

Mystery, Mastery, and Meaning-Making in Postsecondary Education by
Adoptees and Former Foster Youth

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of being adopted and in foster care for students in postsecondary education. It is a qualitative study conducted through interviews and comparing and contrasting those interviews. Results varied, but certain themes emerged, including a need to cope with lack of information (what will be called mystery), and to integrate self and profession (what will be called mastery), as well as individualized ways of this integration (meaning-making). It became apparent through this study that there are identity and cultural hurdles that students face as they transition to adulthood while in college. The theory of Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 1999), which results from separation from biological family, is combined with the ideas of meaning-making and learning theories and used as a framework to understand the findings of the study. Recommendations are suggested for meeting the unique needs of adopted and foster care youth who are transitioning to adulthood while in college, and are based on the literature and findings from interviews. The topic of separation from biological family and the resulting ambiguous loss is an important topic in postsecondary education because there is little research at this level of the impact of questioning one's biological background, with addressing issues of identity, belonging, and power as students move through postsecondary education.

Key terms/phrases

adoption, aged-out, agency, ambiguous loss, biological/birth family, creativity, foster care/youth, innovation, integrative learning,

interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary, learning styles, mastery/control, meaning-making, multiple intelligences, narratives, nature and nurture, self-authorship, self-efficacy, seven core issues

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Role of Researcher

My work here is influenced and motivated by my personal identity as an adoptee, and my academic and professional experiences, specifically as contexts for meaning-making and integrative learning. The background for this study was developed over the course of my Master's degree in Multicultural Teaching and Learning and minor in Educational Psychology. In my classes, as well as in a practicum and an internship, I had the opportunity to explore creative, innovative and integrative learning, and the theory of self-authorship. I have discovered that my academic and personal learning processes are continuous and iterative, in that my work here is part of my own meaning-making process. This motivated me throughout this project to learn more about how people strive to reach their full potential, as they seek to understand their own mysteries and make meaning.

Introduction

Based on the last U.S. census data from 2011, and according to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), there were approximately 400,540 youth in foster care in the United States. In Minnesota, alone, there were almost 5,000 foster youth at that time. As far as adoption statistics, the Donaldson Adoption Institute (2011), stated that one in 35 children in the U.S. was adopted at that time.

According to Grotevant and Von Korff (2011), “Four distinctive types of adoption predominate in North America and Western Europe today: domestic adoption of infants, domestic adoption from the public child welfare system, international adoption, and kinship adoption....What these children have in common is that the rights and responsibilities of their birth parents were legally terminated and transferred to others who will raise them. But adopted persons bring with them different amounts of knowledge about their birth families, as well as widely divergent experiences that serve as building blocks as they go about constructing their adoptive identities” (p. 586-587).

Historically, most adoptions have been closed adoptions, where children do not have access to birth records. This was, in part, to protect family identities; and according to Grotevant (2008), in order to not confuse the child about their identity and history, and not to influence adoptive parents' expectations about the child. This was generally done by withholding information about a child's biological parents; any biological birth or health history forms were sealed.

However, in recent years, “interest in biological connection and kinship were stimulated by medical discoveries about the importance of genetics in health promotion and by media attention to kinship...” (p. 2). This speaks to modern developments in adoption, where contact is often direct sharing of information, as in open adoptions, or indirect and mediated. Many international adoptions still remain closed, however.

For an adoptee or former foster child, college can act as a catalyst, prompting a need to fill in identity gaps. This is a particularly significant time for those adopted internationally, specifically internationally and transracially, as they deal with separate ethnicity identity issues; and for students who were adopted later in life, and thus having spent more time in foster care, as they deal with more trauma. Students who age out of foster care, and were never adopted into a permanent home, also deal with socio-economic factors in college. For this study, I was interested in exploring the postsecondary experiences of those placed for adoption or who otherwise grew up in environments away from their biological parents. I wanted to know if adoption identity development can be facilitated despite a lack of information on genetic and heritage background, and the effects this can have on personal, academic, and career development.

Literature Review

Mystery

Growing up not knowing about biological family, there is a sense of mystery or ambiguity that develops for an adoptee or foster youth. This is due to knowing little or incomplete information about genetic and cultural background, and can relate to health, academics and career, as well as a sense of who they are. Therefore, the literature review can be divided into sections on the effects of this mystery, or ambiguity on adoptees and foster youth, as far as it affects socio-psychological and cultural identity, and developing a sense of mastery over this lack of information through a meaning-making process.

The majority of literature on adoption and separation from biological family has existed in the areas of Social Work, Family Social Science, and Psychology. Subtopics of adoption pertain to law, policy, and practice. In Social Science it is often specific to adoption legislation and policy, foster care, transracial/transcultural adoption, and adoptive identity. In Psychology and therapy, the majority of literature focuses on child and family therapy, trauma and attachment, and ways to think of the birth family or biological family. Both Social Science and Psychology have some research on the topics of adoption communication and openness in families talking about adoption. However, in all of these fields, there has been little exploration in the study of adoptees and foster youth in academic environments. Specifically, there have been a few

studies on adoption and K-12 education (Donalds, 2012), but at the time of this study there is little research or literature relating to postsecondary education.

In this literature review, I will discuss socio-psychological issues of those placed for adoption or who otherwise grew up in environments away from their biological parents. Then I will discuss this as pertaining to culture and international adoptions. Finally, I will discuss literature about the effects of being in foster care.

The socio-psychological issues.

The theory of Ambiguous Loss was first developed by Dr. Pauline Boss in the 1970s, after she studied effects on loved ones who were separated during wartimes, specifically missing-in-action soldiers. Boss says that in the case of adoption, biological family is physically absent, but psychologically present. It was once thought that a child could not feel loss over a separation from biological family they had never known; however, more recent research has shown that adopted youth may in fact grieve over the loss (Grotevant, et al., 2000).

According to Verrier (1993), there is trauma that exists simply because the child is aware enough to remember being separated from the biological mother, no matter if it were at birth or later. If the separation is soon after birth, the connection that had existed for nine months is suddenly gone, creating a sense of abandonment, a lack of bonding that usually occurs shortly after birth; and affecting the sense of self. The effects can manifest in psychological and behavioral difficulties later in life. Related to Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 1999), and

according to Silverstein and Kaplan (1982), there are seven core issues when looking at the topic of adoption: loss, grief, guilt, rejection, intimacy, identity, and mastery/control. The issues tend to be present in personal and professional behavior, and the emotions that surround the behavior. The issue of mastery/control is also used as a coping method (Boss, 2006), in that a person may believe that a life choice was made for them, and not by them, and therefore they lack control, or mastery over a part of their life. This is in addition to experiencing the effects of the loss of biological family. The separation from, or loss of biological family, results in the seven core issues and leads to the ambiguity felt in lack of information about genetic and cultural background.

Statistically, adoptees are more likely to seek or be referred to counseling or therapy than those who were not adopted. Grotevant (1997) states, "Adopted children are referred for psychological treatment two to five times as frequently as their non-adopted peers. This finding has been replicated in countries as widely dispersed as Great Britain, Israel, Poland, Sweden, and the United States" (p. 13). This can be due to the experience of Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 1999), and the potential trauma and seven core issues (Silverstein, et al., 1982), resulting from the separation or loss.

Identity for adoptees does not come from biology and known cultural heritage, but is a conglomerate, as well as a lack of biological and cultural mirrors, or potentially not looking or acting like anyone they know. According to Grotevant (2008), "Adopted youth are confronted with the challenge of making

meaning of their beginnings, which may be unknown, unclear, or otherwise ambiguous” (p. 18).

