities. Then, I analyze the storytelling process, family storytelling, the stigmatization of adoption based on culturally constructed narratives, and adoption and entrance narratives. I conclude by highlighting the lack of research done from the perspective of the adoptee and how this gap can be filled via autoethnographic and performance methods.

#### Identity Construction

Identities are constructed through our communication and interactions with others. Richard Jenkins (2004) stated, "we identify others and are identified by them in return" (p. 20). As people seek to understand their own identity, they consistently compare themselves to the people they interact with, looking for similarities and differences. John Hewitt (1994) explored this concept further:

Human beings are role-making and role-taking creatures who typically see themselves as members of one or another social group or collectivity. They derive a sense of what they should do as well as the energy for doing it from their sense of likeness with others and their participation in joint purposes. They can also define themselves in opposition to the group and derive a sense of location and energy from their perceived differences from others. (p. 111)

When viewing themselves in terms of likeness or opposition, individuals begin to identify with not just one sole identity, but with many different identities that form a unique sense of self. These identities are, “produced and reproduced both in discourse – narrative, rhetoric, and representation – and in the practical, often very material, consequences of identification” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 176). Through the use of narrative and real life experiences, people are able to form a coherent identity in relation to others around them.

Scholars who study identity within the communication field typically understand the formation of identity in two ways: as a stable entity or as always in flux. Those who view identity as a stable construction believe identity is unchangeable and fixed within a specific time and context. Karen Tracy and Jessica Robles (2013) explained stable identities can be described as a category approach, wherein individuals are identified by the different groups they fall under, such as their ethnicity, social class, and sex, etc. (p. 20). In contrast, identity can be seen as socially constructed, at which point a person’s identity is created through their actions and interactions with others (Tracy & Robles, 2013, p. 20). From this perspective, identity is fluid and constantly under construction.

When viewing identity as socially constructed, identity can also be defined as being intersectional. Meaning, a person has multiple identities that work with one another to form an individual’s self-concept (DeFrancisco, Palczewski, & McGeough, 2014, p. 9). DeFrancisco et al. (2014) stated, “An intersectional approach to identity in general... makes clear that all facets of identity are integral, interlocking parts of a whole” (p. 9). Therefore, a person’s identity cannot be separated from the other identities they hold, such as their ethnicity, sex, socio-economic class, citizenship, religion, etc.

For the purposes of this project, I will approach identity from an intersectional viewpoint. I see an adoptive identity as interwoven with the many other identities an adoptee may hold, such as son/daughter, cousin, friend, student, and biological child. Identity is complex and always changing, therefore I do not believe a stable identity approach is appropriate for discussing how an adoptee's identity changes after reflection of adoption and entrance narratives in the adoptive family.

In addition to with viewing identity as intersectional, I also believe individuals perform multiple identities every day. Known as performativity, Judith Butler proposed that people should question, "How am I?" rather than, "Who am I?" (Bell, 2008, p.174). That is, individuals perform their identities in relation to history, institutions, and language and should question why they do so. Thus, *how* they are performing their identities in relation to historical situations and language practices becomes as important as *who* they are performing. Individuals perform their identities in relation to a socially constructed world or a, "set of culturally and socially created expectations" (Bell, 2008, p. 175). By understanding the social construction of identity, we can better understand why individuals feel an urge to perform their specific identities in certain ways. For adoptive children, they learn how to perform their identities in relation to their family identity. By learning their adoptive family identity, they begin to learn how to perform their identity as an adoptee in their own socially constructed world.

### Family Identity

Family is a key institution in constructing an individual's personal identity. A family is seen as:

any group of people united by ties of marriage, blood, adoption, or any sexually expressive relationship, in which (1) the adults cooperate financially for their mutual support, (2) the people are committed to one another in an intimate interpersonal relationship, (3), the members see their individual identities as importantly attached to the group, and (4) the group has an identity of its own. (DeGenova, Stinnett, & Stinnett, 2011, p. 5)

Families are one of the first places a person learns about themselves and the world around them. Family identities can be seen in the roles each individual has within the group such as father, mother, son, daughter, grandma, grandpa, cousin, niece, nephew, aunt, uncle, etc. A family's identity is often seen in comparison to the concept of the nuclear family. According to DeFrancisco et al. (2014) a nuclear family is seen as being, "composed of two heterosexual parents legally married [in which]... the male is the primary wage earner and the female is the primary homemaker" (p. 114). The nuclear family is often presented, via media and other discourse, as the norm or ideal to which people ought to aspire. Commonly cast with a mother, father, two children, and a white house with a picket fence, the idea of the nuclear family excludes the notion that most families do not abide by this structure, thus excluding divorced families, same-sex marriages, and adoptive families.

Because a family's identity is frequently seen in comparison to the nuclear family, those families who do not fit the description of a "normal" family are often relegated to the margins, treated as different, or not recognized as a family unit. Families are often defined biologically, thus neglecting adoptive families whom are not "blood" related.

Because family is often addressed in terms of biology, this can make it difficult for adoptive children to understand their identity in relation to their adoptive, non-biological family. Still, people come to understand themselves in relation to their own family, making adoptive parents an ideal starting place for the adopted child to form a sense of self within the social world in which they live.

### Adoptive Identity

For adopted children, their relation to their adoptive family helps them form their identity both within their family and in society. Haley Kranstuber and Jody Kellas (2011) stated adoptive parents are often open and honest about adoption and are willing to talk with the adoptee about their experience (p. 188). Adopted children use their coherent life story to reduce uncertainty about how they came to be with their adoptive family. Many adoptees communicate the idea they are special because they are picked specifically by their adoptive family. This makes them see themselves in a more positive light, thus contributing to the construction of a positive self and their adoptive identity (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011, p. 188).

Information seeking is a major factor in shaping an adoptive child's identity. Information seeking is considered to be the gathering of information previously unknown to an adopted person about his or her adoption and birth family (Skinner-Drawz, Wrobel, Grotevant, & Von Korff, 2011). Whenever an adoptee seeks to learn more about their adoption, they commonly consider to their adoptive parents as the keepers of this information. Adoption Communicative Openness (ACO) is crucial in shaping a positive self-image for the adoptee (Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011). The openness of the

communication about adoption established by the adoptive parents with their child provides the adoptee a chance to explore their identity through free curiosity and information seeking. Brooke Skinner-Drawz et al. (2011) found an adoptee's desire for seeking information can change drastically between adolescence and adulthood (p. 194). The adoptive child forms their identity from managing uncertainty about the past through narratives, and these narratives change and shape their adoptive identity as they become older.

The transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood involves an increased opportunity to interact with new people in different environments outside of the immediate family. Young adults are expected to tell coherent life stories. These coherent narratives offer an explanation of how young adults fit into their family at the time, but these identities and stories can change over time as new experiences and new information emerge. As the adoptive child's life experiences change, the way they process and understand their adoptive identity changes. For the adopted child, narratives about the adoptive identity may come to the surface from evolving social partners or new social situations, such as meeting college roommates, interacting with coworkers, or becoming involved with new romantic partners (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Thus, their adoptive identity begins to change as they have new life experiences. Lynn Von Korff and Harold Grotevant (2011) explained the frequency of adoption-related conversation within the immediate family mediated the association between the birth family and adoptive identity formation during adolescence. The effect of adoption-related

conversation on the adoptees' identity extended into emerging adulthood, therefore shaping the adoption identity in new social interactions.

### Storytelling

The most natural way people communicate with one another is through the use of storytelling. Storytelling is seen as, "a fundamental and universal way of documenting and describing experience" (Shuman, 2005, p. 9). When individuals document their experience to other people they are able to form a coherent view of themselves in relation to others. Amy Shuman (2005) described storytelling as, "the vehicle and repository for accumulating, sorting, and making meaning out of experience" (p. 9). Storytelling is used by people to persuade, retell existing narratives, and impose categories on their experiences to make sense of their social world.

Stories have the power to make individuals see their world in a specific way. Shuman explained, "The most compelling feature of storytelling is the possibility that its power to transfer and transform will change the meaning of experience" (p. 6). Stories can persuade people to see their life experiences as either positive or negative. For adopted children, the way their adoptive parents frame the adoption experience becomes crucial in understanding their adoption as a good or bad experience. Next, through the retelling of stories, "narrators become witnesses to others' experiences and storytelling provides some hope for understanding across differences" (p. 5). Retelling stories provides a way for the teller to help the listener make a coherent, but fragmented, story of an experience they may not be familiar with. For adopted children, the retelling of the adoption process from their parents' perspective provides a way for the adoptee to make

sense of how they became a part of the adoptive family. Lastly, storytelling aids in the categorizing of life experiences. When viewing life experiences chronologically, individuals are able to form a coherent life story. Storytelling, “impose[s] categories on experience, but people sometimes report their experiences don’t fit the imposed category because the category unfairly judges them” (Shuman, 2005, p. 7-8). Storytelling helps adoptive children make sense of their family in relation to others. Because a stigmatization has been placed on adoption, adoptive children may see the category of “adoptive family” as unfairly judging them, because they believe adopted families operate similarly to the families seen as “normal.” Therefore, adoptive children use storytelling as a way to make sense of their unique identities.

One common way to begin the development of an adoptive child’s identity is through the process of storytelling. Storytelling occurs, “through the participation of many people” (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. vii). According to Langlier and Peterson (2004), storytelling matters because it involves risk and effort on the part of the teller and the listener (p. vii). For adoptive families, storytelling involves high amounts of effort on the part of the adoptive parents and risk on the part of the adoptive child. The adoptee exposes themselves to stories that will change the way they see their adoptive parents, the adoption process, and even their biological family. Jody Koenig-Kellas (2010) explained, “People tell stories every day, multiple times a day to entertain, understand, and communicate self against the backdrop of social and historical contexts” (p.5). Storytelling, and narratives, serve as a common way for individuals to make sense of themselves and the world around them. Storytelling is important because it changes the

way individuals see themselves in comparison to the world. As Langellier and Peterson (2004) stated, “by the time we realize [story telling changes things] we are already enmeshed in a world of stories” (p. vii).

Throughout this thesis, I use the terms stories and narratives interchangeably. Storytelling is a vital aspect due to the way it influences how adoptive children make sense of their adoptive identity. Through family narratives, adoptive children are able to reduce uncertainty about their entrance into the family and, possibly, about their biological family.

#### Family Narrative

One way children are able to easily socialize into the world around them is through the telling of stories amongst immediate family members, specifically, with their parents. Michael Pratt and Barbara Fiese (2004) further explored how family stories contribute to identity development, stating, “We learn initially to construct our identities through our families, and families provide a clear framework for making meaning of the world, whether through stories, rituals, or other methods, that best prepare their children to be successful in an often unpredictable world” (p. 28). Family conversations about difficult topics, such as adoption, are discussed so a child is able to shape her or his identity and make sense of how that identity relates to the world around them.

Stories establish expected cultural standards and rules of conduct within a society. This not only reflects on a person’s behavior in society, but also within the family. Stories establish norms and create “prototypes or models of what people believe ought to occur in their family” (Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker. 1999, p. 338). Narratives create a

family identity that helps to construct a deeper understanding of the family culture to which a person belongs. Jody Koenig-Kellas and April Trees (2006) stated, “Family stories do more than just explain events or amuse an audience. They can teach behavior, and values, help create family identities, and develop family culture” (p. 51). For adoptive families, stories became a main source to aid in the identity development of the adoptee.

Allison Thorson, Christine Rittenour, Jody Koenig-Kellas, and April Trees (2013) explain that an individual’s perceptions of the narratives told are linked to the quality of the family conversations taking place (p. 96). Thorson et al. (2013) continue,

Even though stories are jointly constructed, family members differ in their experience of the conversation based on how they feel about the family members going into the conversation. Therefore collaborative family story telling becomes an important way for individual identity to be constructed. (p. 97)

Jody Koenig-Kellas (2010) provided further insight into how family storytelling contributes to identity development, “Storytelling is a primary way for families and family members to make sense of the everyday, as well as, difficult events. It helps create a sense of individual and group identity and establishes guidelines for behavior” (p. 1). This suggests family stories, such as adoption narratives, are central to understanding personal relationships and creating individual and cultural identities

### The Stigmatization of Adoption

In 1963, Irving Goffman explored the ways in which individuals make judgements of one another based on how well or poorly a person fits into a social category or identity (Bell, 2008, p. 165). Elizabeth Bell (2008) explained, “many categories of identity are stigmatized – certain attributes of a social role are threatening to

one's sense of self, competence, and effective interactions with others (p. 165). Many adoptive families experience stigmatization because they do not fit the norm of the "nuclear family." Nuclear families, or "a unit of a heterosexual couple and their biological children" are considered *real* families whereas families that fall outside of this definition are labeled as other (Wegar, 2000, p. 363). Charlene Miall (1987) explained:

Little attention has been paid to the role of social attitudes toward adoption and their impact on adoptive families ... [this] may be that awareness of attitudes within the larger community toward adoption contributes to a sense of stigma among adoptive parents which influences their perception of their families as real or genuine. (p. 34)

Below, I highlight some ways the relationship between U.S. culture and adoption has led to these stigmas.

One way adoption has been stigmatized in U.S. culture is through the perception and attitudes formed in relation to childlessness among married couples. Charlene Miall (1987) explained, "In North American society, two major fertility norms predominate: all married couples should reproduce and all married couples should want to reproduce ... Childlessness, whether voluntary or involuntary, is considered a form of deviant behavior." (p. 34). In relation to adoption, childlessness becomes a concern for married couples who cannot conceive a child themselves due to fertility problems and thus would seek out adoption as an alternative. Because their child would not be biologically related, the child would possibly be seen as, "not blood related" and therefore become othered not only in their adoptive family, but also in society.

