



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Parents Who Have Adopted a Child

Allie Hughes, OTS; Areum Han, PhD, OTR/L

Department of Occupational Therapy | University of Alabama at Birmingham

Caron Sandefur, LICSW-S PIP | Children’s Aid Society of Alabama

Introduction

There are thousands of children within the United States needing and waiting to be adopted into a permanent family

- The older a child is adopted, the more likely they are to have experienced trauma and abuse
- Adoptive parents often receive pre and post adoption support services and education to navigate common issues
- Few studies explore parent’s experiences surrounding their adoption and the services they received
- Project Aim:** better understand parent’s perspectives of their experience and if services received were helpful
- Supporting Theories:** Trauma Informed Care

Methods

- Research Design**
 - One-time interview lasting 45-60 minutes
 - Discussed topics by asking open-ended questions related to adoption
- Research Location:** Alabama Pre and Post Connections (APAC) at Children’s Aid Society of Alabama
- Inclusion Criteria**
 - have or are currently receiving services from APAC, have adopted a child, and primary language is English
- Exclusion Criteria**
 - have not adopted a child, have not received APAC services, primary language is not English
- Demographics:** (see Table 1)
- 3 total participants
 - 5 children yielded from participants

Results

Table 1. Descriptions of Participants_

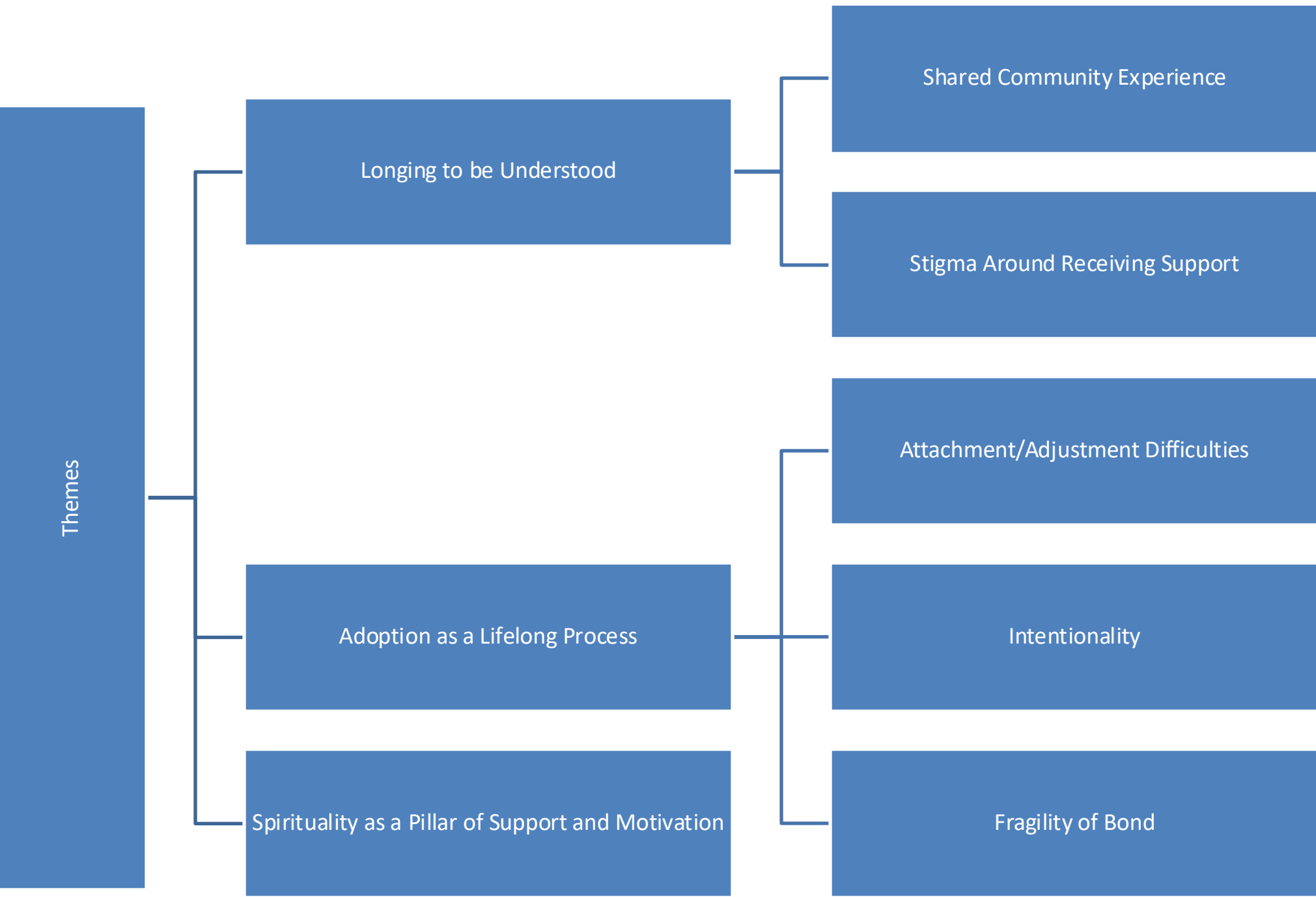
Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Years since Adoption Finalization	Age of Adopted children	Gender	Ethnicity
J1/ Jane	39	F	W	Married	10 months	5	M	W
K1/ Kelly	52	F	W	Divorced	6 years; 12 years	12; 18	M; M	B; H
L1/ Linda	52	F	W	Married	11 years	17; 18	M; M	W; W