Transracial and transnational.

Grotevant, referencing Wegar, explains that adoptive identity is difficult to understand without considering the societal attitudes towards kinship and bloodlines. It has been argued that Western society bases family ties primarily on blood relations. This puts adopted children in a difficult position as they consider their own identity within familial relations. Since their family experience has been rooted in “nurture” rather than “nature,” adoptees can feel marginalized within the dominant culture (Grotevant, 2000). He explains that identity development can also refer to how one sees him or herself fitting into a family and a community context. Adoptees often feel different due to knowing their genetics and ethnicity are different than their adoptive family. However, in the case of transracial adoption, appearances are more obviously different, and how an adoptee is treated by a community or society may affect their identity development. As stated, societal constructs also involve assuming or placing emphasis on blood ties. This can refer to domestic, international and transracial adoptions, in that differences and similarities can be real, or perceived, and on a physical, or behavioral level. “Adoption often becomes “visible” within families because of real or perceived differences in physical appearance, abilities, or personality. Within biologically related families, differences are frequently attributed to heredity; if there is no one in the immediate family whom the child resembles, the

similarity may be attributed to an extended family member - "Oh, your temperament is just like your Uncle Harry's." In adoptive families, differences are obviously not due to heredity from the adoptive parents or extended family. When nothing is known about the child's biological parents, attributions are sometimes still made to hypothesized characteristics of biological family members - "Your mother must have had hair just like that" (Grotevant, 2000, p. 383).

According to Hoffman & Vallejo Peña (2013), between 1971 and 2001, a period pertinent to participants in this study, U.S. citizens adopted 265,677 children from other countries, of whom 156,491 (59%) were from Asia, making Asians the largest population of adopted children by U.S. citizens (Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). They cite that the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2002) estimated that Americans adopted more than 110,000 children from South Korea alone between 1955 and 2001, and further, that The U.S. State Department Bureau of Consular Affairs (2011) reported that 18,605 South Koreans were adopted between 1999 and 2011. This means, they explain, that based on these statistics and timelines, it is probable that many Asian – specifically, Korean American adoptees – have attended, are attending, or will soon attend colleges and universities nationwide (p. 153).

According to Grotevant, et al., (2000):

Adopting children across racial or national lines makes families bicultural or multicultural. The racial and cultural mix of the family's community will determine whether their status is a source of visible difference or not...Children who are adopted internationally or transracially are, almost by definition, different in physical appearance from the members of their adoptive families" (p. 384).

Britner (2008) further explains that many of the same practices that exist for transracial adoptions coming out of foster care exist for international adoptions – there is an emphasis on identity issues that are likely to persist and intensify at various developmental stages, long past the time of adoption. The opportunity for resilience is still high, if measures focus on long-term development.

Britner (2008) stated:

Taken together with other studies across a number of countries, the emerging research paints a picture of resilience, even in the face of extreme early adversity. These results underscore the importance of creating risk/resiliency models to predict long-term developmental outcomes for children adopted internationally and suggest that future research should be designed to identify other potential risk and protective factors. (p. 8)

Older adoptees & foster care.

A rapidly growing number of youth awaiting adoption have been in the foster care system because they were abused or neglected by their parents. These youth are frequently categorized as "special needs" because of their age, because they are part of a sibling group that needs an adoptive home, or other factors that may affect their chance of being adopted quickly after arriving in foster care. Many of these children have spent a number of years with their biological parents or other biological family members and may still remember or maintain emotional connections to them (Grotevant, et. al, 2000).

According to Britner (2008), there has been significant research regarding institutionalization and behavioral outcomes, relating specifically to age at the time of adoption. Looking at research about institutionalization and behavioral outcomes, analyses revealed that after 24 months, children had significantly more disturbances in attachment at the time of adoption compared to children adopted before.

Britner (2008) stated:

Correlations revealed that severity of deprivation was negatively and significantly correlated with IQ scores and IQ scores were significantly predicted by a combination of three risk and resiliency factors: severe deprivation, age at time of adoption, and the socio-economic status of adoptive parents. (p.8)

In a study comparing Korean and Swedish adoptees in Sweden (Dalen, M., Hjern, A., Lindblad, F., Odenstad, A., Ramussen, F., & Vinnerljung, B. (2008), (the Korean adoptees being internationally adopted, and the Swedish adoptees being domestic adoptees), cognitive development was studied for both groups. Study groups were created for men entering the Swedish military and standardized tests were taken including spatial, verbal, and logical. The findings were that domestic adoptees in Sweden had less cognitive development. Both pre and post-adoptive factors were responsible for these developmental delays. It is suggested that because Korea has high standards for pre-adoption conditions that this may enhance cognitive abilities.

A meta-analysis carried out by van IJzendoorn et, al. and referenced by Dalen, et al., (2008) conclude that there is a gap between the international

adoptees' cognitive competence and their school performance, meaning that the adoptees perform on a lower level than their cognitive potential would indicate, an "adoption decalage."

In an article Boss (2008) wrote on failed adoptions, she quotes a parent, stating:

When policy refers to older adoptions, we think they mean teenagers. But "older" also means ages as young as three or four when the damage may already be done. The longer a child is subjected to adversity the more likely there will be Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). (p. 7)

Looking further into emotional and behavioral adjustment for adolescents, Benson, et al., (1996) found that statistically, the later a child is adopted, the more behavioral problems there can be. They go on to explain that adoption of a child between the age of 2-10 reveals the same levels of psychological adjustment, and that most failed adoptions occur during adolescence (age 11-12).

Benson et al., referencing Verhulst et al. (1996) further explain that older children may have been subjected to early deprivation such as nutritional deficiency, lack of adequate stimulation, lack of affection, and lack of opportunities to form positive or secure attachments to others. All these factors may combine to create increased difficulties for the older child adoptee. They state:

While our data show increasingly negative effects if a child is adopted above the age of two, they further indicate that waiting until after a child is 10 can result in even more deleterious effects...Older children bring with them a history of past experiences and may be less malleable and experience greater difficulty in adapting to new situations. They may also

face a dilemma between a growing need for independence and the attachment required for integrating into a new adoptive family. This latter reason would be especially relevant for adolescent adoptees, for whom separation from parents is an important developmental task. Finally, older children may be more psychologically linked to their families of origin and may view adoption as a disloyal act. (p. 111)

According to the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26 (2011), for most young people, the transition to adulthood is a gradual process, many continue to receive financial and emotional support from their parents or other family members well past age 18. This is in stark contrast to the situation confronting youth in foster care.

According to Courtney, et al. (2011):

Too old for the child welfare system, but often not yet prepared to live as independent young adults, the approximately 28,000 foster youth who “age out” of care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011) are expected to make it on their own long before the vast majority of their peers. (p. 1)

Due to this lack of basic stability, those who age-out of the foster care system may not have economic means, or the social and cultural capital to pursue Higher Education. Ruddy and Unger (2008), agree that disruptions in living environments for foster youth and social support systems that change, act as factors which lead to risks like: poor academic attainment, social maladjustment, emotional distress, unemployment, and difficulty establishing independent living. In the Ruddy and Unger study, aged-out youth were interviewed and displayed many needs that match these risks, as well as those characterized by adoptees and foster children. The most frequent desired characteristic of support providers was to *be there*, followed by being able to

trust, being accepted, a sense of belonging, and having a positive sense of self.