Another factor that contributes to the stigmatization placed on adoptees is that they do not fit into their family either physically or psychologically, feeling a sense of

loss of identity in relation to their biological family. Miall (1987) stated, “The viability of the adoptive family has come under review as more and more adopted individuals have seemingly failed to achieve a sense of personal identity within the adoptive family” (p. 34). Failure to achieve personal identity stems from an inability to integrate their biological heritage and information into their identity structure among their adoptive family (March, 1995, p. 654). Because of a lack of background information due to the adoption, adoptees may seek out a reunion with the biological family to form, “personal coherence and serenity” (March, 1995, p. 654). A lack of biological information leads to a violation of U.S. society’s norms of kinship, meaning, “the relationship existing between certain individuals based on their common bonds of blood or marriage” (March, 1995, p. 654). Because adoptees are not blood related to their adoptive family, in U.S. culture they are seen as divergent from the norms of family and kinship.

Along with deviations from kinship, perceptions regarding the adoptee’s psychological state due to adoption may lead to stigmas. Weagar (2000) explained:

Most adoption studies have been conducted in order to determine factors that cause mental health problems among adoptees ... Yet, since the kinship in [adoptive families] is culturally defined as a deviant family form, we should not be surprised to find that the lives and identities of adoptive family members are affected in negative ways (p. 365).

Past research has focused on the mental state of adoptees, as well as seeing their family form as deviant, thus affecting their family and identity in negative ways. Because of this, a shift in the way adoption is studied leads to a better understanding of adoptive families, their identity, and thus reduce the stigma placed on them. Although there may be socially

constructed stigmas of adoption in U.S. culture, one way adoptive families can combat this stigmatization is through openness of sharing adoption and entrance narratives.

#### Adoption and Entrance Narratives

Families must work together to establish an identity through communication within and outside of the family. Family stories have a significant impact on the self-concept of individual family members. In adoptive families, *adoption entrance narratives* teach the adopted child what it means to be adopted, why they were placed for adoption, and where they fit into their adoptive family. These stories impact the adoptee's sense of identity and value (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Adoption entrance narratives both affect and reflect individual self-concept construction and well-being (Kranstuber & Koenig-Kellas, 2011). Colaner and Kranstuber (2010) explained, "adoptees may be unsure of their origins, what happened to their birth parents, or how they are different from their peers, and this curiosity motivates the adoptees to approach the adoptive parents for more information" (p. 236).

Adoption stories help adoptive children make sense of their experiences and develop a sense of self and understanding. Researchers have found a number of benefits for individuals who self-disclose and share adoption narratives. Disclosure and narratives about distressing experiences, such as adoption, can positively affect an individual's well-being (Kellas & Trees, 2006). The stories adoptive families tell both individually and collectively reveal information about how they feel and think about their interpersonal relationships with one another. The telling of difficult stories, such as

adoption, provides an opportunity for personal insight and development of an ever-changing, adoptive identity.

Creating shared meaning between family members plays a major role in adopted adolescent adjustment. The interaction and communication between those in an adoptive family provides more of a challenge in creating a shared reality because of the stigmatization of adoption in society (Rueter & Koerner, 2008). The identity development for adopted youth, in particular, can be challenging due to differing family personalities and appearance. Therefore, adoption narratives shared among the immediate adoptive family become crucial in the development of a positive self-concept for the adoptee.

Through adoption narratives, adoptive parents normalize the adoption process in order for the adoptee to manage uncertainty about their adoptive identity. Adoption becomes commonplace and is thought of as “normal.” Elsbeth Neil (2012) conducted a study which found most adoptive children had a sense of always being in the adoptive family. Several adoptees argue being adopted was “normal” or “no different,” specifically because they had no memory of being anything else. Neil presented the thoughts and emotions of adopted children, often not heard, and offers a glimpse into how these adoption narratives shape what adoption means and what it feels like for the adoptive child (p. 415).

### Conclusion

By understanding personal and family identity construction, one can begin to understand how an adoptee comes to know “How am I?” in a society known for placing a

stigmatization on adoptive families. By way of family storytelling, an adoptee comes to understand their identity in relation to their family and thus to the world.

The way I have come to understand my identity is strongly tied to Tracy and Robles (2013) notion of a socially constructed identity. I have often viewed my identity as fluid and constantly changing because who I am today has been influenced by and has changed from the person I was in years past. As I have new experiences and meet new people, my identity changes the instant these occurrences happen. When speaking of my adoptive identity, in particular, I know the experiences of hearing different adoptive stories has changed my adoptive identity and that the way I view myself as an adoptive child has changed as I have grown up.

Building off of DeFrancisco et al. (2014) I also understand my adoptive identity is only one of the many identities I hold. Through an intersectional approach to identity, I am constantly assessing how my adoptive identity interlocks with the many other identities I have. Throughout this thesis, I work through how being adopted impacts my other identities as a daughter, cousin, friend, and student.

As I assess the way my identity is constructed, one of the most important processes of identity development is through storytelling. As Koenig-Kellas (2010) explained, individuals tell stories every day for a variety of reasons whether that be to entertain or to understand how their identity functions in relation to others. Storytelling is a vital way that people communicate their identity in relation to the social constructs around them.

In relation to my adoptive identity, the stories my adoptive parents have told me have aided tremendously in how I see myself as an adoptive child against a culture that often stigmatizes adoptive families for not fitting the norm. These stories have not only helped me to understand my personal identity, but have also aided me in understanding how my family identity and culture has been created and maintained through adoption narratives.

Given the lack of research done from the adoptive child's point of view, this thesis helps to expand on knowledge concerning adoption from the adoptee's perspective through the use of interviews and autoethnographic and performance methods. Chapter 3 gives a detailed account of the methodology used to study my personal adoption narratives and how they have helped in shaping my adoptive identity in relation to all other identities I possess. Through a discussion of narratives with my parents, I use autoethnographic and performance methods to expand on understanding how my adoption stories have led me to perform the adoptive identity I do today.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

There are many research approaches within the field of qualitative research. This thesis uses a multi-methodological approach, combining autoethnography, interactive interviews, and performance to explore the complex intersection of family, narrative, and identity. As a member of the culture/family being studied, I have collected a lifetime of observations that provide me with a profound understanding of the development of an adoptive identity that could not be obtained any other way. I have personally observed and participated in the telling of adoption narratives within my adoptive family.

To share this personal experience with others, I first collected my own family's adoption narratives through the process of interactive interviewing with my adoptive parents. I then reflected personally on how these narratives have changed my adoptive identity throughout the years using autoethnographic methods. The emotional experience of autoethnography helped me generate a broader understanding of how my adoptive identity is formed through the telling of adoption narratives. Last, I used the performance method of dance as a way to embody these experiences and obtain new understandings of adoption through movement. This multi-methodological approach aided in revealing the relational experience of identity construction particularly present in adoptive families.

In this chapter, I give a detailed description of autoethnography's origin, how to successfully write and critique autoethnography, my process of using interactive interviews to discuss adoption narratives told within my adoptive family, how the narratives told in the interviews were thematized and analyzed, and how I used

performance as a method to obtain knowledge concerning adoptive identities through embodiment. I conclude by highlighting why two chapters of analysis are present in this thesis and how using a multi-methodological approach aided in each of these chapters.

### The Origin of Autoethnography

Autoethnography was developed as a critique to traditional, scientific research. Tony Adams and Carolyn Ellis (2012) explained, “autoethnography developed in response to a crisis of confidence ... bias against personal experience ... and an increasing awareness of and respect for human difference and identity politics” (p. 196). In other words, autoethnography was developed to show how personal experience could be used as an alternative way of obtaining knowledge. Instead of conducting studies based on other groups of people, autoethnography is used as a way to assess how personal stories explain cultural experience.

Autoethnography grew out of the field of ethnography as a way to study individual experience, rather than collective experience. Carolyn Ellis (2004) gives insight into the term ethnography:

*Ethno* means people or culture; *graphy* means writing and describing. Ethnography then means writing about or describing people and culture, using firsthand observation and participation in a setting or situation. The term refers both to the process of doing, to a study, and to the written product (p. 26).

By taking part in the daily lives of those being studied, ethnography emphasizes taking on the role of a participant observer, therefore providing insight into the world *of others* in order to make meaning and understand culture.

In contrast, autoethnography provides insight into *personal* experience as a way to understand the self and its connection to culture (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). Culture lives in all

humans; therefore, to write about oneself is to write about cultural experiences.

Autoethnography aids in, “sensitiz[ing] readers to experiences shrouded in silence and forms of representations that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different” (Adams & Ellis, 2012, p. 197). All stories have the potential to be more than just our own experience. It is up to the researcher to tell them in a way that makes this possible (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). Through autoethnography, researchers are able to bring different, personal experiences to the surface in order to make sense of the way these experiences are shaped by culture.

#### Assessing Autoethnography

Writing a successful autoethnography requires the researcher to be self-reflexive, transparent, reliable, and valid, while also contributing a personal experience that can be generalized on a cultural level.

The autoethnographer should be self-reflexive in so far as they have an, “honest and authentic awareness of one’s own identity and research approach” (Tracy, 2013, p. 233). This includes not only sharing motivations, but also engaging in research techniques that aid in self-awareness and exposure (Tracy, 2013, p. 233). This also requires the autoethnographer to be transparent to insure they, “are being honest and open about the activities by which the research transpired ... [and] being up front about other people’s roles in the research” (Tracy, 2013, p. 234). Throughout the research process, I, as an autoethnographer, participated in methods in which I was self-reflexive, not only in respect to my participants and audience, but also to myself. I disclosed all information

necessary to remain transparent with my audience and participants and was upfront about the role of myself, my adoptive parents, and my biological family in the research process.

To assess an autoethnographer's reliability means the audience should be able to determine the credibility of the researcher. Adams and Ellis (2012) use the following questions as a way to determine an autoethnographer's reliability:

Could the author have had the experience described given available evidence? Does the author believe that this is actually what happened to her or him? and Has the author taken 'literary license' to the point that the story is better viewed as fiction rather than as a truthful, historically accurate account? (p. 207)

By reviewing these questions, readers of this thesis will be able to evaluate my reliability as an autoethnographer to deliver a truthful account of the events of my adoption process and how these stories contributed to the development of my adoptive identity.

Last, an autoethnographer should be able to establish the validity of their research, meaning, "trying to assess whether readers find the text lifelike, believable, and possible, and whether the story, the representation, is coherent and could be true" (Adams & Ellis, 2012, p. 207). The autoethnographer should not only be able to present a believable account, but should also be able to, "help readers communicate with others different from themselves or ... improve the lives of participants and readers, and the author's own life" (Adams & Ellis, 2012, p. 207). By sharing my personal, adoption experience, I hope to leave my readers with a better understanding of adoptive family identity, an adoptive child's identity, as well as illuminating the ways in which they can combat against the stigmatization placed on adoptive families in the United States. It is my intention to write in a way that resonates with readers and highlight the storytelling and narratives prevalent

in adoptive families and how these narratives contribute to the development of an adoptive child's identity.

### Interactive Interviewing

Along with the self-reflection the autoethnography yields, I have combined the use of interactive interviews with autoethnographic writing to offer a more in-depth analysis of how adoption narratives have contributed to my adoptive identity. Interactive interviewing, "provides an in-depth and intimate understanding of people's experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics" (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997, p. 121). By using this interviewing technique with my parents, we were able to speak about the emotionally taxing events that took place before, during, and after the adoption process. Adams and Ellis (2012) explain that interactive interviews include:

Collaborative endeavors between researchers and participants, whereby both discuss, together, issues that come up in conversation about particular topics ... [that] are situated within the context of emerging and well-established relationships among participants and interviewers [with an] emphasis on what can be learned from the interaction within the interview setting as well as from the stories that each person brings to the encounter. (p. 203)

During the interview process with my parents, we established a conversational rapport whereby we were able to discuss issues concerning the adoption process. Because I have a very strong relationship with both of my parents, we were able to share specific stories of certain events that happened before my adoption took place, during the adoption process, and after my adoption occurred. By interviewing my parents, I encountered parts of my adoption narratives that I do not remember or have never encountered. I believe this was imperative in order to gain the maximum amount of knowledge about my

adoption necessary to do an adequate self-analysis of how these stories have formed my adoptive identity.

### Participants

Autoethnographers may claim the stories they write or perform as their own, but they ultimately cannot avoid involving others in the process (Tullis, 2013, p. 244). The “others” who appear in this particular autoethnography are my parents. Because I am writing of my own personal experiences, the identity of my parents cannot fully be concealed. Therefore, informed consent was granted by both of them. These forms were read, signed, and approved by the University of Northern Iowa’s Human Participants Review Board (See Appendix A & B for sample consent form and recruitment script). My parents completed the informed consent form and have permitted the use of their real names (Bryan Smith and Julie Sand) for this study.

To gain insight into the adoption narratives told when I was a child, interviews were conducted separately with each of my parents. My father, age 48, works for a trucking company in Stuart, IA and my mother, age 49, works for a glassware company in Greenfield, IA. I chose to interview each participant separately as to not cause conflict between my parents who have been divorced since September of 2014. These interviews took place at each of their homes, providing a comfortable and natural atmosphere. I informed both my mother and father that the interviews would be recorded so that I would be able to listen to them at a later time for transcription. The conversations began with me prompting questions of their experience with the adoption process and their memories of revealing this to me as a child (See Appendix C for sample interview

questions). These questions invited each of the interviewees to talk more openly and freely about their experience with the adoption. These interviews were nondirective and the participants' responses to the questions determined what we would talk about next.