Abbreviations: B, Black; F, Female; H, Hispanic; M, Male; W, Non-Hispanic White.

Results Continued

- Three main themes emerged from the interviews:
 - (1)** Longing to be understood (subthemes: shared community experience; stigma around receiving support)
 - (2)** Adoption as a lifelong process (subthemes: attachment and adjustment difficulties; intentionality; fragility of the bond)
 - (3)** Spirituality as a pillar of support and motivation.

Figure 1. Themes



Discussion

- Across all interviews, parents reflected that they often felt misunderstood by and isolated from others in their support system
- Connections with others in similar circumstances made parents feel seen and heard
- The path to adoption is long and takes much preparation, even before the child is placed in the home
- Parents expressed the need for increased pre and post-adoption support
 - Parents have had great, positive experiences with current APAC support
- Stigma around wanting or needing support was noted
- Parents described adoption as a lifelong process
- Issues in attachment, maladaptive behavior, and emotional regulation were the hardest for parents to navigate
- Parents also spoke of the difficulties when their child did not meet their expectations or acted differently than they anticipated
- Play-based activities and intentional time were beneficial for parent-child bonding
- Even with progress, bonding is still fragile
- Spirituality was a motivating and supporting factor in the parent’s adoption experience

Discussion continued

- Implications for Practice:**
 - Importance of context and personal factors
 - Role of OT in emotional regulation and maladaptive behaviors
- Limitations:**
 - Small sample size
 - Female-only respondents
 - Lacked spousal responses
 - Utilized a one-time interview
- Future Research and Direction**
 - Employ studies with larger sample sizes and diverse participants
 - Identify specific occupational therapy interventions that address emotional regulation and maladaptive behavior
 - Develop new adoption related educational resources for parents

Conclusion

- There is a need to expand current adoption support practices
- Occupational therapy practitioners have a role in supporting these families and it is within their scope of practice

References

Agius, C., Eve, Z., & Pearson, R. (2023). Exploring the lived experiences of compassion fatigue in parents who adopt children with trauma histories. *British Journal of Social Work*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad185>

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2020). Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process-Fourth Edition. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(Supplement_2), 7412410010p1-7412410010p87. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2020.74s2001>

Koh, E., Hanlon, R., Daughtery, L., & Lindner, A. (2022). Adoption by the numbers. National Council for Adoption. <https://adoptioncouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Adoption-by-the-Numbers-National-Council-For-Adoption-Dec-2022.pdf>

Mounts, B., & Bradley, L. J. (2020). Issues involving international adoption. *The Family Journal*, 28(1), 33–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480719887494>

Moyer, A. M., & Goldberg, A. E. (2017). ‘We were not planning on this, but ...’: Adoptive parents’ reactions and adaptations to unmet expectations: Adoption expectations. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22, 12-21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12219>

Nadeem, E., Waterman, J., Foster, J. C., Paczkowski, E., Belin, T. R., & Miranda, J. (2016). Long-term effects of pre-placement risk factors on children’s psychological symptoms and parenting stress among families adopting children from foster care. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 25(2), 67–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1063426615621050>

Racine, N, et al. (2020). Trauma-Informed care as a universal precaution: Beyond the adverse childhood experiences questionnaire. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 174(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.3866>

Acknowledgement & Contact information

I would like to thank Dr. Areum Han, Caron Sandefur, UAB Department of Occupational Therapy, and Children’s Aid Society of Alabama for their unwavering support and dedication to my project.

Contact Information; Allie Hughes, OTS, allie99@uab.edu