There is a great need to not only provide foster care services, but also have them be reliable and sustainable. There is also a desire from those interviewed to focus on individuality and not using groupings like the labels “foster children” or “aged-out.”

As seen above, many of the issues experienced are the same for adoptees and foster youth, and those never permanently placed in a home, or who aged-out of foster care. This is because both populations were separated from their biological families and experienced some trauma (Boss, 1999). Most adoptees and foster children lived in foster care at a point in their life. It is possible that some deprivation and trauma can exist before two years of age (Verrier, 1993). In some cases, both those permanently placed in homes, and those who age-out of foster care, were separated from biological parents without the biological parents voluntarily relinquishing their rights. As stated, this can be due to neglect or domestic violence. The issues of trauma and attachment are apparent for both populations, but more so for those removed from biological parents after age two. The issues of attachment are the same for children adopted after age two, and for those who remain in foster care and age-out when turning 18 (Courtney et. al, 2011).

Though many of the socio-psychological issues are the same for youth placed in permanent homes and those who were not, a significant difference is that those who were not adopted often have a lower chance of finishing high

school and often do not obtain postsecondary education, due to having to live on their own and support themselves after age 18 (Courtney, et. al, 2011).

Mastery & meaning-making

Grotevant and Von Korff (2011) explain that:

The process of meaning-making is evident in adoptive identity exploration, as adopted persons reflect on the meaning and impact of adoption on their lives, take active steps to gather information that will enhance that understanding, and construct a meaningful narrative. Thus, exploration is the “work” of identity. A number of psychological and contextual factors influence adolescents’ propensity to explore, while cognitive and affective outcomes of exploration also influence future orientation toward exploration and help to reshape one’s identity narrative. Meaning-making involves constructing a narrative about oneself that attempts to answer many questions. (p. 18)

Boss (2006) refers to meaning-making in relation to ambiguous loss, stating, “Human experience is meaningful when it is comprehensible to those who are having the experience. Thus, meaning is both personal and phenomenological” (p. 74). In postsecondary education, forming an integrative personal, academic, and professional identity is critical for development. (Evans, et. al., 2010). However, as seen above, adoptive identity can be a more complex process for students, especially when they are at university-level and are more independent.

Relating this to postsecondary education, the theory of self-authorship was conceptualized by Kegan in 1982, and later redefined for college students by Baxter Magolda. Baxter-Magolda (Evans, et al., 2010) explains self-authorship as “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations” and

answering the three following questions: How do I know? Who Am I? How do I want to construct relationships with others?" (p. 184).

Meaning-making through integrative learning.

In speaking about attachment issues related to ambiguous loss, Boss (2006) says the goal is a perceptual shift in the relationship -- one that accepts the ambiguity and uncertainty of absence and presence. This can ease trauma produced by the loss. There are many ways to do this, but related to student development, Boss says of the use of the arts -- "John Lennon's "Mother" musically encapsulates the poignant example of a child whose mother disappeared from his life, came back, and later died" (p. 176).

Art and identity, as well as the power of art in healing has been discussed more recently in the field of mental health. According to Bertram (2007), several mental health patients listed art as being: distraction, achievement, and expression for art and healing. It is interesting to also note that more recently, art therapy is not always having the therapist in control, but putting the patients in an agency role. Bertram states:

... the role of art therapy has been challenged and there is an emerging literature that advocates a move away from using art as therapy, towards a more democratic process that places the healing significance of creativity away from the therapist and locates the therapeutic efficacy of creative expression within the individual. (p. 784)

This quote serves as a way to express how art can be used both as therapy and as developing agency and self-efficacy. Though not all art therapy is related to adoption issues, it has been shown to facilitate identity development

and tie back to the core issue of adoption of mastery, which refers to having mastery over one's own person, decisions, and environment.

Forms of expression, specifically narratives concerning identity, are common in adoptive identity research, as mentioned above. For example, digital stories can be used as an example of what a personal narrative story can look like, because they are more commonly used in undergraduate classrooms. In a digital story that is specific to adoption, one student tells her story of being adopted from South Korea as an infant (Mattson, 2014). In her narrative she speaks of an artifact — her baby blanket —, which the story was built around. This digital story is part of a project in which the Immigration History Research Center is collecting immigrant stories as records, a modern alternative record to written records of immigration.

Artistic and innovative forms of expression and meaning-making can be summed up by integrative ways of learning. Integrative learning further has a subset of interdisciplinary education. Barber states, of integrative learning:

The ability to make connections among disparate elements of information and meaningfully synthesize concepts has been heralded as a necessary skill for success in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century. There have been an increasing number of calls in American society for college and university graduates to possess this ability to make connections among life experiences, academic studies, and their accumulated knowledge, and from one context to another (AAC&U, 2002; AAC&U & Carnegie Foundation, 2004; ACPA, 1994; ACPA & NASPA, 2004; Joint Task Force on Student Learning, 1998; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). In *Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning*, the Joint Task Force on Student Learning (1998), a commission assembled by three national higher education associations (The American Association for Higher Education, the American College Personnel Association, and the National Association of Student Personnel

Administrators) suggested three categories of integrated learning, stating: Learning is fundamentally about making and maintaining connections: biologically through neural networks; mentally among concepts, ideas, and meanings; and experientially through interaction between the mind and the environment, self and other, generality and context, deliberation and action. (p. 1)

Separation from biological family and the ambiguity, or mystery, that results leads to seven core issues. Mastery is the most important of these issues once students begin postsecondary education, due to seeking academic and professional mastery in their lives. Students' identity development can suffer and lead to problems in academics and ultimately in career development. Students can learn to make meaning from both their biological and adoptive identities. There are several ways to facilitate learning and meaning-making in a postsecondary context (more will be discussed in the Discussion/Implications and Recommendations sections).

Methods

This study was a qualitative research study approved by the Institutional Review Board under IRB Study Number 1505E70222. The study was an exempt study due to the nature of this project. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the experiences of students in adjusting to college life who had little or no involvement with or knowledge of their biological parents?
2. How is the student's undergraduate experience affected if there was an adoption involving a foreign country?
3. How can postsecondary education provide more competency to support and facilitate identity and cultural meaning-making for those separated from biological families?

Data was collected by interviewing students and graduates of Higher Education during the Fall 2015 semester. The methods used were considered participatory research. The site was in part at the University of Minnesota and in part outside. Thirteen adoptees and former foster youth were asked to participate; six agreed to participate and were interviewed. The age range was 18-40 -- some participants, still in undergraduate education, others who had graduated within 10 years or less from undergraduate education. Four University of Minnesota (UMN) students were interviewed: three in person and one through written interview. Two were undergraduate students, one was a graduate student. Two graduates of Higher Education were also interviewed. Finally, there was one written

interview from Russia. There was also an unofficial observation at the children's home (orphanage)/school in Russia from which the interviewee graduated. After data collection, there was an iterative data analysis, while more data was being collected, as all interviews took place over fall semester.

Data Collection

Six interviews were administered: four in-person interviews, and two written interviews. The interviews were conducted at the University of Minnesota, as well as two outside the university, and one written interview was international. The students and former students represent an age group from age 18 to age 39, and consisted of undergraduates and graduate students, or those who are within 10 years of having graduated as one of those populations. The students' demographics varied widely and are listed below. Three countries were represented, the U.S, South Korea, and Russia, as places of birth. The interview questions consisted of 15 questions with sub questions, and concerned foster care; connection with biological family; support for adoptive identity and development of academics and career during college; and a Wellness Indicator. The questions were developed based on research classes previously taken, and meeting with faculty from the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. The Wellness Indicator is from The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare from the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. Names were changed to protect identities of students. The interviews were recorded using a digital recording device for transcription and analysis purposes.