Along with interviews, artifacts were used to provide more in-depth conversations about the adoption narratives. These artifacts included scrapbooks that document the second adoption<sup>2</sup> process with my mother, a picture she received at the adoption party, and a book of pictures of my biological family. As a researcher, I self-disclosed personal understandings during the interviews in order to reflect the way people usually go about having family conversations. As participants hear their own stories being told, they engage in self-reflection and identity creation. As these narratives were discussed between my parents and me, new understandings were created, stories were rewritten, and we cultivated new meaning in the adoption stories within the experience.

### Thematizing Interviews

With the use of audio recordings, the interactive interviews were transcribed following the interview process. Transcriptions were typed out and included nonverbal behaviors that were seen as significant during the interview process (i.e. eye contact, crying, reaching for items, etc.). I used a process of second-level coding which is used to, “explain, theorize, and synthesize” my interviews as well as, “interpret and identify patterns” found in both my mother and father’s stories (Tracy, 2013, p. 194). Through the process of synthesizing and making sense of all of the stories told between my mother

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<sup>2</sup> I was adopted by my father and his first wife when I was a baby. After my father divorced his first wife, he remarried. The second adoption refers to Julie, the woman I call my “mother”, adopting me when she and my father got married. The event of my second adoption aids in my argument that adoptive families, as well as all families, are messy and complicated.

and father, I was able to establish common themes and stories found among both sets of interviews.

Themes began to emerge during the transcription process when I realized my mother and father were telling the same stories. There were, of course, stories that were also told only by one of them. For example, my father mainly discussed the first adoption because that is the adoption that was most influential in the way he viewed the adoption process, whereas my mother focused more specifically on the second adoption because it was the most influential for her understanding of the adoption stories. Although each of my parents had different experiences during the adoption process(es) they both had recollections of each other's experiences because of previous sharing of adoption stories among our family. The following themes regarding adoption and adoptive identity construction emerged from the interview process: openness about the adoption within the adoptive family, the stigmatization attached to the word *adoption*, the need for adopting a child, the contrast of being a parent figure versus being a legal parent, the significance of the child's biologically given name versus the adoptive name, what it means to be a "good" parent (distinctively a good mother), and the adoptive parents and adoptive child's feelings towards the biological family. An analysis of these themes can be found in Chapter 4.

Along with the themes listed above, there was also a metaphorical theme present throughout all adoption narratives told. A metaphor, "compares one thing to another and in doing so provide[s] a vivid picture of how we are experiencing the scene (Tracy, 2013, p. 212). Through the use of metaphorical analysis, I was able to assess my adoptive

identity in a different way than I did with my thematic analysis. The metaphor found throughout all the adoption stories told was the use of hands as a way to describe the experiences of the biological family, the adoptive family, and me, the adoptive child. I used this metaphorical analysis as a way to work through my assessment of my adoptive identity in a new way. Not only did I use this metaphor for written analysis, but it also sparked the idea of using performance as a method of understanding adoptive identities. After using performance as a method of assessing the metaphors of hands, I wrote a post-text to further analyze my adoptive identity in relation to the adoption stories told during the interview process. The metaphorical analysis of the use of hands, the performance sparked from this analysis, and the post-performance analysis can be found in Chapter 5.

#### Performance as a Method

When using autoethnographic methods, the technique of showing versus telling emerges as a way to assess the significance of the work. Adams and Ellis (2012) explain, “showing brings the reader into the scene ... [while] telling is a writing strategy that [provides] readers with some distance from the events described so that they can think about the events more abstractly” (p. 200). Through my written analysis in this thesis, I am able to provide my audience with distance from my experience as an adoptive child, therefore creating room for my readers to think about adoption in a more abstract way. But, that was not enough for me. I wanted to *show* my audience what it is like to live an adoptive identity. I wanted to bring my audience into my experience to help them understand adoption and adoptive identities in a new way through the process of performance.

### The Performance Process

Performance serves as both a process and a product. Elizabeth Bell (2008) explained, “performance [is] something that happens, emerges, and grows in and through a process ... [it] marks identities, bends time, reshapes and adorns the body, and tells stories” (p. 16). I was not only able to assess my adoptive identity through the product performed for the audience, but also through the process of creating the performance. In this way, the embodiment of my adoptive identity in relation to my biological family and adoptive family became the site for my fieldwork. Dwight Conquergood (1991) stated, “Ethnography is [a] distinctive research method, [using] participant-observation fieldwork, [which] privileges the body as a site of knowing ... [it] is an embodied practice; [an] intensely sensuous way of knowing” (p. 180). That is to say, the work of studying culture provides a site for personal embodiment and this embodiment becomes a sensory way of understanding. Conquergood (1991) goes on to explain that performance makes up for what gets lost and muted in texts by being, “a complement, alternative, supplement, and critique of inscribed texts” (p. 191). In the case of autoethnography, performance aids the autoethnographer in the ability to not only tell their stories on paper, but to embody their stories and ultimately be able to share this embodiment with an audience. Conquergood (1991) described this experience as going from a textualization, or mimesis, to a co-experienced time, or kinesis (p. 183). Through the use of embodiment and movement, autoethnographers are able to experience their stories in a new way, as well as share these experiences with an audience who will interpret them in new ways. For me, the process of creating a dance performance became the site where I began to

understand my adoptive identity more fully, and it also served as a way for my audience to connect to adoptive families and children in a new and more emotional way.

### Choreographing Identity

I have always used my ability to dance as a way to share stories with other people and to express my own emotions. Because I used the performance method of dance to assess my adoptive identity in relation to the adoptive stories my parents told, I used choreographed movement to share this analysis with a live audience. Dwight Conquergood (1985) stated, “Often I have been gratified to see the way the performance of a story can pull an audience into a sense of the other in a rhetorically compelling way” (p. 3). I see my choreography as a form of visual rhetoric, in which I share my personal experience of adoption with my audience. Choreography is, “a rich term for performativity: bodies in movement, bodies in social relationships, bodies performing within and against historical codes and conventions are all visible in dance” (Bell, 2008, p. 181). Through the process of choreographing a dance, I was able to assess my adoptive identity as I saw it personally, how it related to the other relationships I hold, and how adoption is seen in the United States. I saw the use of dance as a, “becoming of a ‘self’ through performativity” (Bell, 2008, p. 182). Not only was I assessing my adoptive identity through dance, but I was becoming myself and developing a new adoptive identity through the embodiment of my adoption stories.

### Conclusion

An adoptive child's identity is formed by managing uncertainty through the telling of adoption narratives by the adoptive parents. While the research on adoption narratives is extensive, it fails to look at the creation of shared meaning on the topic through the eyes of the adoptee. My research explores how adoption narratives shape the adoptive child's self-concept through the lens of the child. Therefore, my research questions are:

RQ1: What narratives do adoptive parents tell to an adoptive child?

RQ2: How do these narratives influence the construction of an adoptive child's identity?

Using a multi-methodological approach, I was able to assess the adoption stories told by my parents in multiple ways and therefore gain a deep understanding of the way my adoptive identity has been constructed in relation to the adoption stories told.

Through the process of interactive interviewing and thematic coding, I was able to determine what adoption stories have had the most significance on my adoptive identity as well as the identity of both of my parents. By using metaphorical coding, I was able to determine the use of hands as an important metaphor to analyze these stories in a new way. By establishing this metaphor in relation to a written text, I was then able to construct a dance performance that served as a method of embodiment to experience my adoptive identity in a different way. Using performance as a process and product, I was then able to share my experience of embodying my adoptive identity with a live audience. A lot of research has been conducted on dance as a way of understanding

communities and cultures. I used dance as a way to understand the self and its connection to adoptive family culture and the United States perception of adopted families.

Because I use a multi-methodological approach to understanding which adoption narratives are told by my adoptive parents, and how these narratives influence my adoptive identity, the analysis of these methods is extensive. As such, I have broken my analysis into two chapters. The first chapter uses narrative analysis to assess how each of the themes mentioned during the interactive interviews contributed to the construction of my adoptive identity. The second chapter uses performance methods in combination with autoethnography to determine how the metaphor of hands was present throughout all adoption narratives told, how this written text transitioned into a live performance, and how the performance aided in a post-text analysis of the live dance performance.

## CHAPTER 4

### NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Humans produce and reproduce their identities through communication and storytelling (Jenkins, 2004, p. 176). Through the use of narratives, individuals are able to share real life experiences to form coherent identities in relation to those around them. Family is one of the first institutions that aids in an adoptive child's identity development. Therefore, for adoptees the use of adoption narratives can influence their identities to change as they learn more about the adoption process, their biological family, etc. Through storytelling and family narratives, adoptive children not only construct their identity as an adoptee, but also their family identity, their identity as a peer, and as a friend.

For me, adoption stories and family narratives told by my parents were critical in my identity development. Conversational interviews with my parents revealed stories concerning adoption, the adoption process, and adoptive parenting. Specifically, the following themes emerged:

- Openness about the adoption within the adoptive family
- The stigmatization attached to the word *adoption*
- The need for adopting a child
- The contrast of being a parent figure versus being a legal parent
- The significance of the child's biologically given name versus the adoptive name

- What it means to be a “good” parent (distinctively a good mother) and
- The adoptive parents and adoptive child’s feelings towards the biological family.

#### Openness about Adoption among Adoptive Family

Adoptive parents are usually open and willing to discuss their experience of adoption with the adopted child (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011, p. 188). This was no exception between my adoptive parents and myself. During the interview, my dad would ask, “What else do you want to know,” “What else do you want to talk about?” and “Well, you already know the story.” This demonstrates both his willingness to discuss the different stories of the adoption with me, as well as how common it is for him to share the adoption story with me. Furthermore, my parents’ willingness to participate in this project is evidence of their openness.

When I asked my parents if they remembered the first time they told me I was adopted, neither could pinpoint an exact moment. My father explained, “I don’t remember the first time I told you, because we told you from day one,” Similarly, my mom stated, “Both of us have always talked about you being adopted. We were very open about that.” Because my parents had always been open with me about my adoption, there was no big reveal, nor was learning I was adopted a significant life event. It has always been second nature to all of us, and a topic we were not afraid to discuss with one another.

When I asked my dad if he remembered how he told me as an infant he stated, “We just started calling you our adopted baby. ‘How’s my little adopted baby, Montana?’

... and then you always knew you were adopted, but you didn't know what it meant." He explained that he always called me his adopted baby and that he, "was proud" of having an adopted child. Although it made me happy that he was proud to have me as an adoptive child, I could not help but be aware of the use of the word *adopted* before *baby*. Because I was not just his baby girl, I was his *adopted* baby girl. The distinction between these two is the reason I believe there is still a stigmatization of the word *adopted* in U.S. culture today. Using the marked term of *adopted*, my father created the impression that our family was violating the norm of the nuclear family. According to Victoria DeFrancisco et al. (2014) people use marked terms to, "mark [a] category only when a nondominant person fills it" (p. 112). For example, a common marked term is the use of the word *man* in man slut. The marked term of man in front of the word slut allows a person to associate the term with a male, rather than a female like its common association.

Using the marked term *adopted* aids in the reinforcement of the nuclear family wherein if you are not biologically related to the family then you are labeled as *other*. But, my father was not using the marked term in a negative way. He was using the marked term in a positive light, to show that because I was his *adopted* baby, I was special. Although I knew my father was using the term in a positive way, I could not help but question if other people overheard his use of the term *adopted*. Assessing the risk involved with using marked terms, I knew that although my family used *adopted* with a positive connotation, there were people in the world who did not see an *adopted* baby as special.

My father also explained that although he told me I was adopted at a young age, he did not think I knew what it meant to be adopted. My mother echoed this same opinion explaining, “You always knew. I don’t think you understood it until you were older though.” I agreed with this statement in the interview with my father, explaining, “I don’t think I really understood until mom adopted me the second time.” Because I have been adopted twice, one time being when I was around eleven years old, I had the opportunity to experience the adoption process more than once. I believe because I experienced adoption again, I was able to fully understand what it meant to be adopted. Experiencing adoption twice aided in new opportunities for my parents and I to discuss adoption at an age where I might be able to fully understand it more fully. Because of the eagerness and willingness of my parents to discuss adoption with me, adoption was defined for me in different ways. My family saw adoption as a process to be celebrated, thus being able to discuss my adoption with friends and others became common occurrences.

When I was younger, my dad said, “I remember one time you prancing around singing, ‘I’m adopted! I’m adopted!’ ... It was like nothing because we would talk about it so much.” Even as a young child, I was open with telling people I was an adopted child. As I grew up, my mom explained:

I remember one time I was in the office working [at the dance studio] and you go. ‘Hey mom, I’ve been adopted twice haven’t I?’ and I’m like, ‘Yeah,’ and you go, ‘See, I told you so!’ you were talking to somebody about it.

Not only was I open with sharing that I was adopted, but I was proud to explain that I had been adopted twice. To me, it seemed that being adopted twice meant that people saw me as special. Because I was adopted, someone had *chosen* me to be in their family. Not only

once, but twice! Because my parents had framed adoption as an important part of my identity, my adoptive identity became one that I embraced and celebrated.

My mom also explained that we were open about the adoption not only within our immediate family, but with the rest of our family as well. After the second adoption, my parents were very open about sharing this moment with our whole family. My mom described, “We had an adoption party. We sent out invitations to family and friends at the community building ... Everyone was celebrating the adoption.” Not only were we open with sharing the experience with our family, my parents decided to have a party to celebrate the adoption complete with music, food, and presents. Our party was held at the community building in our hometown where over one hundred people came to congratulate our family on the adoption.