Demographics.

Student 1: Male, Caucasian, 36, adopted from Minnesota, USA, Master's student, undergraduate degree in Youth Development, Social Justice

Student 2: Female, 21, Asian American/Korean, adopted from South Korea, completing bachelor's degree in English and minor in Child Psychology

Student 3: Female, 39, Asian, adopted from South Korea, undergraduate degrees in Nursing and Criminal Justice

Student 4: Female, 18, Spanish/European, adopted from Maryland, USA, undeclared major undergraduate student

Student 5: Female, 31, Bi-racial, adopted from Minnesota, USA, undergraduate degree in Communications and minor in Sociology

Student 6: Female, Russian, aged-out of foster care (children's home) in Russia, undeclared major undergraduate student

Data Analysis

The digital audio files were analyzed using a transcription method, which involved listening to the audio recording and transcribing, then picking out codes from each interview of words and phrases. Each interview was transcribed in full by the interviewer. Analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process. Coding was done of words and phrases in the transcript. Codes were grouped together if related. Codes were compared among interviews and resulted in themes related to the literature review concepts. The resultant themes and the

research questions formed the basis of the coding and theme strategy, and these were continuously revised. The data analysis process was based on the Action research method (Stringer, 2013).

Findings

After completing analysis for the data collected, two main themes arose:

1. Mystery and Ambiguity in Background Information
2. Mastery: Having or Lacking Control/Mastery
 - Meaning-making: the mode or way the ambiguity was mastered
 - Meaning-making: any result or product created from that process

Theme 1: Mystery and Ambiguity in Background Information

The socio-psychological issues, cultural issues, and issues of foster care, as discussed in the literature review, are used here as a framework to understand interviewees' answers. Most interviewees described that growing up they knew they were adopted – or in the case of the student adopted at age 16, grew up knowing a little information about her biological family. They also knew some basic information about their biological family, including: where they were adopted from, what kind of foster care they had been in, and approximately how long they had been in foster care. To them, this was factual information about their identity, as was what they lacked or did not know. Most said they would share what they knew with others, but that it was sometimes difficult to share, especially to those who might not understand. Ambiguity also existed in not remembering or knowing much about early experiences:

Student 1: “No, I had been asking questions. I actually have memories of ... of prior to being adopted.”

Student 2: “I don't have any memory of it but I was yep, I was with one family, so I lived with a family, and obviously I don't have any memories of it.”

Student 5: “With outside folks it feels like I'm educating people, um or that it's like a story time, like let's gather around and listen to her story.”

Student 3:

No I don't talk a lot about it, um it's a very, very sensitive issue for me, um because it's a lifelong journey of not knowing who you are, who I am, um I get really emotional, or I can get really emotional, umm because I don't, I just don't have – I have zero information.

One student who searched for and met his biological family recounts:

Student 1:

I don't think of my experience as unusual or weird until I get those facial expressions ‘wait you have how many? what?’ those kinda things ... but I have no problem talking about it. I really don't think anything about it. If someone's talking about family, I'll talk about family.

Ambiguity was often present when it came to health history or questions about genetic heritage. This pertained to going to a medical doctor, psychiatrist, or psychologist, either at the university and elsewhere.

Student 1:

Any time I go to the doctor and answer those kind of questions I always give whatever history I have, or I'll say ‘I don't know, adopted,’ or I used to say that. Now I don't need to because I have all that history historical knowledge kind of thing.

Referring to being diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) in college:

Student 5:

Because it really came when that psychologist said wow this could be something you inherited ... and I never heard those words before, my whole life, you know, I was just like oh you're adopted, never mind, we don't know this and so once he said this it was kind of like it opened up a door, to um maybe if that door had been opened up sooner... but it takes me pursuing that and I didn't, cause even know where to or how to.

Socio-psychological issues can cross into ethnic, racial, and cultural issues, especially for those adopted transnationally and transracially. Issues related to ethnicity, race, and culture were present four of six times with the students interviewed. Two students were adopted from South Korea; and one was adopted both from, and into a biracial family, but lacked information about specific factors concerning her biological family while growing up. After her undergraduate education, she took a genetic DNA test, which proved helpful in her meaning-making process. Finally, one student knows her extended, biological family is still in Europe, but does not know anything about them, and was told in foster care not to speak her first language.

In at least two of the interviews, the students were able to explore the issues of race and ethnicity in their academics and careers. However, there seems a large need to have the awareness of these issues in postsecondary education, so that for example, an adoptee from South Korea is not automatically grouped together with the student population from Asia, as one student noted.

She explained that many emotional issues are similar for all Asians dealing with potential racial and ethnic issues, but that all Asian American adoptees were grouped together for a panel at the university.

Student 2:

But um I think the things we grapple with are similar just by not, just by looking Asian – which is sad but we're often always morphed together based on our appearance – like I'm often asked if I'm Chinese more often than I'm asked if I'm Korean, so I don't know if maybe I look more Chinese than Korean, but I feel like we all share this similar identity, um in some ways.

She further explained that she is usually asked this by Asians (usually Chinese), but this perspective may carry over into the classroom or elsewhere on campus if a student is not recognized as an adoptee from Asia, but only seen by the university as Asian, or Asian American.

Student 5:

I think I struggled maybe a little bit more to find it all before I did 23 and Me ... I know I struggled more when I was younger and it also plays a toll [sic] in race as well, because being biracial, I don't -- my sister's biracial as well, and a few family members are that look more typical to your biracial makeup I guess and I don't, I look different, and so I was always wondering why I looked different. I get asked all the time, I still get asked all the time – like what am I, why? And I tan in the winter, and I tell them it's not a tan, this is the color of my skin, but only until, once I found out my results from 23 and Me.

Student 4:

I never searched for my birth family because I'm not ready. I was six when I was orphaned, and though I am sure that my relatives would welcome me with open arms, I know nothing about being Spanish. The people I met in Foster Care told me that if I spoke Spanish (my first language), I would never be adopted, so I never spoke-or even thought- in Spanish after the age of six. I became an average American. I lost most of my ability to

speaking my native language. I relearned it in High school [*sic*], but because I know I now have the accent of a Gringa, I fear my family would disown me like they did my mother.

Results and findings from interviews match data from the literature concerning the time in foster care equaling chance for trauma. All adoptees were in foster care, with a range of time from person to person of 3 months to 16 years. Student 1 said that he knows the first year of his life that he spent in foster care, and the memories from it were traumatic:

And I always knew growing up something was different. We were very open about the fact that I was adopted and I just always had a lot of questions, and like a big whole vacancy on a lot of that, which I do believe was that I wasn't immediately just born adopted. So, you know there was a lot of interaction back and forth that first year -- I immediately went home with my mom, I had that bond...it turned out to be a very traumatic event that spurred a lot of what was going on. She was the only one who can answer those questions, and so I kept asking questions until I finally got to ask *her* those questions.