Although my parents have always been open with me about the adoption, there was a time when my father thought about not revealing the adoption to me until I was older. He explained, “I was talking about how we wasn’t going to tell you that you were adopted till you was at least 16 [and] the lady says ‘you shouldn’t do that because they will rebel,’ and it struck me.” I often wonder how my story would be different had he not told me until I was sixteen. Would I have rebelled or resented my parents? Would I still be open about my adoption with other people? I also wondered why my dad wanted to hide it from me in the first place. Did he think I would be ashamed? I suspected that my father’s desire to potentially hide the adoption from me was related to the stigmatizations that are attached to adoption.

### Adoption as a “Dirty” Word

Perceptions of adoption, and adoptive families, have placed a stigmatization on the word *adoption* when describing children and families. Katrina Wegar (2000) explained, “the dominant North American genetic family ideal on community attitudes toward adoption [have placed] negative bias [on] adoption, adoption research, and practice” (p. 363). These negative perceptions come from the belief that biological ties in families are more important for family bonding; a belief that has been reinforced through media portrayals (Miall, 1987; March, 1995). Because my parents and I had been open about adoption since I was a young child, the thought of adoption as a “dirty” word had rarely been discussed. In fact, before the interviews, I had no previous recollection of my parents’ views on the word *adoption*. So, I prompted them to disclose their thoughts on the stigmatization of adoption within U.S. culture.

My father responded to the question, quickly stating, “That kind of stereotypes you from other kids, ‘I’m adopted they’re not ... and you would never do that ... and if you do it’s internally and you just don’t tell anybody.” This explains that he is well tuned to the notion that there is a stereotype against adopted children. Some of these stereotypes stem from not being “blood” related or being able to carry on a family legacy. My father goes on to explain:

I still think there is a stigmatization with adoption, I really do... ‘It’s not my blood, not part of my DNA makeup’ ... I think that it holds a lot of people back. They can’t see past the, ‘you’re not in my family tree,’ ... It doesn’t matter, you’re in my family tree.

My dad addresses a few of the stigmatizations associated with adopted children and explains that these hold no weight for him. He still considers me to be a part of his family tree. He was troubled by the fact that some individuals in his family did not believe this.

My father explained that there was some resistance to adoption among his immediate family when he adopted me. It was hard for him to disclose that this resentment came from his own mother. Apparently my grandmother openly said, "She's not our blood." This phrase has specifically reinforced the notion of the "nuclear family" as something to which all families should aspire, correlating blood relations with a strong, tight knit, and successful family. If someone who is not blood related becomes a part of the family, it is often seen as tainting the family tree. My father, who has ceased communication with his mother for many years, disagrees with this opinion stating, "You don't have to be blood to be family. That's what I think and have since I met you." Although I have been lucky to have been shielded from such sentiments, I know there are many adoptees who are not so fortunate to be accepted into their new family with open arms.

My mother, on the other hand, said she did not believe there is a stigmatization against adopted children in the United States. I was astounded by this. During our interview, she stated, "I don't think there is, is there?" I shook my head yes and she replied, "Really? What is it?" I went on to explain that although I may face less stereotyping than other adoptive children, that it is still prevalent in our culture.

Specifically, for children adopted from outside of the United States, becoming a part of an American family may not only be difficult to adjust to, but also difficult to

explain. There are often remarks made such as, “Why doesn’t your child look like you?” or “Why didn’t you just have your own children?” Overheard by the adoptee, these statements negatively influence an adoptive child’s self-concept. These statements are difficult for the adoptive parents to process as well, especially when they are unable to conceive children biologically, as my parents experienced. This can also be said for domestic adoption where the adopted child is a different ethnicity than their adoptive family. A child’s place in the family may be questioned and the child may be told, “Those aren’t your real parents.” Because I was adopted in the United States, by a family who identifies as the same ethnicity as me, my adoptive mother noticed very little stigmatization around adoption. Being the second mother to adopt me, the circumstances surrounding the adoption were slightly different, and we had already previously worked through the stigmatizations before this adoption took place.

#### “We had no other Choice”: The Need to Adopt a Child

“Why didn’t you have your own children?” is an interesting and sometimes sensitive question for adoptive parents to answer. There are many reasons why a couple may seek to adopt a child, whether it is for medical reasons or because they hope to provide a better life for a child in need. For both my parents, the reason for adopting a child concerned medical issues. My father described, “I was in the navy ... me and my first wife was trying to, uh, have a child and we could never conceive. I guess that’s when we started talking about it.” My father stated that they had tried fertility injections and these failed to work. Shortly after this, my biological mother had approached my dad to consider adopting me.

My adoptive mother's answer to this question was simply, "I couldn't have children." I know this is a topic that has often been difficult for her to discuss. She has often said she did not think she was meant to have children, and that my father and I had come into her life as a way for her to become a mother. My mom has always been open to disclosing that, "There are people that can't have [babies] that should have them." My mother's reason for adoption therefore became more than just medical reasons. She adopted me to become a better mother than the one I previously had. Adoption, in a sense, is reframed from being my mother's "last resort" to being "a blessing" or a way to fulfill her dream of being a good mother.

One side of the story that is rarely considered in the question of, "Why adoption?" is why does *the child* need to be adopted? There are many reasons a child may need to be adopted, but here I will briefly discuss why I needed to be adopted. The reason I needed to be adopted the first time is simple: my biological family could not financially take care of me. My father explained, "She was 18 years old and was getting kicked out of the navy ... She had clue enough to say, 'I know you will give her what I can't. I have 19 dollars in my pocket. I can't even afford a car seat.'" My dad also explained that my biological father already had two children from a previous marriage, and therefore could only be responsible financially for them, stating, "It's not that he didn't want to be responsible for you, but he knew he couldn't be." My dad also said that my biological father knew my adoptive father would be able to take care of me the way he could not.

The reason for my second adoption is one that is hard for me discuss, but deserves recognition. As a baby, while my father was away in the navy, my first adoptive mother

did not take proper care of me. She would leave me alone for long periods of time in my crib, never change my diapers, and would abuse me. My father soon found out through friends what was happening while he was away and immediately filed for divorce. After a couple of years, my father met my mom. She adopted me as a way to make sure I had a mother figure who would take care of me the way a child deserves. During the interview with my mother, she described a time as a child where I disclosed that, “my old mom used to beat me.” My mother then stated, “That was before I adopted you and I probably said, ‘we need to get this taken care of.’” Adoption, in this case, was not only for happiness or fulfillment of the parents of the child, but for the safety of the child.

My parents also described all the things I had been afforded because I was adopted. My father said, “I don’t think you would be as far as you are today... I don’t know that you would have had the opportunities that we gave you,” and my mom explained, “I don’t think you would be in college.” Thus, adoption can be necessary to help a child achieve future success. Because I was adopted not only once, but twice, I have been afforded a life that has included a safe home, a comfortable upbringing, and a promising future full of educational opportunities and success.

#### Parent Figure versus Legal Parent

Adoptive parents not only go through an emotional transition when adopting a child, but also a legal process to become a parent. My father explained this process, stating, “[The biological parents] actually signed the rights away before you was even born.” My dad explained that they technically adopted me when my biological parents were three months into the pregnancy. This legal process seemed to go by quickly

because the adoptive parents petitioned a court to adopt the unborn baby (me)<sup>3</sup> only three months after the biological parents signed their rights away. My father explained, “You were adopted before you even came out of the womb.” This strange statement made me feel uneasy. I began to wonder what the biological parents thought of this quick process and the fact their unborn baby (me) was adopted before it (I) even came into the world.

Not only did my father go through this legal process once, but twice. After my father divorced his first wife and met my mom, they decided, for many reasons, that my mom, Julie, would adopt me and become my legal guardian. My mother stated, “We had to have Stacy’s rights taken<sup>4</sup> away.” What I noted here was the significance of legally taking or signing the rights of a parent away for the sake of the child. My biological parents, for financial reasons, could not take care of a child. Stacy, my father’s first wife, was also not a satisfactory parent<sup>5</sup> for the child (me) and therefore had to have her rights as a parent legally taken away. What this meant for my mother was that she would finally be the legal parent she had longed to be since she met my father and me.

Although the process of legally adopting a child means a lot for any adoptive parents, for my mother it meant a great deal more. It meant a legally binding tie between a mother and a daughter that no one could break. For my mother, she needed this contract to *really* feel like a parent. She explained on the day we went to the courthouse to finalize

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the description of the legal process specifically, my parents referred to “the baby” and “it” when referring to me. I include the first person pronouns as a way for the reader to understand the legal process in reference to myself more fully.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that both of my parents use the language of “taken away” to describe the way one person gains the right and responsibility of being a parent and another person loses these rights. This strong language aids in the argument that what makes a good parent is vital in the way my parents assess their identity as an adoptive parent.

<sup>5</sup> This anecdote is detailed in a later section of this chapter.

her adoption she was, “Very happy and proud. We [even] got all dressed up.” When I asked her why we got dressed up she excitedly stated, “Because we were going to court! To finalize it!” This statement struck me as odd so I followed up the question by saying, “Going to court doesn’t seem like something to be excited about.” She disagreed by explaining, “What? Yes! It was because I was going to legally be your mommy and *my* name was going to be on your birth certificate.” She was excited because the ritual of court made her an *official* parent. This ritual had a lot of significance for my mother and marked an important transition in her identity, as well as my own. She and I would legally be mother and daughter and nobody would be able to say otherwise. The legal process of adoption was her way of saying, “This is my daughter. And I am so proud to legally be her mommy.”

Even though I knew the reason, I prodded her a bit more, asking, “How was legally being a mommy different from just a mother figure?” My mom explained, “It’s just because anytime you go to the doctor or anything something would happen I couldn’t legally do anything. But then after [the adoption], it was like no big deal ... It’s just that paper you have to have.” Because my mom was not legally my mom for a year, she was not able to do the things that a mom should do for her child (me), like filling out paper work at the doctor’s office when I was sick. Because institutions, such as schools and hospitals, rely on the legal definition of family, my mother not only needed legal declaration of guardianship for practicality, but to feel recognized by these institutions as my legitimate mother. My mom explained, “In your eyes we were still mother-daughter,” but for her the legal process of adoption made us mother-daughter in *her* eyes.

What is in a Name?: Biological Name versus Adoptive Name

For my mom, the legal process made her my mother. For my father, it was changing my biologically given name that made him my father. He stated:

You was actually born Montana Lynn ... but [we] went with your middle name [we wanted to give you], Montana Jean Williams. That was your name when you were born. Of course we had to petition a court to change your name.

My new, adoptive name did not begin with Montana Jean. My dad goes on to explain, “We was looking at Megan ... I believe we were looking at Elizabeth too ... I think we were really pushing towards Megan, though. Megan Renae.” Would having the name Megan or Elizabeth have made my adoption process different? I began to wonder if a different name would have completely changed who I was and how I saw myself.

What struck me with my dad’s statement was not that my name was different, but that, “Of course [they] had to,” make my name different. The power of being able to choose my name was significant to my father. When children are born, their parents get to choose their names. I was born Montana Jean Williams, but my dad felt he needed to change my name to Montana Jean Smith, so that I would become a part of his family. The last name of any family is one that individuals usually have high identification with, and my father was no exception. Although my father had not conceived me biologically, he still had the ability to participate in the ritual of naming his child. By having my father’s last name, I officially became *his* child.

The narrative of my name has been one I have remembered since I was young. It stuck with me because I always found my name, Montana, to be quite different from all the other kids at school who had names like Megan, Ashley, Anna, Emma, etc. I always

wondered what it would be like to have a *normal* name. My dad would tell me, “Well your name *would have been* Rose if you had not been adopted. Rose Williams.” I would sit and think, “Rose. A common name. I could have been Rose, but now I have the name Montana and it is so weird!” Eventually, I grew to accept, and even appreciate, the name my father has given me. But, I have always wondered if a different name would have made me a different person with a new identity.

Another narrative that has been shared along with the changing of my name is my dad’s story, *Why I Chose the name Montana*. I have heard this narrative many times, but it is one that has truly had an influence on my identity to this day. My dad explained,

One of my good friends [from the navy] always talked about how beautiful Montana was, the state. He was from Montana. And I got sick of hearing how beautiful it was ... But once I saw you it popped right into my head and that’s when I named you ... They closed the blinds so you couldn’t see, but there was one little broken blind that I looked through and I knew because my eyes went right to you and I said, ‘That is the most beautiful thing I ever seen in my life.’ That’s where Montana came from.

I identify strongly with this story not only because my dad named me after a beautiful part of our country, but because when my dad named me we connected, in a single instance, as father and daughter for the first time. For me, it was in this moment that I became his adopted child and he became my dad. Although I wonder if my identity would have been different had I been given a different name, my dad stated that the name Montana, “Fit. It fit *you*.” The name Montana not only fits who I am as a person, but it also fits our adoptive family and my inception into a new life.

### Do They Have What It Takes?: Being a Good Parent

Other anecdotes that my adoptive parents have told me detail the need for me to be adopted twice. From these narratives one theme emerged: Needing better parents. In both instances, many statements arise as to why my previous parents did not satisfy the requirements it takes to raise a child.

My father was able to explain that the need for my first adoption stemmed from my biological parents not being able to take care of a child financially. As stated earlier, they could not even afford a car seat to transport me, and my biological father felt he had enough responsibility with his two existing children. My adoptive parents believed they could satisfy the requirements of being good parents, so they asked to adopt me. In order for an adoption to take place, my adoptive parents first had to satisfy the legal standards of what is considered a “good parent.” My dad explained, “The baby needed a guardian *ad litem*<sup>6</sup>, a lawyer ... She looked where you were living, where your room was ... she watched you interact with us ... and noted that you were a happy, well-adjusted baby.” My father and his first wife were assessed and deemed fit as parents. On the day of my first adoption my dad recalled:

The lawyer said, ‘take those [ear piercings] out because the judge hates pierced ears on babies. She sees that as a form of abuse.’ Man we ripped those suckers out! Well not ripped them, we took them out of your ears.

In addition to the guardian *ad litem*, a judge needed to approve of my adoptive parents. For the judge, the criterion for a good parent was a lack of piercing on a baby. For the guardian *ad litem*, it was the atmosphere of the living conditions. What was seemingly

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<sup>6</sup> According to ptla.org (2015) a Guardian *ad litem* (GAL) is, “a person the court appoints to investigate what solutions would be in the ‘best interests of a child.’”

absent from this assessment was the way my father's first wife would treat me in the coming years.

Within the stories my mother tells, is the story of why it was necessary for her to become my mom. She explained:

I don't know if you remember this or not and you might not want to talk about it. But we were reading a book one time and you said, 'You are the best mommy I have ever had. My old mommy used to slap me and yell at me when daddy was at work.' I will never forget that because I have never been in anything like that in my entire life.

My responses to my mom after this statement in the interview are brief. A short, "mhmm," "Yeah" and a change of subject to, "So after you adopted me what happened." This narrative, often shared among my adoptive parents and myself, is one I still struggle with today. Here, I find out what it means not only to be a good parent, but distinctively a good mother. A mother that does not abuse her children while her husband is away. A mother that is nurturing, comforting, and supportive. This exact anecdote is the reason I refer to this woman as, "my dad's first wife" and not "my mom." It is because she was not a mom. She did not know how to be a good mother. I have repressed these memories for years and still am not able to grapple with them. All I can say is that I am happy I have been adopted twice and that the second adoption led me to a better mom: a mom who cares and loves me with her whole heart.

My mom stated during the legal process of the second adoption, "I had people write me recommendation letters on me adopting you. Everybody wrote good recommendations on how I would be a good mom." Not only did my adoptive parents have to get the rights of my dad's first wife taken away, but my mom had to have

recommendation letters written to attest to her ability to be a good mom from people who had frequent interactions with her and me together. Along with these letters, my mom explained, “[Another] guardian *ad litem* had to come and she went into your room and you and her went and talked.” I again, had to have a woman come assess the living conditions of the home I would be living in along with the interactions between my, hopefully, new mom. After the guardian *ad litem*’s approval, my mom was able to legally adopt me.

After my final adoption, there were many stories that spoke to my adoptive parents’ ability to satisfy the requirements of being good parents. My dad explained, “We took you to the theatre, musicals, we took you everywhere with us ... I wanted you to experience everything ... You knew you were loved and we gave you everything we could.” For my parents, the ability to take me to events, to experience new things, and to feel love is what makes them good parents. In their eyes, these are the standards they have set for themselves to fulfill. My dad stated, “You’re the only kid I know that has been adopted twice.” The tale of two adoptions is the most unique story I have about myself. Not many individuals can say they have been adopted twice or been given a second chance at having *great* parents. I consider myself lucky to be able to call this story mine.

### The Mythical Biological Family

Out of all the stories that have impacted my adoptive identity, the story of my biological family is the most significant to me. As a child, I remember my father describing my biological parents to me. He recounts these descriptions, stating, “I think

you got his chin, but the rest of [your physical features] are from her ... [and] she was easy going. You have a lot of that.” My father would describe my biological mother more than my father. The only recollection he stated of my biological father is, “Your blood father was one of the smartest guys I knew ... he was a very nice guy.” I believe my dad never had much to say about my biological father because my biological father removed himself from my adoption process.

My dad described his interactions with my biological parents in the Navy and how he had worked with them on the same naval base in Charleston, South Carolina. He also explained that my biological mother would even come have dinner with my adoptive parents in the months leading up to the adoption. All of these interactions between my adoptive father and my biological family made me question if I would ever get the chance to meet them. My father stated, “Once you figured out what adoption was you would ask me several times, ‘am I ever going to be able to find them, my [biological] parents?’ and I was like, ‘well we need to because we need your [medical] history.’” I was astounded with this mythical idea of my biological family. I would ponder what do they look like? Do they know where I am? Have they tried to find me like I want to find them? These questions circulated in my head until finally I had to know more about them. My dad explained, “You asked me at 13 and I told you that you had to wait until you was 16.” My mom attested to this sentiment, stating, “We wanted to wait until you were older till when you could handle it a little better in case you face some rejection or whatever.” Once I turned sixteen, my adoptive parents and I began to look for my biological parents. Although I feared rejection like my mother explained, I still wanted to meet them. My

father ultimately agreed and decided it would be best to try and find them for medical history reasons. The process of finding my biological mother was smooth. My father shared:

I always knew we was going to find her. At the very least just talk to her ... We hired a private detective out of Florida. All I had was her first and last name and where she was stationed at and where she was from.

With this bit of information, we were able to receive her location, email address, and phone number. My father recounts the first phone call he made to my biological mother stating, "I said, 'This is, umm, Bryan Smith. If you remember I adopted Montana,' and it was three days later before she called me back. She said she almost didn't call back."

Reflecting now, I can imagine why she would not want to call back. I imagine she and I shared similar fears about meeting. Although we did not know one another, we shared the experience of an event that has impacted both of our lives in different, but significant ways. I imagine my biological mother was scared to relive that moment, because I was scared to relive it too.

Eventually, my adoptive parents and I decided to visit Indiana, where my biological mother lived. Via phone conversations with my father, my family discovered that I had two biological sisters that I would be meeting too. This is the news that changed my identity dramatically. As a young girl, I dreamed of having siblings, specifically sisters. I was raised an only child surrounded by friends and peers who had very close ties with their siblings. I wanted this bond more than anything. I remember as a child having imagined interactions of playing Barbies® with a sister in my closet. This

was an identity I lacked, but wanted the most. Now, I finally had the chance to add “sister” along with the many other identities I held.

Leading up to my first encounter with my biological family, my parents both recounted how they were nervous and scared. My mom stated, “I was nervous [to meet them]. Sick to my stomach. It was harder on me than anything and I don’t know why ... I guess it was because she was your birth mom and I was scared to death.” For my mom, I can imagine this trip would be a little more intimidating than for my father. My biological mother had mentioned during a phone conversation that my biological father had been killed in a car accident. As such, I would never meet him. For my dad, he had no added pressure of meeting the man that had been my father before him. But for my mom, she would come face to face with the women that gave birth to me.

For my dad, the nervousness came from believing I would like my biological family more than my adoptive family. He explained, “I didn’t want to go honestly. I was scared ... We were scared you would like them better than us. Cause blood is thicker than water.” He was nervous that I would decide to leave my adoptive family to be with my blood relatives. He explained the stereotype of “blood is thicker than water” (often used negatively towards adoptive families) as a way to explain why I would want to leave him and my mom. This story not only reinforces the notion of the nuclear family, but implies that, if given the chance, adoptive children would chose to go back to their biological family. I was shocked to learn my parents had felt this way.

My parents and I did eventually meet my biological family including, as my mom stated, “mom, grandma, grandpa, an uncle, and three girls if I remember right.”<sup>7</sup> I was nervous, scared, excited, and overwhelmed all at the same time. I remember the day vividly, but I remember what happened after we left even more. Sitting in our camper, I was contemplating whether I wanted to go back for a barbeque my biological family had invited me to the next day. My father recounts this narrative best, explaining:

You said one noble thing to me that day ... ‘I don’t want to go back, I know who my parents are. I know who raised me.’ ... That was the most profound thing you ever said to me. It validated what I did.

This day was emotionally taxing on both my parents and myself to say the least. Even to this day, retelling this story brings up many emotions. During my interviews with both of my parents, when we spoke about this narrative they would start tearing up. This story not only contributes to my adoptive identity, but to my parent’s identities as a mother and a father. If I had decided I did like my biological family more, if I did have a strong connection with them, my parent’s identities as mother and father would have ended. But they did not. After meeting my biological family, I realized that I already felt self-fulfilled with the identities I possess. I was already a daughter, niece, and granddaughter to my adoptive family and that, to me, was enough.

### Conclusion

The narratives retold during these interviews highlight how my adoptive identity has been influenced by the adoptive stories my parents have told me. Without openness about my adoption between my parents and me, I would not even know these stories and

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<sup>7</sup> This narrative is unpacked in Chapter 5, “Dancing my Adoptive Identity: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Identity through Embodiment.”

how they influence the way I view myself. They illustrate the importance of speaking openly about adoption in my life and how it has influenced me to see adoption as positive rather than a stigma.

Although the legal process of the adoption impacted my parents' identities more than my own, this process influenced my identity more than I previously thought. The fact that my parents described this legal process as a way for them to become more than a parent figure is testament to how much they wanted and needed to adopt a child. This legal process led to me being raised by great parents who could take care of me financially and emotionally, thus contributing to the many identities I would come to hold in the future, such as student, world traveler, friend, graduate, etc.

With the changing of my name, I became a part of a new family. This family has influenced my identity in significant ways. But, most importantly, it has made me realize that my adoptive identity, overall, has had less of an impact on my life than the other identities I hold. Although I have had contact with my biological family, I have chosen not to take on the identity of "biological daughter, sister, granddaughter, niece," instead opting to exist in my identity as an adoptive child.

Throughout these narratives it also became apparent to me that I felt a need to claim one set of parents as my own. For example, one mother was incapable of being a good parent, and therefore replaced with another who was also incapable, and was then replaced with a great mother capable of being a good parent. I also worried that if I liked my biological parents, it would threaten my adoptive parents' identity as my parents, rather than viewing both sets of parents as my parents. Instead of saying I have three

mothers, I say that I have one. Instead of saying I have two families, I say that I have one. Rather than viewing all the individuals who have at one time been my parents, I had a need to decide, through storytelling, who my authentic parents were.

Sitting in my Qualitative Methods seminar, we were discussing how qualitative research could be presented in creative ways. With a background in dance, I began to imagine how I could present my findings from my interviews with my parents in a creative way. In a random instance, my professor starts talking about hands, and I am instantly aware of the presence of hands throughout my parents' narratives. The use of hands among myself, my adoptive parents, and even my biological parents could be an interesting way to tie all of these narratives together. As I began to reread my transcriptions from my interviews, the use of hands became a highlight of the stories my parents were recounting. With a plethora of statements regarding hand use, I decided to use this information as a way to create a movement piece to detail my experience as an adoptive child and how these stories have influence my identity. A description of this analysis is recounted in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

## DANCING MY ADOPTIVE IDENTITY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY THROUGH EMBODIMENT

In this chapter, I take the reader on my analytic journey of translating interviews into a written text (an autoethnography), a live performance, and then back to written text. Elizabeth Bell (2008) describes this process as enabling pre-texts and enabled post-texts (pp. 72-73). *Pre-texts* are a script or blueprint which, “guide[s] direction for the performer,” while *post-texts* are a, “representation of a performance that [is] written down after the fact” (p. 73). Here, I provide the reader with the pre-text, describe the performance enabled by this text, and end with a text that serves as a representation of my personal experience during this live performance.

Written analysis of my adoptive identity, as well as the adoption stories told by my parents, stemmed from the following themes: the contrast of being a parent figure versus being a legal parent, what it means to be a “good” parent (distinctively a good mother), the significance of the child’s biologically given name versus the adoptive name, openness about the adoption within the adoptive family, the stigmatization of adoption, the adoptive parents and adoptive child’s feelings towards the biological family, and the need for adopting a child. Although all of these stories yield a powerful reason for autoethnographic analysis, I chose to focus on an unanticipated, but symbolic theme discovered throughout all the stories told: the use of hands among the biological parents, the adoptive parents, and the adoptive child.

This metaphor became apparent to me during interviews, as both of my parents used the phrasing, “handing the baby over” “putting the baby up for” and “giving the baby away” as a way to describe the process of the baby going from the biological family to the adoptive family. The metaphor of hands also emerged when my parents described giving or “handing” me a new name (and identity) when I was adopted, as well as the way my biological mother and adoptive parents cared for me with their hands. The use of each individual’s hands within these stories struck me as an important way to analyze how all of these stories have changed my adoptive identity as well as my self-concept.

This chapter builds off the previous analysis by first creating a pre-text in the form of an autoethnography, next composing a live performance from the written autoethnography, and finally transposing the live performance into a post-text. First, I created a written autoethnography detailing the overarching theme of the use of hands that was present in the narratives my parents and I discussed. This analysis is broken into three sections: “Handing Her Over” which details the use of hands among the biological parents, “Helping Hands” which details the use of hands among the adoptive parents, and “Hopeful Hands” which details the my use of hands as the adoptive child. Inspired by this analysis, I created a live performance to embody my story and share it with others. A copy of this dance performance is found at the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhje5\\_FgA3I&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhje5_FgA3I&feature=youtu.be). Next, I adapted the live performance for the page as a post-text, allowing me to discover how my adoptive identity is influenced by the adoption stories told by my parents through embodiment. Last, I offer a reflection of

the process of creating a pre-text, composing a live performance, and transforming this performance back onto the page.