A former foster child who was adopted later in life recounts moving from one foster home to another in her interview:

Student 4:

The bad part about this house was that as soon as we got home from school, she locked us in our bedrooms until exactly 6pm. Then we had dinner and she let us use the restroom, then she locked us in our bedrooms again until morning. Though we were separated for most of the time, eating dinner with my brother every night made me feel much safer and more at home. In a surprise in-home inspection our Social Worker found out what [she] was doing, and though we were okay with it (we didn't even know it was illegal), they revoked her right to foster, and we moved on to a new home, separated again [*sic*].

At a children's home, or orphanage, in Russia (explained more in Discussion/Implications), psychologists were staffed for traumatic issues that

children came in with. There was a large sensory room, and a smaller sensory room to provide working through feelings around trauma. As seen in the literature review, though attachment issues exist for any age, the chance is higher for youth coming from longer periods of time in foster care. There may also be economic issues that persist into postsecondary education, due to an inability to be able to think of college as a child and only thinking about the basic needs, such as food and security.

Student 4: “I didn’t have the luxury to worry about college when I was a kid, [...], I didn’t know what it was. I had to worry about surviving, which isn’t what a kid should have to worry about.”

Theme 2: Mastery: Having or Lacking Control/Mastery Over a Part of One’s Life:

Regardless of whether they searched for biological family, all students achieved some sense of mastery to form an integrative identity. For some this was with a knowledge found through searching, for others it was developed through academic or career identity development. This aspect of the interview was ultimately connected to academics and career. Most interviewees described this process as a story, and some described wanting to help others share their story. The way all interviewed discovered their purpose for a career was different based on circumstance, and personality, as well as other factors that were outside the scope of this study. Some students described a sense of not having

control over either part of their adoption story, or an aspect of their process in deciding a career. To move toward integrating biological and adoptive identity, all students had to learn, or are learning, to be masters of this and make meaning — to integrate what they knew and did not know, in its ambiguity.

One student also discussed her need to feel a sense of control or “authority” in school settings. If she did not feel this, she did not feel she had a right to speak or belong in the classroom:

Student 2:

And I like teaching in front of a classroom of students, or tutoring students because I feel I'm helping them and I have some sort of authority to help them. Right, but in other settings, especially in some classroom settings I'm very introverted um because I feel like my authority is always in question or I don't have as much authority as somebody else does, so I don't feel like I have the right to about something which I most of my childhood I was extremely introverted, very introverted. I really struggled in school because I could not speak, would not speak, um and then something changed in high school, I was more extroverted and everybody thought I was extroverted, everyone still thinks I'm extroverted, but I'm really introverted.

Student 2:

It was like the happenstance that I was talking about before. He just happened to be connected to the right people at the right moment. He was teaching in Korea, teaching English in Korea, and he just ended up finding a social worker who looked into his file for him, and there was phone numbers and contact, his birth mother's contact information, was written on the back of these sheets of paper, it just, it's not gonna happen to us in real life likely.

Student 3:

My parents pushed me to go to school. They thought I'd be really good at nursing, um because I have a lot of care for other people, so I went part-

time to do the program. I finished but I just, just wasn't feeling it, it just wasn't what I wanted to do.

Student 2:

Yeah, yeah it was, absolutely, and it was just timing and happenstance of people I was interacting with at the time, specifically those professors that helped me figure it out, which is, I'm glad that they were there, I don't know if I would've figured it out otherwise. I think the other part of it was also personally just needing to figure out for myself what I wanted to do.

Student 5:

The other classes that I had taken thus far were toward the communication degree and then I wasn't sure like what I wanted to do when I graduated, I didn't have like a clear path, and then so my advisor and I were talking about, with communications you can do anything with that, and it wasn't such an intense testing process to get into it, so then it was like 'Ok done, I'm sold, I'll go into that,' and then I ended up being like 'this is what I would've picked anyways.' cause I really, I really enjoyed it.

Student 4:

It seems to be very difficult because I still can't decide on a career. Though my latest foster family tried very hard to teach me how to be an adult, as a kid in foster care, college wasn't something that was ever on my mind. I thought about when I would eat, and I thought about when I would be able to use the restroom, because those were the things that mattered. My adopted parents' biological daughter was raised to go to college. She grew up constantly being enriched in the sciences (from my mother's knowledge), and economics/business (from my father's knowledge). It was always weird to me to know that my sister was raised so different than me.

Mastery and meaning-making:

Everyone in the interviews demonstrated forming his or her own meaning-making. As said before, the method or mode to do this was different for each

person. This relates back to the literature on learning styles and accounts for personality, academics, and career. I present each person's case in meaning-making below. Though several exhibited feeling a lack of control over their lives at some point, when they controlled other parts of their lives pertaining to career or school they felt in control and more of a sense of mastery. A format of presenting each student's story separately was chosen to highlight their voices and lived experiences. This is because, that though there were themes in common for all students where Mystery or Ambiguity was concerned, each student proved to be unique in the way they carried out their meaning-making.

Student 1:

He was born in and adopted in Minnesota at the age of 11 months. During those 11 months he was sometimes with his birth mother and sometimes in different foster care homes. He is the only student interviewed who went through a search process for his biological family, which was conducted through the adoption agency through which he was adopted. He had many questions and believed only his biological family could know and answer them. After he found the answers, for some time he was not sure what they meant. He attended counseling for a few years and it took a long time until he felt control over his life. He did not complete his first undergraduate degree. He took eight years off from college not long after searching. However, upon returning to college (at a university closer to home), he was able to create his major, and took only three years to complete the new degree. After he searched for his biological family and

made meaning of it he now forms his identity around his role with his multiple families, as well as his role in his career. He now works in a position that has not existed before and finds much pride in both roles in family and career.

The first year and a half at (college) was strong. I was a solid A-/B+ student and then left college, and came back and went to (college), and I had a lot more clarity of who I was, and where I was going, and what I was doing. During that 8 years is when I was exploring my family and doing soul searching and stuff and so when I came back to (college) I was a straight 4.0 student all the way through.

“Yep, you know after I'd searched, I'd met them, I got my questions answered, and then I didn't know what to do with it. What did this mean?”

I just have a very different story from anyone else I talk to ... because I actually am in contact with all iterations of my family, so I got to know who my foster family was, I got to know who my biological families were, I got to know who my adoptive families were. I'm actually integral in all of those ... except for the foster I'm not so much part of them ... but I'm really kind of an important figure within holding all of the families together. So it's just (a) very different experience than most people have.

Student 2:

Student 2 was adopted at the age of five months from South Korea. She began in one undergraduate program, but it was not conducive to how she wanted to engage and help others. After over two years, she found a program more conducive to helping her express herself in studying English and with Asian literature classes. She's interested in teaching in the future and in interacting and facilitating students' learning at “turning points” in their lives.

So I'm writing about um race, and being a minority in essentially like middle class White suburbia, and writing about like ra- not tension, but I guess like personal identity tension ... but that's making me think a lot about heritage and what makes you Asian ...

is it like your genetics, your skin tone, your biology, or are you just like a product of your environment?

But it took me two years of undergrad here taking courses, working toward an elementary degree and volunteering in the schools to realize that was not what I wanted to do because there wasn't a level of ... I was trying to reach this level of engagement and that's what I want as a teacher, is to engage and build relationships with students at turning points for them — where they're either struggling with something, or they're learning something new about themselves, or they're trying to reconcile something. So to me English is, and language arts, provides an opportunity for young people to find some sort of creative expression or voice to speak, um aspects of identity, or things they are struggling with. This is why I'm compelled to language arts, but you can't get that with kindergartners through 5th graders. You can do so many fun things with them, but you cannot expect a deeper level of engagement, and that's why I ultimately went towards the secondary education, so 6th grade-12th grade, because that's when I really started thinking about those types of things, and wanting to explore those types of things, um and that's the engagement that I want, and that's how I picked my vocation is that I knew that I wanted to make a difference in people's lives that way by giving them a creative voice. Um and I don't know if adoption specifically was the tipping point for me, but a lot of different aspects of my identity led me to want to help people find creative expression for their identity. So I'm sure adoption is wrapped up somewhere in there.