### Handing Her Over: The Pre-text

Throughout the interview process, my adoptive parents openly discussed my biological parents. Although I did not (or choose not to) collect stories from my biological parents for the purposes of this research project, from my adoptive parents' perspectives I was able to piece together the way that hands become signifiers for analyzing the biological parents side of the adoption and, in turn, constructing my adoptive identity.

As an expecting mother, hands cradle the baby bump. Expecting mothers rub the belly and feel for kicks as a way to assess how the baby is progressing. In relation to my identity, it is odd for me to consider that I spent nine months with a woman who nurtured me, felt my kicks and hiccups, but then decided she could no longer care for me. I did not consider myself as similar to my biological mother until I met her for the first time and saw a little of me in her; we had similar eyes, height, hair, and other physical features. As the woman who used her hands to caress the belly I developed in I realized that, although small and less significant than my adoptive parents, she did contribute to the development of my identity by way of physical features.

A financially unstable couple may seek to put their baby up for adoption if they see fit, as my biological parents did. When putting a baby up for adoption, biological parents use their hands as they sign away their rights as a parent. My (adoptive) dad assessed my biological mother's stance on being able to raise a child by stating, "she was

19 years old and had nineteen dollars to her name.” He also stated that after the biological parents chose to “put the baby up”<sup>8</sup> for adoption, they had to “sign their rights away.” After the baby has legally shifted into possession of the adoptive parents, the biological parents must literally hand over the baby. In the case with my father, he explained, “she had the baby and then she had to hand [the baby] over to us.” The act of “handing over” a baby as a biological parent, I imagine, comes with a feeling of emptiness. An empty uterus. An empty heart. And now empty hands. The act of signing your rights as a parent away is pertinent to the development of my identity. Because my biological parents had chose to hand me over to a couple who was better able to care for a child, I was given a new identity. My father explained the significance of this new identity in the way my name changed. He explained, “you were actually born ‘Montana Jean Williams’ when you were born. Of course we had to change [this] during the adoption [legal] process.” My given name became “Montana Jean Smith” and thus I received not only a new name and identity, but also a brand new life in the care of new hands.

My father explained because my biological parents and adoptive father worked together in the navy, my biological mother would, “have dinner with my [adoptive parents] in the months leading up to the birth” At dinner, the use of hands becomes a way to consume food, converse with one another, and calm nerves. With the tension of an adoption in the room, the use of hands as a way to calm nervousness is significant. Even the act of using the hands to consume a meal together as two separate families trying to

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<sup>8</sup> Another interesting metaphor used during the adoption process. The phrasing of, “putting the baby up” strikes me as slightly offensive,. As if to say, “This baby is for sale at an auction and will go to the highest bidder!” I would like to see a change in the language used concerning the adoption process.

give one child a hopeful life is a powerful way to assess how the closeness among two families aided in the adoptive child's identity development. To me, this event served as the starting point that would lead to my biological family and I meeting eighteen years later. The closeness between my adoptive father and my biological parents afforded me the chance to explore my identity as someone's biological relative, whether that be a daughter, granddaughter, or sister. Although these identities are still hard for me to grapple with today, I see these identities as a way for me to be comfortable in my own adoptive identity and to realize my adoptive identity has led me to all the other identities I have constructed thus far in my life.

In reference to the biological father, the use of hands to distance oneself becomes distinguishable. My dad described my biological father by stating, "he just kind of wanted to distance himself" and, "he already had two girls from a previous marriage and knew he couldn't be responsible for you." With two children to care for, my biological father's hands were already too full. He must use his hands to work at a job that only affords him to care for two children, causing him to create distance from himself and his third child. Using his hands, metaphorically, to push himself away from the adoption process, my biological father's choice to distance himself strengthened my relationship with my adoptive father, as he was the only father figure who actively reduced the distance from me. While I have three mother figures in my life, my adoptive father is the only father figure that I have known. As a young child, an adoptee actively looks to the parents as a way to construct their identity in relation to their mother and father. For some reason, I have always been a "daddy's girl" and realized the importance of having a

father in my life after I found out my biological father had passed away in a car accident before I had a chance to meet him. I still consider what my relationship would be like with this man had I been able to meet him when I met the rest of my biological family. My adoptive father is the one who has taught me the importance of my identity as a daughter, a hard-working “Smith,” and a high school and college graduate. As identities I believe to be imperative to my self-concept, I wonder what other identities would have been introduced to me by my biological father, and if these would have been just as important to my adoptive identity.

The summer after my senior year of high school, I met my biological mother for the first time. This experience not only aided in the development of my adoptive identity, but my adoptive family’s identity as a whole. Both of my parents described being nervous and scared before this meeting occurred. I can imagine my biological mother had the same feelings. Based on the personal experience, I can accurately account for the use of hands among the biological mother during this time. First, she used her hand to shake mine; a gesture I felt communicated a distant formality and her hesitancy with regards to meeting me. Next, her arms were actively crossed and hands tucked to the sides, an act commonly associated with being closed off. I wondered if she had regretted her decision to meet me, but realized she needed to fill this identity void for herself as well. Finally, the hands were used to turn the pages in the scrapbooks my adoptive mother had spent years crafting for reference to special memories. These were scrapbooks that detailed a successful and happy life of the adoptive child she gave up all those years ago. As her hands turn the pages, the realization that adoption was indeed the right action is

something I believe crossed my biological mothers mind because it was something that crossed mine.

### Helping Hands

Related to the emptiness of the hands of the biological parents after handing the baby over, is the adoptive parents experience of the emptiness of their hands longing for a child. Both of my parents cited not being able to have children through natural birth as a reason for adopting a child. My father explained, “my first wife was trying to have a child and we could never conceive.” After a “final fertility injection,” the option of adoption was welcomed. My mother had a similar experience before she met my father, stating, “I couldn’t have children.” With empty hands longing for a child that could not come naturally, my father and his first wife were able to fill these hands when my biological parents “handed” me over.

Like the biological parents, my adoptive parents also signed papers that granted them access to full hands for years to come. Throughout the process, I see my identity as a “special child” that my parents often tell me about in their stories. Because I was adopted twice, the process of signing papers makes me “extra special” because more than one person was willing to fill their hands with the responsibility of taking care of me. Although my parents framed this as me being an extra special child in order to make me feel I was in secure hands, I see it as being tossed around from family to family until someone was actually able to take care of me properly, a topic discussed below.

As an established navy man, my father’s callused hands became a marker that distinguished him as “abled” in the ability to care for a child. These same hands, along

with his first wife, were used when eating at the table with my biological mother in the months leading up to the pregnancy and the hands that received me for the first time after I was born. These same hands, though, were used in an unanticipated way to show the closeness between the adoptive father and his soon to be baby girl. My father described an experience in the hospital where, “[the hospital] closed the blinds so you couldn’t see in, but there was one little broken blind that I looked through and I knew then, because it went right to you, and I said, ‘that is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life.’” With the use of his hands to peer through the blinds, my father established what would come to be a very strong sense of identity I have to my father as being his “beautiful,” adopted daughter.

While growing up, my father and mother discussed whether they were going to reveal to me I was adopted. My father explained, “we [weren’t] going to tell you that you were adopted until you [were] at least 16.” In this sense, hands are used to cover the mouth, concealing the truth of adoption. Not only does this aid in developing (or potentially hiding) my adoptive identity, but also in the all too recognized stigmatization of “adoption” as being abnormal. After hearing that my parents were going to wait until I was older to tell me I was adopted, I began to question whether this would have changed the way I saw my adoptive identity. As a slightly rebellious teenager, I believe I would not have coped with this news well in high school. Being from a small, judgmental town, finding out I was adopted as a sixteen year old would have been difficult news to grapple with while negotiating the other identities I was forming. I would have felt as if my parents hiding the adoption from me was because they not only thought I would feel

ashamed for being adopted, but that they felt ashamed for adopting me. However, my parents chose not to conceal the fact that I was adopted from me, instead welcoming this identity, and its stigmatization, with open arms when I was a young child.

My father, in particular, assessed the need of providing the adoptive child with all the things they would not have had they been raised by the biological parents. When asked if being adopted influenced my identity, my father stated the following:

I've looked all the statistics up [and] on average, adopted parents spend more on their children than regular, I mean natural born, parents. I hated going to the theatre, [but] I would take you... I wanted you to experience everything... We took you to musicals, we took you everywhere with us [for] everything we did... So I think you got [better]-rounded that way.

In this narrative, hands can be seen actively giving the adoptive child things, working to provide for the access to provide luxuries, and helping in making a well-rounded child. I firmly agree with my father in assessing how the luxuries he afforded me have influenced my identity development as an adoptive child. Because I was fortunate enough to be adopted into a family that placed value on providing a child with new opportunities, many new identities emerged. These identities include little league tee ball player, a member of the high school track team, dance team captain, world traveler, lover of the fine arts, etc. Although many other individuals can ascribe to these same identities, my adoptive identity single handedly enabled me to perform these identities while growing up within my adoptive family. I do not believe I would have these same identities had I stayed in my biological family.

For my mother, hands were used to assess who makes a good parent. As mentioned previously, my father adopted me with his first wife. Once they got divorced,

the need for a second adoption was evaluated by my mom. She explained, “we were reading a book one time and you said, ‘You are the best mommy I have ever had, my old mommy used to slap me and yell at me when daddy was at work.’” In this instance, hands are used to determine who should raise a child. My father’s first wife used her hands to abuse a child, thus making her ineligible to raise a child properly. Knowing this, my mother used her hands to console me as a child, letting me know she would never use her hands in this way. Instead, my mom used her hands to embrace and to help me, a gesture significant in the way my adoptive identity has been formed. To me, this was a sign that my mom was trying to show all the ways she was treating me properly as a child, rather than being abusive like my father’s first wife. Adoption narratives, in this instance, served as a way to distinguish between what makes a good mother and what makes a bad mother. As I work through what this means for the development of my identity, I am able to apply these values to myself as a mother in the future.

### Hopeful Hands

As an adoptive child, I find value in assessing the way my own hands have played a significant role in my identity development. Aided by the helpful hands of my adoptive parents, my very own hands have been afforded many opportunities. I clinched my father’s finger with my tiny hand as I took my very first steps as a baby, grasped the handle bars as I rode a bike for the first time, held the table as I blew out the candles at every over the top birthday party my parents threw for me, and opened presents every Christmas. These same hands were placed on the shoulders of the boy who took me to my first school dance, homecoming, and prom, embraced friends that influenced my

identity even more than my adoption, and waved goodbye to them as we embarked on new life journeys. I have used my hands to wave hello to new opportunities, such as using a pencil to take notes in my first college class at the University of Northern Iowa, to accept my diploma when I walked across the stage four years later, and to write this very paper as I sit comfortably in the second year of my graduate studies. It is clear to me that my hands, aided by my adoptive parent's hands, have led me to the identities I hold today.

I have also used my hands to ponder the idea of a biological family. After realizing what adoption meant, I used my hands as a way to wipe away tears knowing that a person in the world decided they did not want me. After I decided I should not blame them, I used my hands to scratch my head as I considered meeting my biological family. When meeting my biological family for the first time, I used my hands in the same hesitant, handshake with my biological mother, to embrace biological grandparents, and to place on the shoulders of my two biological sisters as my adoptive mother took a picture of us together. A picture, which shows the striking similarities in physical features, but highlights the difference in our upbringing. Within each of these acts, is the development of an adoptive identity, which includes someone else's daughter, granddaughter, and sister. These identities are some I still grapple with accepting today.

#### Embodying an Adoptive Identity: The Live Performance

In 2014, after my parents' divorce, I created a dance piece detailing my emotions during this time, as well as the loss of the love between my parents. This performance was a very cathartic experience for me, and one I still get chills from when I think about

how I felt while creating and performing it. Because of this experience, I decided creating a movement piece about my adoptive identity would be another way for me to tap into the emotions I had hidden from myself about the topic. I also wanted to develop a more concrete way to explore the use of hands in adoption. Because I have a background in dance and choreography, a live performance became a way for me to explore my analysis more in-depth.

The live performance was set to an instrumental music piece entitled; *Hope*, composed by Paul Cardall. I chose this music for the background to my story because the beat sparked ideas for rhythm and hand placement and because the children's voices echoing throughout resonated with me as an adoptive child. With the help of a peer, I was able to record my voice speaking the text of a shorter version of "Handing Her Over" on top of the instrumental music. I was in awe of how well this text sounded with the audio and thought the feel of the music would go well with how I wanted to create the movements that would flow together. Thus, my performance was staged to my own voice telling my story while the instrumental music helped to control movement and resonate with the audience because of the echoing of children's laughter accompanied by an adoptive child's story.

After the audio for this performance was recorded, I went to the local dance where studio I work to begin developing choreography to help me gain a deeper understanding of my adoptive identity. The dance performance recounted the chronological order of giving the baby up for adoption, how my adoptive parents' hands

have helped me throughout the years, and what I was afforded by being adopted (similar to the order of my pre-text analysis).

The live performance was presented at the University of Northern Iowa's Interpreters Theatre. Performed on December 8, 2015, my dance piece was a part of the production, *An Evening of Text Messages*, which showcases student performance work from the Department of Communication Studies. An analysis and personal reflection of this performance is recounted below.

#### Exposing Identities through Dance: The Post-text

It is no easy feat to represent dance on paper. As such, I offer a detailed account of the very raw and real emotions I felt while creating and performing *Handing Her Over* during rehearsals, as well as in front of a crowd of 90 people at the UNI Interpreters Theatre. I decided early on that I wanted to create this performance as a way to embody the experience of not only my adoptive identity, but also the identity of my biological mother and my adoptive parents. Dance has always been a way for me to express myself and to create knowledge and new ways of seeing. I value the process of gaining knowledge through embodiment and see the process of creating as more beneficial than the actual product.