She also described interacting with Koreans (non-adopted) and Asian adoptees:

And I've had really cool conversations where they show me pictures of what life is like there, which gives me a really cool real-world perspective, but I also think Asian American adoptees in general is ok too, because I think in a lot of ways we share the emotional aspect of it, even if we're regionally from slightly different places.

Student 3:

She was adopted from South Korea as an infant. She is also a birth mother who made an adoption plan for her son. In her case she has said she

knows “nothing” about her biological family. This could factor into her choice of having her son’s adoption be an open adoption. It is one way she may make meaning of her own adoption experience. She received her bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice, after spending years studying and working in the medical field, but knowing it wasn’t right for her. She now works at a correctional facility. She was first inspired to pursue a career in Criminal Justice by others who have found missing children.

Speaking of inspiration for career in Criminal Justice:

(It was) really inspiring that he took something very tragic and turned it around to help this country more than anyone can probably fathom and that got me like that’s so cool like you know, maybe I can make a difference in someone’s life or something.

Speaking of academics after she switched to Criminal Justice: “Uh, best I’ve ever done in school. I really, really was interested, really applied myself.”

Student 4:

Student 4 was adopted at age 16. She has a biological brother who was adopted with her at age 18. Their parents passed away 10 years prior to this, and they were in foster care with five families until being adopted. In her case, as she has held on to what she knows of her parents and heritage – what she knows and doesn’t know means a lot to her. She is aware of the differences in her life of being in multiple foster care homes, and now in a permanent home. She is only beginning postsecondary education and has not yet decided on a major.

She said of her experiences in foster care and as an adoptee:

I think that having people be more aware of what it means to be adopted would have been great. The pity makes things worse, and I think it's mostly because of how long I was in foster care, but people look at me as if I am a miracle child. They sometimes baby me through things, and I get away with a lot because I'm from a broken home, but I don't need that. If people just recognised that being adopted or orphaned still makes us human, that would be great.

Everybody has a story, and I had mine. All the other foster kids understood that, but regular kids, with regular families don't seem to get that. Regular kids see the fact that I'm in college as a "yay you!" moment, but when I go to group, I get to just have my story, and not be an inspiration for ending up normal after living a rough life.

Student 5:

Student 5 was adopted at the age of three months and was born and adopted in Minnesota. She likes to speak and communicate about her experiences, and this was facilitated in great part by her family, and in college where she received her bachelor's degree in Communications. Because she now works in the area of foster care, she finds that her background in Communications and Sociology, as well as being an adoptee, form her integrated identity. She is aware and passionate about the fact that she hopes in telling her own story, that she can help others heal – specifically when it comes to talking about race and about family. She says, of herself and experiences, "I'm a believer that each individual person's experiences are unique to their own in how they heal, cope, and become resilient."

I struggled with like, what's my niche, where do I fit, and then I was initially pursuing like a Mass Journalism/Communication, Advertising type of

Business Management type of path, and that is not what I was really interested in, but I didn't know what else to do. And as I started to really own and understand my disorder, and speak with a doctor about it, and get onto medication, then my education started to, my performance started to get a lot better and then I was picking — it solidified what my major was and got really passionate about it, and then I ended up doing well, but the reason it took me five years is because the beginning was really challenging and that set me back farther...”

I would say the feelings that you have on the inside about, um I wish ... obviously you always wish you knew then what you knew now ... but I wish that I could have had somebody to connect with about um the like I said the not feeling good enough, the not feeling wanted — those feelings show up in different ways within like friendships, relationships, school, employment, whatever that looks like it, shows up in different ways. um I think like I would've thrived more sooner than I did had I.

I strongly believe in once you've healed from whatever trauma that you face, and you feel resilient and empowered to share your narrative or your story, that is a um empowering tool to help others heal and cope with their own situations, so I do share a lot or speak on behalf, or I advocate, but I can't do that for anyone else, I can only share my story.

I just have always known, and we talk, like my family, we talk about things all the time — “this is how I'm feeling, this is where I'm at,” um so I was in a very nurturing, supportive, communicative family, so that is so important to the emotional well-being or mental health of somebody's life. So I would say I'm like in I'm very fortunate because I'm in a really good spot cause I can talk about anything with anybody with my family.

Yeah, I would say because, um, my work is in foster care, that I'm in that community all the time, um and advocating for our young people in our program. Um, one of our success factors is um, kinship reunification, just working on wherever somebody's at in their journey, and I, like I said, have a big passion for young people, and so helping them navigate their journey, go through what they've gone through, and be able to say um, ‘you know this is what I've experienced, and you know, I graduated, and I'm in a professional, I'm successful,’ for whatever that it is, something that I talk about frequently, constantly, all the time. I have to with this work, yeah.

So I have always known and I've always articulated at a really young age that I understand that not every young person's story ends the way the way that mine did. They don't feel connected, or they don't feel they belong, and I had that with my mom my dad and my sister, and so it has been my purpose to create that environment wherever I'm at, and it is something that I talk about all the time here. And so when I first came into this role there was one program for foster care services, and I said like this is a population of young people that we're not focusing on that deserves to be focused on, and since then have increased one program to six programs, multiple, doubled my staff, which then doubled the amount of young people we're serving, and now foster care services is its own entity, and is something that people are finally paying attention to, um and so I feel like I'm living my purpose every day, and I wouldn't feel so passionate or strong about this had this not been my personal identification.

In summary of the findings, overall, it was found that adoptees and foster youth share a sense of ambiguity in that, though they may not be consciously aware of an ambiguous loss, they have a lack of genetic and cultural information, which was sometimes found affecting academic and career paths. This was specifically found in taking longer to finish undergraduate education, or switching majors, or being undecided in a major. It was also found that they do not want a "one-stop" type of service, as is often provided to students at large universities. Interviewees stated that this can seem prescriptive and that sometimes the appointment times are too short (sometimes only 20 minutes). This can be seen in university counseling, or career services. Individuals preferred talking with, and mentorship from teachers, family, and friends, instead of primarily using university services. They also wanted to maintain privacy, as they will talk about their adoption or foster care when they feel it is context-appropriate. These

findings were in contrast to questions that were asked concerning a potential need for having adoption-specific resources at university level. Instead, students preferred to approach their identity development more integratively, and independently, such as taking culture classes, working in a field conducive to exploring their own identity, and helping others in similar positions.

Implications/Discussion

Noting that a need for meaning-making is common to all undergraduate students (Evans, et. al. 2010), but is more critical for students who were placed for adoption or who grew up in environments away from their biological parents, and relating this to the findings on those interviewed wanting control over their own meaning-making of their adoptive experiences, several implications can be discussed here. First, students showed that their meaning-making process differed from student to student, in that every student might find his or her “niche,” or make meaning through different means of expression or mastery. Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (Sawyer, 2012, p. 44) supports this, in theorizing that intelligence is more than IQ, and instead encompasses visual, musical, kinesthetic, logical, naturalistic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal abilities. It is not specifically a student development theory, but builds on Kolb’s (Evans et. al, 2010) Learning Styles theory, which involves four types of learners and four steps in learning experiences. It is also similar to Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning, which puts making something, or creating, at the top of a hierarchy in learning. The theory of multiple intelligences explains why different students have different strengths, and therefore, different ways in which they might express themselves, or construct their meaning-making.