During rehearsals for this performance, I experienced my adoptive identity in a different way than I had before. Working through the process of creating the movement that would accompany the story via audio recording was a way for me to engage and embody not only my adoptive identity, but also the identity of my adoptive parents and biological mother.

While creating the movement related to my biological mother, I realized my adoptive identity was heavily influenced by what I thought my biological mother had given up when she handed me over to my adoptive parents. I have always struggled with the idea that a mother could give away her child and I wanted to explore why this placed such a heavy burden on my soul. Using my own hands as a reflection of hers, I recounted the events of the adoption as if I was experiencing them through the eyes of my biological mother. I rubbed my own stomach as if I was her, contemplating the idea of giving away her child to a couple who were no more than mere acquaintances. The physical act of rubbing and holding my stomach made me feel for my biological mother in a new way. Before, I felt anger and hate towards a woman who I thought chose to give me away because I was not the child she was hoping for. Now, dancing through her experience, I realized that giving up a child comes with a lot of internal conflict and struggle. A struggle I am sure my biological mother would wish upon no one. I felt her struggle of realizing that the life this couple would give her child was more than she would ever be able to afford. I could not imagine the internal dialogue she must have had with herself and the struggle of realizing she would not make a good parent to this child she thought deserved the best the world could provide.

When I finally reached the moment of embodying the actual handing over of the child to the adoptive parents, I broke down. I had never come to terms with this experience before and finally letting myself feel what she felt and how I felt at the same time is a moment I will never forget. In a dim lit dance studio, I began to cry as I realized how much I had been afforded because my birth mother had decided to give me up for

adoption. I trembled through the motion of bringing my hands out from my chest and to an invisible couple who was about to give this child a chance at a successful life. And as I stood in this studio as an instructor and a Master's student I realized that this was the best choice she ever made for me. My biological mother was the sole reason I was in the position I was at the moment.

As I moved on with working through movement related to my adoptive parents, my emotions became lighter as I realized all the things my parents had helped me with as a young child. One specific moment that I recreated was the moment my father recounted during his interview of the first time he saw his adopted child. Working through movement, I danced in his footsteps as I peered through the blinds at a hospital and saw his "baby girl" for the first time. During rehearsals, I pondered how my dad felt at this exact moment. I imagined it felt like a whirlwind and his heart was beating out of his chest. I tried to recreate this feeling through movement by turning in relevé (up on my toes) as I let my leg follow behind me in a free fall. With my eyes closed and letting my body guide me, I could feel my heart pick up speed and a big smile spread across my face. In that moment, I experienced total happiness. A feeling I imagine my father felt seeing his daughter for the first time.

Other moments from my childhood I recounted included taking my first steps by tip-toeing and sliding to the floor as if I had fallen at the end of the longest stride of steps I had taken as a baby, gripping the handle bars of my first bike and revving up as I accelerate down the gravel road for the first time, and blowing candles out on a birthday cake in front of my family and friends. These movements are all prominent memories

from my childhood and recreating them made me appreciate, more than ever, my parents and all they did to make sure I had a childhood full of opportunities and support. I realized that all the material things and opportunities I was afforded had more of an effect in shaping my identity than being adopted did. Although being adopted made these opportunities possible, my parents were the ones who pushed me to have a successful and rewarding future.

Moving toward the end of the dance piece, I focused on the achievements I have had because of my adoption. Graduating from high school and receiving a college degree are two events in my life I am most proud of. More importantly, they are moments that were possible because of my adoption. Working through the movement for this section of the dance, I began to realize how much I had truly been given as an adoptive child; the chance to be the first person in my family to graduate from college and the first to pursue a Master's degree in hopes of eventually receiving a Ph.D. in Communication Studies. I was a person who had been afforded the chance to make a difference. In this moment, I was thankful that my biological mother had handed me a new life when she handed me over.

The night of the actual performance was one I will not soon forget. I have always enjoyed sharing stories through dance to a group of people and this was no exception. Not many people have conversations about adoptive children, let alone see a dance created to detail the journey of an adoptive child's life. I felt fortunate to be the person that could spark a conversation among a group of college students, friends, and colleagues.

I had been put in the middle of the lineup for the performance *An Evening of Text Messages*, a biannual event in the Communication Studies department showcasing student work from the semester. I was especially nervous for this performance because it was my first time sharing I was adopted with a lot of people I worked with and knew in the department. My thesis advisor and both professors from my thesis committee were present, other professors I had class with, peers from my graduate program, and even some students from the introductory Communication course I taught and had encouraged to come for extra credit. All of these individuals who had a preconceived idea of who I was as a person would realize I was an adopted child and I wondered if this would change the way they saw me and, if so, in what way.

When it was finally my time, I took my place back stage left and waited nervously for the music to begin. My stomach was in knots and I could feel my palms sweating more than usual. The music began. I was rigid and stiff at first, but became more comfortable when I realized I could not see the audience. It made me feel like I was back in rehearsal, by myself exploring my identity in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of what it means to be adopted. My breathing was heavy and I know the audience could hear me over the music. I was not breathing because I tired, but because in this moment I was really immersed in not only who I was as an individual, but who my biological mother and adoptive parents were too. Embodying a character is not usually something I notice during a performance, but because these characters were real people from my life I became highly aware of it. Everyone in the audience was experiencing my biological mother and adoptive parents at the same time I was and I began to wonder how this made

them feel. I wondered whom the audience empathized with, or if they empathized with anyone at all. Did they have a new understanding of what it meant to be an adoptive child? Had I changed their views? Did I make them feel something? I still ponder this today, but hope my story hit home with someone or made him or her think and feel in new ways, just like the performance did for me.

While performing, I was aware of not only who was in the crowd, but also who was missing: my parents. I did not mention to them I was performing at the show that evening, let alone ask them to come. Part of the reason is that they live three hours away and I felt like asking would place a burden on their life. The other part was the fact that they were divorced now and I did not want to cause conflict by having them in the same room. Finally, I did not know how they would react to seeing my adoption story come to life via dance. Would they be okay with the way I portrayed them? Would they be hurt because I included my biological mother? Would they even understand why I wanted to do this? I never told them of this performance and they will not know about it until they read my thesis. And now I question myself, asking why I chose to keep this performance from them. Maybe it is because I am still grappling with what it means to be an adoptive child, and maybe it is because I am realizing it means something different to me than it did before. Before I talk with my parents about it, I want to make sure I know for sure myself.

During the interview process, both of my parents said they believed dancing had a bigger impact on who I am as a person rather than being adopted. At first, this comment seemed odd to me. How could movement make me who I am rather than an actual event

that happened to me? After this performance, I realize their comments are actually true. Although I have always grappled with my adoptive identity, I think it was more about how my identity intersected with my biological mother rather than actually being adopted. Working through this internal conflict via dance allowed me to see this relationship between my biological mother and me in a new way. Because I was able to embody and feel the way she felt, moved, and hurt, I realized her actions were to protect me.

By taking my biological mother's perspective of the adoption process into account, I began to engage in empathy toward her and her decision to put me up for adoption. Empathy is, "the [qualitative] process of feeling with another, of putting oneself in another's shoes" (Pelias & Shaffer, 2007, p. 99). Through the process of embodying my biological mother's decision to put me up for adoption, I began to recognize her point of view, to identify with her emotions through this process by way of convergence, and to incorporate her perspective<sup>9</sup> in the way I now tell my adoption story (Pelias & Shaffer, 2007, pp. 102-106). Rather than having resentment and hard feelings towards her, I appreciate the sacrifice she made in handing me over, and all that I have come to have because of this. She saved me. Through the act of performing my biological mother's perspective of the adoption, I became forever grateful for the way her hands granted me a new life.

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<sup>9</sup> A term Pelias and Shaffer (2007) ironically coin as the *adoption* stage of the empathy process (p. 106).

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Within my adoptive family, many stories concerning adoption, the adoption process, and adoptive parenting, were told to aid in the understanding of my family's adoptive identity, as well as my identity as an adoptive child. Family and adoption narratives were used to discuss the difficult topic of adoption, to teach the value of providing and caring for a child, to establish what it means to be a good parent, and to construct an adoptive family identity for my parents and myself. Through the process of constructing this thesis, I was able to understand more fully the way these stories have aided in the construction of my adoptive identity, but I also understand that my adoptive identity has changed and shifted as a result of this project.

Drawing from interactive interviews, narrative analysis, and autoethnographic writing and performance, I was able to identify the adoption narratives told among my adoptive family and how these stories have contributed to the way my adoptive identity has been constructed and shaped. In this chapter, I illuminate how the process of writing and performing my adoptive identity, adoptive family, and biological family has aided me in addressing the adoption narratives told within my family, and how these stories have shaped, and continue to shape, my adoptive identity. I also discuss how this study has contributed to scholarship in family communication, adoptive family communication, storytelling, identity, and performance studies research as well as highlighted paths for future research. I conclude this chapter by discussing the personal implications of doing a

project of this nature and the ethical implications regarding the embodiment of others through performance methods.

### Answering the Research Questions

Drawing on the narratives described in Chapter 4 as well as the autoethnographic analysis done in Chapter 5, I was able to successfully answer my research questions of what narratives adoptive parents tell to their child and how these narratives influence identity construction for the adoptive child. As stated in Chapter 4, there were many adoption narratives discussed among my adoptive family. Some of these stories are common stories that other adoptive children are likely to have. For example, it is likely many adopted children have stories about how open one's family is with discussing adoption, the stigmatization attached to the word *adoption*, or the need for adopting a child. While these stories were common in my own family's repertoire of stories, other narratives were specific to my adoptive family's experiences, such as my adoptive parents' view of being a parent figure versus a legal parent, the significance of my biologically given name, what it means to be a "good" parent, and my adoptive families feelings towards my biological family. For my family, these stories are unique because of the particular circumstances that surrounded both my adoptions. Each adoptive family and adoptive child has their own experiences that change and shift the way they perceive their adoptive identities.

Viewing identity as socially constructed and intersectional, I was able to assess how my adoptive identity has been created in relation to all the other identities I hold. These identities include adoptive daughter, biological daughter, granddaughter, biological

granddaughter, biological sister, cousin, niece, friend, high school and college graduate, etc. For an adoptee, being adopted is not the sole factor contributing to their identity and self-concept. I see adoption as the starting point; the identity that led to all my other, seemingly more important, identities being established. Because I am adopted, I am able to be a daughter to my adoptive parents, a cousin, niece, and granddaughter to my extended family, a friend to others, a high school and college graduate, and a person with many opportunities ahead.

By exploring adoption from the adoptee's viewpoint, communication scholars are able to distinguish how storytelling among adoptive families aids in the development of the child's adoptive identity. By way of narrative analysis, I discovered many adoption narratives that were, and are, told between my adoptive parents and myself. Some of these stories I have heard time and time again, such as the many names I would have had had I not been adopted, locating my biological family, and the tension when meeting them for the first time. By hearing these repeated stories, I understood how the retelling of these narratives aided in the construction of my adoptive identity. These stories allowed me to consider my identity in relation to my family and to the world around me. Other adoption narratives emerged for the first time during the interactive interviewing process, such as my adoptive parents idea of what constitutes a "good parent" and the many stories my adoptive father shared of his interaction with my biological family before I was conceived. Some adoption narratives were stories I had suppressed. For example, prior to this project I did not recall my first adoptive mother abusing me nor did I remember my feelings towards my biological family and how I never contacted them

again after our initial meeting that summer. By hearing stories I had not heard prior to this project, I was able to collect new memories that contribute to the way my identity is being constructed. This shows that although I may have had a coherent, adoptive identity at the time of hearing those repeated stories, when new stories are introduced my identity changes once again.

By rehearing the stories I had suppressed, such as the story of my first adoptive mother abusing me, I am able to consider why I did not remember these stories. I realize that this story made me feel weak, unappreciated, and like I was a child this person did not want. It makes me see that person as unworthy of being in a parental role, but it also makes me see them as someone that although I do not want to admit it, contributed to my adoptive identity. The story of my first adoptive mother made me realize I was lucky to have a second chance at adoption and that other children are not as lucky.

The story of my second adoption made me realize how difficult being a parent is, and that being adopted is not always enough. Despite the vetting process, there are times adoptive parents are not fit to be parents. I was lucky enough the first time to have at least one person who realized the other parent did not fulfill the requirements of “mother” as best as they could. After this experience, I was privileged enough to get a second mother and I know now that the experience of having a second adoption meant I was lucky enough to get a third chance at having an amazing mom. I believe all of my stories aid in my argument that the idea of what constitutes a family is continuously being redefined. In my instance, I was able to try on multiple parents before I had “the right fit.” The idea of “trying on” family challenges the idea of the stable, nuclear family. Adoption has the

ability to challenge the definition of what constitutes a family because they too include a group of people who are full of love and support for one another.

Through the theme of hands, I was able to assess how all of the stories discussed with my parents have aided in my identity development as an adoptive child.

Specifically, it has made me realize the many identities I was afforded because I had an adoptive identity first, the way this identity works in comparison to my biological identity, my identity in relation to my adoptive parents, and what the identities I will chose to perform in the future, such as being a good mother. By using this analysis as a basis for constructing a dance performance, the choreography process helped me empathize with my biological mother, and to consider how she must have felt when she “handed me over,” how my adoptive parents constructed their identity as parent while I was growing up, and how my adoptive identity developed in relation to both of these viewpoints. Performing this dance piece helped to further my understanding of my experiences as an adoptive child and made me realize that I will continue to have more experiences that will change and shift my identity in the future. That is to say, I discovered the adoption narratives that have aided in my identity construction up to this point and realized I will have many new stories that will change the way this identity develops.

I see my adoptive family identity as fluid, much as I see the identity of any family as fluid. After my parents’ divorce, I began negotiating new relationships and identities yet again. I became a child of divorce and a step-sibling; identities that I am still making sense of to this day. Along with these new identities, I am still negotiating my identity in

relation to my biological family and realize my relationship with this family, and my identity, are far from complete.

### Contributions, Conclusions, and Looking to the Future

My stories are just one account of adoption and the adoptive identity construction process. Although this thesis is just one glimpse into the adoption experience, I believe my stories lend a better understanding of adoption and adoptive identity construction to those who read it. My stories offer the adoptive child's view of adoption, rather than the adoptive process as seen through the lens of the adoptive family. In this section, I highlight contributions made to storytelling, adoption, and identity through performance methods, propose new paths for future research, and offer concluding thoughts.

#### Storytelling

Storytelling is used to persuade, retell existing narratives, and impose categories on their experiences to make sense of the world. Storytelling has helped my parents and I to make sense of our identities. This study shows the risk associated with storytelling from both the teller and listeners' perspectives. This specific project aids in addressing the way family narratives become the main tool families used to make sense of their identity in relation to those in their family, as well as to other families. For adoptive families, adoption narratives are vital in the way the child makes sense of her or his adoptive identity. Through telling my adoption stories, I hope to have shown the way these stories truly do make a difference in the way an adoptive child's identity is constructed. Stories often set cultural standards for how people should act within society, which has contributed to the stigmatization of adoptive families. My study helped to

illuminate that adoptive families are no different from biological families, breaking the stigmatization placed on these families. I hope that future research in storytelling helps rid our society of this stigmatization fully.

### Adoption

By filling the gap in adoption literature, this study has allowed individuals to see the process of adoption from the perspective of the adopted child. Through an autoethnographic analysis, I was able to offer a glimpse into how adoption narratives shape what adoption means to the adoptive child, as well as how adoptive children cope with memories of these stories. Each adoptive family will have different narratives and different experiences that shape how their identity develops. The same can be said for any family that shares stories to make sense of their world. I offer this study as one example of how adoption narratives aid in the construction of adoptive identity development and look forward to reading many more examples of adoptive children sharing their stories through autoethnographic methods.

Many adoptive families experience stigmatization because they do not fit the norm of what is seen as the “nuclear family.” Throughout analyzing the adoption narratives told within my family, I have found that the stories told surrounding adoption work to counter the social stigma placed on adoptive families. Even though it is clear that these negative views exist in U.S. culture, there are ways in which my family tried to counter these stigmatizations such as using the word *adoption* with a positive connotation and by telling narratives that highlight adoption as a special event. Although family communication cannot rid society of the negative connotation associated with adoptive

families, the stories adoptive families tell can be one step in countering these stigmatizations.

### Performance and Identity

Individuals perform multiple identities every day. By studying identity construction through performance methods, this project demonstrates how embodiment can be used as methodology, in this case to make sense of how identity is shaped through lived experience. Through the use of dance, I was able to make sense of not only my adoptive identity, but also my adoptive parents' identity and my biological mother's identity. Although I believe embodiment is a vital turning point in the way we study identity, there are also ethical implications to be addressed. Because I chose to embody an identity that was not my own, I felt guilty for assuming how my biological mother felt at the time she gave me up for adoption. Although I felt guilty, I was also able to empathize with her in a way I had not before. I felt guilt, but I also felt forgiveness. As such, I caution others who chose to study another person's identity through embodiment, as the process is emotionally taxing.

Because this study is only one account of an adoptive child's perspective, future research should consider adding more into the conversation from the adoptee's point of view, account for different types of adoption (domestic versus international and public versus private), and adoption occurring more than once in the same family as well as to the same child. A variety of scholars from fields ranging from communication to psychology to sociology should consider using autoethnography as a method to gain knowledge from the adoptee's point of view so as to understand adoption in contrast to

the stigmatization that has been placed on it through dominant cultural narratives. Last, I offer a reflection of adoption through performance; a method I feel adds a unique way to understand adoption narratives and identity construction. Further research should seek to expand on how methods of performance such as movement, image theatre, and the Mystory can aid in the understanding of adoption narratives and identity construction through embodiment.

Through the process of self-reflexivity I was able to expand the knowledge base of adoptive families and adoptive identities from the child's point of view. The process of adoption is messier than the general public understands and there are some instances where adoption can occur more than once for the same child. This reflection helped to illuminate that adoptive families, like all families, are not as stable as people are led to believe. Through this study, individuals are able to understand that adoptive families (and all families) are complex, messy, constantly changing, and aid in identity construction among individuals within the family.

#### Personal Implications

This project began in my first semester of my graduate studies. In our Introduction to Graduate Studies course we were asked to analyze past theses as a way to help us decide what emphasis and methods we might be interested in exploring. I was struck by several theses that used autoethnographic and performance methods as a way of conducting scholarship in the field of communication studies. Paired with my love for dance and storytelling, I decided to explore the path of autoethnography and performance. After a two year process, I am unbelievably pleased with the way these

methods of understanding communication scholarship have helped me to understand myself in new ways, as well as the communication that occurs among adoptive families. I was surprised to find, though, that along with using these methods came a very emotionally taxing journey of discovering how my identity and family identity are still being shaped by new experiences.

This thesis has allowed me to explore my own communication with my adoptive parents and to gain an understanding of the many, and often complex, ways that adoptive families make sense of their identity in contrast to the “nuclear family.” It has also helped me, personally, make sense of my adoptive identity and some of the identities I may have been suppressing, such as biological sister, daughter, and granddaughter. After the summer of my senior year of high school, my parents and I planned a trip to meet my biological family for the first time. Before this point, I had seen my adoptive identity as attached to one family, but after this visit I realized my identity was much more complex. Not only was I a daughter, granddaughter, and niece to those individuals in my adoptive family, but I was also a daughter, granddaughter, and niece to my biological family I met that day. I had also gained another identity of being a sister, an identity I had always wanted. But now that I had it, I was scared and I did not know how my biological family would react to meeting me. It was in this instant that I realized my adoptive identity shapes my other identities. Because I was adopted, I was a family member to a very specific group of people I may have never met had I not been given up for adoption. I would have different friends, would have attended different schools, and I may not have been writing this very thesis. Although I am grateful for the identities I have been

afforded because I was adopted, I still wonder what it would be like to try on my biological identities. I believe this project has contributed to the chance for me to explore what it means to have these identities in the future.

Doing a project of this nature can place a heavy, emotional burden on those involved in the study. Before I began this project, I wondered if I was ready to take on a study that would bring back a lot of memories and emotions. I told myself I was ready, and I believe I was, but that does not mean it was still not difficult at times. During my interactive interviews with my parents, there were times when I was hearing a story for the first time or hearing a story that I had suppressed from my memory. Both my parents and I shed tears as we relived the adoption process and the experience of meeting my biological family for the first time. This is not to say I regret doing this study, because I believe this project is important not only for myself, but for other adoptive children. I do want to add a word of caution for those who are thinking of doing an autoethnographic study. It will not be easy. It will ask you to relive experiences you have not thought of in years and sometimes it will bring you to tears. But, it will be worth it.

### Conclusion

As I come to terms with the process of this project, I realize my time in dealing with my adoptive identity and the experiences that come with it are far from over. Recently, I attended a conference in Austin, Texas to present on a panel for the first time. Lost in the whirlwind of academia, my adoptive identity still crept in. I get a text from my father regarding my biological mother, Stacey. He wrote, "I found Stacey on Facebook ... I sent a friend request." Ironically, as I put the finishing touches on this

project, my father found my biological mother on Facebook. “Is this really happening,” I think to myself. Sitting in my thesis advisor’s office, we try to decide how I should conclude my findings of this project. Distractedly thinking about my father’s message I say, “You know what is crazy? My dad texted me when we were in Austin saying he found my biological mother on Facebook.” I tell Danielle I am torn between adding my biological mother as a friend on Facebook, and Danielle assures me I do not have to decide right now. “I feel guilty, you know? I have not talked with her or my sisters since we visited them six years ago. What do I do? Add her and then say, ‘Oh hey. Sorry I have not talked to you in six years, but how is it going?’” In that instance, I realize that I am still trying to address how my adoptive identity is changing because of the adoption narratives I continue to experience. I have a new narrative to try and make sense of, and I realize a simple Facebook friend request could alter my adoptive identity yet again.

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APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM  
**UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA**  
**HUMAN PARTICIPANT REVIEW**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

Project Title: How Adoption Narratives Shape an Adoptive Identity: An Autoethnographic Account

Name of Investigator(s): Montana Jean Smith, graduate student

**Invitation to Participate:** You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The university requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. Participation in this project is completely voluntary.

**Nature and Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to assess what adoption narratives are told to an adoptee during their adolescence. The interviews used will help to determine how the adoptee's identity has been impacted by these adoption narratives.

**Explanation of Procedures:** In an interview, you will be asked a series of questions related to the adoption narratives told throughout the adoptee's childhood. Questions will arise from the conversation taking place between the interviewer and yourself. The interviewer may also collect artifacts relating to the adoption and refer to these during the interview process.

**Discomfort and Risks:** Risks to participation are minimal. You may find risk or discomforts from participating in this study related to emotional or psychological discomfort, stress, embarrassment, and time inconvenience.

**Benefits and Compensation:** There will be no cost or monetary benefit to you if you participate in this study. Personal benefits you may get from participating in this study include reflection, personal growth, increased bond with family members, and increased knowledge of adoption narratives.

**Confidentiality:** Because of your association with the researcher, your identity will be obvious to those who read the study. To minimize any risks related to this, you will be asked to review the information in the study before submission is finalized for public viewing.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawal of your consent or discontinued participation in the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits or rights to which you might otherwise be entitled.

**Questions:** If you have any questions regarding the nature of this study or desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study in general, you may contact Montana Jean Smith at 515-669-7574, Faculty Advisor Dr. Danielle Dick McGeough at 319-273-6985, or the office of the IRB Administrator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, for answers to questions about the rights of research participants and the participants review process.

**Agreement:**

**I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed name of participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of investigator)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of instructor/advisor)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## APPENDIX B

### RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

As a part of my graduate work at the University of Northern Iowa, I am doing a research project that intends to collect adoption narratives present in an adoptive family. I will be interviewing both my adoptive mother and father to collect these narratives and then using this information to analyze my own view of these narratives and how they have influenced my adoptive identity. I would like you to be a part of this process by allowing me to interview you. It is very important for you to know that your participation in this project is completely voluntary and the success of my project does not require you to participate if you do not want to. The interviews will be audio recorded and kept on file until May 2016. If you have photographs or artifacts that would be helpful to this project that you would be willing to share, that would also be appreciated. If any information arises through the interviews that you do not wish to disclose, you are not obligated to answer. If there is any information that you disclose that you do not wish to be a part of this study, you may request to have me remove it from the study. If you choose to participate in this study, I will have you read through the final draft before any publications are made to make sure your stories are accurately portrayed. Your real names will be used in this study unless this makes you uncomfortable. If it does, let me know and your name can and will be changed. Once again, your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all without any negative result. If you would like to

participate in my project, please carefully read through and sign the informed consent provided. Thank you for your consideration.

## APPENDIX C

## SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When did you decide you wanted to adopt a child?
2. What were the events leading up to you finalizing the adoption?
3. What do you remember telling me about the adoption?
4. How do you believe being an adopted child has influenced who I am or the way I see myself?
5. Can you describe how your life would be if you did not pursue adoption?

APPENDIX D  
IRB APPROVAL

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs



Human Participants Review Committee  
UNI Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
213 East Bartlett

Montana Smith  
9025 University Avenue, Apt. 4  
Cedar Falls, IA

Re: IRB 16-0038

Dear Montana:

Your study, **How Adoption Narratives Shape An Adoptive Identity: An Autoethnographic Account** has been approved by the UNI IRB effective **9/29/15**, following a review of your application performed by IRB member, **Helen Harton Ph.D.** You may begin enrolling subjects in your project.

**Modifications:** If you need to make changes to your study procedures, samples, or sites, you must request approval of the change before continuing with the research. Changes requiring approval are those that may increase the social, emotional, physical, legal, or privacy risks to participants. Your request may be sent to me by mail or email.

**Problems and Adverse Events:** If during the study you observe any problems or events pertaining to participation in your study that are *serious* and *unexpected* (e.g., you did not include them in your IRB materials as a potential risk), you must report this to the IRB within 10 days. Examples include unexpected injury or emotional stress, missteps in the consent documentation, or breaches of confidentiality. You may send this information to me by mail or email.

**Expiration Date:** Your study is **Exempt from continuing review**.

**Closure:** Your study is Exempt from standard reporting and you do not need to submit a Project Closure form.

**Forms:** Information and all IRB forms are available online at <http://www.uni.edu/rsp/protection-human-research-participants>.

If you have any questions about Human Participants Review policies or procedures, please contact me at 319.273.6148 or at [anita.gordon@uni.edu](mailto:anita.gordon@uni.edu). Best wishes for your project success.

Sincerely,

  
Anita M. Gordon, Ph.D.  
IRB Administrator

Cc Danielle McGeough, Faculty Advisor