There are several models of potential ways to facilitate meaning-making that can be used as examples to build on the findings. These can be used as

educational and applied models to facilitate students' learning and integrative identity construction in postsecondary education.

Model 1: Children's Home/School

An example of sustainable educational (pre-K-12) development is in the Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky area in Russia, which is 292 miles (six to seven hours) West of the capital, Chita. There is a regional children's home that houses about 100 abandoned, disadvantaged, orphaned, disabled (physically or mentally) children, and children without guardianship. What the children's home provides is all the support services, including education for the youth residents.

The residents are given the opportunity to attend school at the home, as well as make it their own in many ways, including being organized into "families" and produce their own artworks including paintings, woodwork, crafts, and several song and dance performances. The structure of the school and home is run mostly by the children, giving them a sense of control that was perhaps lost when they were separated from their biological families. One student went on to sing on a national TV show in Moscow. The children come from different cultural and familial backgrounds, some from different ethnic backgrounds, but are able to establish families within the Children's Home. Many children come with backgrounds of trauma, and some with disabilities, but are able to find resilience through have stable education and home structure, as well as opportunities for growth and development through culture, and art.

Model 2: Leadership

Another example is the Boreas Leadership program. It is a program that hosts leadership workshops, such as Integrative Leadership, and weekly collaboration forums. Boreas is facilitated through the Learning Environmental Sciences building on the St. Paul Campus of the University of Minnesota. The programs are focused on graduate students, but the ideas and methods could be extrapolated for undergraduate education. Take from the Boreas web site:

The Boreas Leadership Program trains and develops the next generation of world changers to catalyze social and environmental solutions. Boreas offers co-curricular leadership development opportunities that build on the strengths of graduate education to create effective change agents. Boreas programming is idealistic and pragmatic. The program offers a series of skills workshops in communications and media, integrative leadership, public skills and systems thinking and tools. Boreas also organizes a series of professional networking events and offers leadership practice opportunities. (<http://boreas.environment.umn.edu/>)

Model 3: Interdisciplinary Education

One current example of interdisciplinary education is STEAM Education, or Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math. It is currently used in K-12 Education and is a recent change to STEM education that integrates Arts into classroom and curriculum. It ties well into different learning styles, and accounts for interests and different levels of learning. From Yakman's web site on STEAM Education: "We now live in a world where; you can't understand Science without Technology, which couches most of its research and development in Engineering, which you can't create without an understanding of the Arts and

Mathematics [sic]" (Yakman, 2009). A University of Minnesota professor, Dr. Upadhyay, provides his perspective on STEAM, as a teacher of curriculum and instruction:

STEM habits of mind and arts habits of mind are very similar—curiosity, persistence, collaboration, and systems thinking. When we show how these habits of mind support learning, teachers and students themselves can see that they support all subjects, and no matter what their cultural background happens to be. (Marty, 2014, p. 15-16)

Furthermore, institutes like the Institute for Advanced Study exist at the university level, and focus specifically on bringing together interdisciplinary scholars from both the STEM community, as well as policy, and other social science and liberal arts disciplines. The IAS web site states:

As a University-wide interdisciplinary center, it is a resource for scholars, artists, professionals, and students who are engaged in a wide variety of study and practice. It also serves as a bridge between the University and the wider community as a place where people meet and ideas are exchanged. (<http://ias.umn.edu/>)

Model 4: Story Circles

Story circles are used for many topics as a mode of creative and innovative expression. They have been used with both adoption and in the creation of digital stories. There can be exploration with these ideas and practices.

The Center for Digital Storytelling is a non-profit which teaches a method of reflection and iteration in teaching and learning narratives. The method is called a Story Circle and they host these teaching sessions as workshops. Those attending the workshops are then able to teach this method to others in the story

circle fashion. For example, if faculty or staff at a university attend the workshop, they can then teach students at the university the Story Circle method. The

Center's mission statement is:

To promote the value of story as a means for compassionate community action. We partner with organizations around the world to develop programs, which support individuals in rediscovering how to listen to each other and share first person stories. Our group process and the stories that emerge serve as effective tools for change amidst a world of technology and media overload. (<http://www.storycenter.org/>)

In the Twin Cities area there were two recent events. One was an Adoption Play Project facilitated by a story circle. The other involved Minnesota authors connected to adoption (adoptees, birth/first parents, adoptive parents, adoptive/birth family members), reading from their works. The adoption story circle was facilitated by Wonderlust Productions and done in three parts with each part of the adoption triad (adoptees, biological mothers/parents, adoptive parents) (<http://wlproductions.org/mail-your-story/>).

Finally, it should also be noted that there was some interest indicated in creating a center or group for adoptees/foster youth.

Summary of Implications and Discussion

Compounding on the findings that adoptees and former foster youth lack genetic and cultural information, and it can affect their academic and career choices, several models were provided. This keeps in mind the fact that all students are

different and have different learning styles, and therefore may respond differently to facilitate learning and growth depending on the model.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The cultural and geographical region where this study took place might have been limiting in that this might only represent a specific subset -- and ways of coping -- with separation from biological family, as well as ways of expressing narratives. There were also some translation issues for international interviews. More time would be needed to have congruence of this part of the study.

Another limitation was that in data analysis there was only one analyzer, as opposed to having two or more, as might be the case in group projects. The researcher also found that the way the interview questions were asked may have had some influence over the answers given, as there was a tendency to use the same words that were asked in the question, in the answer, as well as to answer different ways to similar questions, depending on the way the question was asked. A final limitation was that though the work for this project began over Spring and Summer semesters of 2015, the thesis was completed this semester, so time was a limitation.

Future work

There is much room for future work in this project, which became apparent not long after beginning the study. I will address this in terms of cultural and international; foster care; and integrative learning work. These are the areas, which could further help build less of a sense of mystery, or ambiguity for students, as well as help facilitate mastery and meaning-making.

One potential area for future work might be a study of a group of undergraduates who were not adopted or in foster care. This would provide comparison, for the purpose of knowing if these experiences presented in this thesis are unique to the population of adoptees and former foster youth, or if some are experiences for all undergraduates. This can act as a control group with the same number of participants as there were for those interviewed in this study. There could also be a focus group of adoptees in the future to provide a sounding board for a more integrative, group study.

Cultural work: More may be done with the Korean American Adoptee Network (KAAN) group to see if there is interest in creating a student KAAN group. Another population not explored in this study, but growing at university level, is Chinese adoptees. This can be explored as well.

International work: Though there was one interview conducted from the Russian children's home, more could be done with this aspect of the study because of the connections that exist between the children's home and local contacts in the Twin Cities.

Foster care: Foster care was explored here, but work with the aged-out population was not explored in great detail. Because this population does not often reach Higher Education, it was more difficult to identify and explore, though there is much room for this.

Integrative Learning opportunities: Explore opportunities to connect more with creative expression communities or individuals: e.g. creative communities mentioned above, the Korean adoptee and playwright mentioned by one student, and look more into the community of practice of media literacy and digital stories as modes of narrative and meaning-making for adoptees.

One other aspect of this study that would benefit from further exploration is in personality theory, and other aspects that were not accounted for in the interview. Students explained different ways of learning and forming and identity, but only one mentioned that her way of doing this could be due to her personality. It is likely, however, that many aspects of the methods of each student's meaning-making process can be accounted for by elements of personality, motivations and goals, communication style, or gender.

Finally, the duration of this study did not allow for exploring the other half of mastery, called tempering mastery. Briefly, this involves learning mastery, but also learning to live with ambiguity, because resilience will otherwise be weakened (Boss, 2006). This can be important to students who have gone through their own meaning-making process, but can benefit from understanding that this does not necessarily replace ambiguity from not knowing their genetic or

cultural heritage. Boss warns of the danger of having either too little or too much mastery, as, she says, no one can complete control every part of their life.

Recommendations

In keeping with the findings and interviewees' unified voice, it is mainly recommended to integrate self-authorship learning and leadership skills into undergraduate curriculum. This will not only be useful for adoptees, and a platform for them to constructively work out their adoption narratives, and career interests, but it will be useful for all students. It also allows flexibility of curriculum design for teachers and other administrators. Other professionals, such as artists and scientists who have gone through their own adoptive-identity and meaning-making process, could be invited as guest speakers, as well. There are resources such as interdisciplinary education, campus workshops and seminars, and leadership minors and programs that can be recommended, such as in the examples listed above.

Interviewees also mentioned not wanting to be singled out or feel different than non-adopted peers. However, they also wanted to figure out how to “thrive better and earlier,” as one student said. Integrating theories and practices into regular classes and programs, could increase administrators' awareness —such as knowing the legal age when students can begin searching for biological family, or in the case of open adoption — knowing that students may have a connection to their biological families. This approach will also be the most useful way as it allows everyone (teachers, students, etc.) to use his or her own ways of meaning-making. It would be most useful to integrate the recommendations, at

least at curriculum-level, for students who are first or second year undergraduates, since that is near the legal age to search for biological family. However, keeping in mind that students search at different ages, it would be useful to have in classes that involve more creative expression or reflection at any level during undergraduate education.

Though most interviewees did not go to counseling continuously, most sought it at some point. Two sought counseling in some way in college. One was for an undiagnosed learning disability; one was after searching for his biological family. If interviewees did not seek it, they referred to others who provided mentoring or counseling for them. The theories used here were not directly mentioned in the interviews, but empowering these students to know about the seven core issues is not something that comes up in college, because most who utilize it are in research or practice in social work such as adoption agencies, or when students have already reached specialized therapy. It is not also common for therapists to bring up the issues with adoptees and foster youth directly. So though the students may have been recommended to individual or family therapy at some point in life, by the adoption agency or otherwise, the idea of not wanting too much attention to the fact of being adopted (leading to feeling different or singled out) persists enough that those interviewed found other ways to cope. However, therapy still might be a viable option for some.

Recommendation 1: Awareness and competency

Workshops and seminars for administrators on adoption and separation from biological family

Through adoption agencies and other social and psychological resources, such as the School of Social Work, and the departments of Family Social Science, and Psychology at UMN, there is a wide range of knowledge, and different perspectives on adoption, foster care, and issues that might arise for students. University administrators should be given basic awareness that there may be adopted students in their classrooms and not make assumptions about race, ethnicity, socio-economic situation, or age. They should be able to identify core issues that may be present for such students, such as that of the seven core issues, and be able to identify and recommend faculty, staff, or administrators that can be of help, if needed, or requested. This is often communicated in initial class introductions, when students feel it's context appropriate, or in written assignments.

Recommendation 2: Students building mastery skills

There are many interdisciplinary and integrative groups on campus that could work with students on leadership skills and building their sense of mastery. Having students give talks about adoption might be a start. Or they could design panels, as one student referenced. Also, most students said they would at least be open and willing to go to a group, or center that was for adoptees and foster

children. It did not appear to be specific to race or ethnicity, but this could be determined later. Of most importance is the recognition that the student is both an individual, who will cope and make meaning in their own way, as well as an adoptee or former foster youth who all deal with similar issues.

Recommendation 3: Teaching and Learning: Class readings and assignments that focus early on self-authorship, building self-efficacy, and using multiple learning styles.

Some structure is still necessary for students in undergraduate education, and not all students will be at the same developmental stages, which teachers and staff must be aware of. However, teachers should have basic student development theory training, specifically of self-authorship, and multiple learning styles and intelligences. There should be awareness of cultural, ethnic, and racial issues that pertain to adoption and separation from biological family. Finally, creativity and innovation, such as STEAM education, is not usually implemented at postsecondary education level. However, many faculty and staff on campus (UMN campus) already have a community of practice of interdisciplinary work. Some use digital stories as a way for this in the classroom, and some are familiar with STEAM education.

Concluding Remarks

This study was largely motivated by my personal and professional experiences as an adoptee, as well as interactions with other adoptees and foster care youth. Throughout my personal journey I found certain recurring themes in this group of people, and I had been curious to find out if these themes were specific to myself and the people I knew, or more general and applicable to a larger group. After this study I have a better understanding of several recurring themes and commonalities, which has helped me, in part, to make my own meaning in my personal, academic, and professional identity.

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Appendix i

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of students in adjusting to college life who had little or no involvement with or knowledge of their biological parents?
2. How is the student's undergraduate experience affected if there was an adoption involving a foreign country?
3. How can postsecondary education provide more competency to support and facilitate identity and cultural meaning-making for those separated from biological families?

Appendix ii

Interview Questions

- 1. Were you ever in foster care?**
 - 1a. If so, how long were you in foster care?
 - 1b. Did you live with a family?
 - 1c. Did you live in a group home?
 - 1d. Do you know anything further about the foster care? i.e.) the socio-economic situation of your foster care family

- 2. If you were adopted, were you adopted from another country?**

- 3. How would you identify your ethnicity?**

- 4. What is your connection to your birth family like?**

- 5. Adoptees – Did you search for your birth family during college?**
 - 5a. How old were you?
 - 5b. Was there a specific experience that prompted you to search?
 - 5c. Was searching something you always wanted to do, even before college?

- 6. How often do you think about being separated from your birth family?**
 - Every day?
 - Only when asked to complete genetic or heritage related questions?

- 7. Do you talk about your separation (birth family) to peers or teachers?**

- 8. How would you rate the overall competency of university administrators about adoption or separation from birth families?**
 - 8a. Did you find them supportive of your search?
 - 8b. Did you find them supportive of helping you express your separation experience in another way? i.e.) creative expression

- 9. How long did it take you to complete your undergraduate degree? If you are still in college, how long has it taken so far?**
 - 9a. How would you describe your academic performance over the course of your undergraduate degree?

9b. Did you seek help for academics?

10. How did you decide what you wanted to study?

10a. Did you change majors often?

11. How difficult did you find it to choose a career path or know your purpose for a career?

11a. Did you seek out career counselors?

12. Have you utilized any therapy/counseling services?

12a. at the university?

12b. outside the university

13. How do you think your adoptive/separation identity could have been fostered during your undergraduate degree?

14. If there was a campus center or student group for adoptees, how likely would you be to attend or be a part of this?

15. Wellness Indicator: On a scale of 1 to 5 how would you rate the following? (this is from the School of Social Work at UMN and is for foster care)

Safety and Security

Environment

Mental Health

Physical

Cognitive

Community

Purpose