



Adoption openness and adoption stigma: a retrospective study of adult adoptees

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Abstract

This study explored adult adoptees' experiences and challenges concerning their adoption and the extent to which adoption issues were openly discussed within the adoptive family. Listening to the perspective of adoptees is important as their experiences, and expectations can influence their well-being and the success of their placement. Fourteen adult adoptees participated in this study. Qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. Interviews took place between June 2020 and November 2020. The analysis of transcripts was conducted according to the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) guidelines. Three themes related to the aims of the current research emerged from the data: (a) adoption secrecy, (b) adoptees' expectations for communication openness, and (c) adoption stigma. This study provides valuable insight into adoption communication openness, recognition of adoption stigma, and adoption microaggressions.

Keywords Adoption · Communication openness · Adoption stigma · Adoption secrecy · Adoption microaggressions

Introduction

Adoption is one of the most significant childcare institutions, and its main aim is to place children in need of safety and shelter in a family environment (Lewis and Brady 2018). Thus, adoption is a legal childcare option supplying children in need with a stable family environment and has been practiced globally for a long period of time (Palacios and Brodzinsky 2010). In addition, the United Nations (2009) support and encourage children's development in a nurturing and stable family environment that promotes their growth.

Current changes in adoption policy and practice as the model of "openness" between the child and both birth parents and adoptive parents place new demands on

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the adoption triad as well as the professionals involved in adoption (Jones and Hackett 2007, 2010). In this new era, adopters have the dual task of establishing a stable and meaningful relationship with their adopted child while maintaining at the same time the child's connection to their birth family (Jones and Hackett 2007). In addition, previous studies underline that adoption openness is considered beneficial for all parties (adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents; McIntyre and Eisenstadt 2011).

However, being adopted may also entail both gains and losses for adoptees, and coming to terms with these two antithetical features can be rather difficult (Reinoso et al. 2013). Furthermore, socially prevailing beliefs and stereotypes about the absence of relatedness and blood connection can negatively influence how adoption is experienced (Morgan and Langrehr 2019).

Scholars in the field argue that according to adoptive parents' views, adoption can be considered as a humanitarian act as they would be saving an abandoned child (Jones and Hackett 2007; Omosun and Kofoworola 2011). Furthermore, infertile couples interviewed to reveal their views on adoption reported that even though they viewed adoption as a secondary alternative, however, adoption allowed them to accomplish their dream of forming a family and recover their wounded feelings stemming from infertility (Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell 2003). Potential adoptive parents also reported that they feared the social stigma related to adoption (Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell 2003).

Michail (2013) examined adoption from adoptees' perspective and argued that adopted children viewed the absence of birth family contact as difficult and emphasized that adoptive parents should communicate valid adoption information. The same study also showed that there was a possibility of experiencing social stigma, especially among non-adopted peers. In her study, Neil (2012) explored children's perceptions of their adoption and showed that a quarter of the participating children were not ready to talk about their adoption, another quarter expressed a positive view on adoption while the other half expressed resentment about being adopted.

Research demonstrates that the age at which children are adopted profoundly influences their development. In particular, the younger the child is adopted, the lesser the institutional experience may have and consequently fewer emotional and social difficulties may be displayed (Merz et al. 2013). As Bilson and Munro (2019) argue, the age of five years appears to be a significant cutting point as regards the emotional and social consequences of adoption.

According to past research data, adoptees' narratives involved stereotyping and personal invalidation illustrating how their adoptive identity has contributed to feeling isolated and marginalized (Grigoropoulos 2021). Furthermore, in several cases, adoptees' distressing feelings resulting from a lack of information about their birth family led them to search for their birth families (Berge et al. 2006; Garber and Grotevant 2015; Grigoropoulos 2021). In all, research findings report that adoptees desired more contact with their birth family members and to meet other birth family members as well. However, openness was not desired by all adoptees since some were happy with their lives without it (Berge et al. 2006; Grigoropoulos 2021). This diversity among the needs and desires of adoptees emphasizes that "no single adoption arrangement is best for everyone" (Grotevant and McRoy, 1998, p. 197).

Adoption is also considered to entail abandonment issues. The reasons for biological parents to place a child in an institution differ and depend on factors like social norms, attitudes towards abortion, and the societal acceptance of teenage pregnancy (Jurviste et al. 2016). In this light, adoption as a social institution exists because some parents cannot care or do not want to engage in their children's rearing. In addition, other people who are not biologically related to them wish to care for these children (Palacios and Brodzinsky 2010). Overall, research findings indicate that neither adoptees nor birth and adoptive parents are a homogenous group with the same personal experiences and the same needs. Thus, the main aim of this study is to examine the experiences and challenges of the participating Greek adult adoptees and the extent to which adoption issues are openly discussed within the adoptive family.

Adoption openness

Scholars in the field characterized communication about the adoptees' birth family and separation from that family as adoption openness. This means that adoptive parents speak both about the child's past life and birth family (Brodzinsky 2006). As Barbosa-Ducharne and Soares (2016) suggest adoption openness is a part of the adoption communication process and besides the act of information, it entails feelings, joys, frustrations, and doubts about the adoption status. Brodzinsky (2005) described the openness of adoption communication as "a willingness on the part of individuals to consider the meaning of adoption in their lives, to share that meaning with others, to explore adoption-related issues in the context of family life, to acknowledge and support the child's dual connection to two families" (p.149). According to Le Mare and Audet (2011), adoption communication is an interactive process constituted by the interaction of both parents and children. This form of communication in the adoptive family supports the child to explore and come to terms with his/her history (Santona et al. 2022). Specifically, Brodzinsky (2005) emphasized open communication about adoption issues as of great importance because it can influence the child's psychological adjustment more than the actual contact with the birth parents. Helping the children to understand their origins and supporting their curiosity about birth family are key tasks in adoptive parenting (Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes 2002). Previous research findings suggest that adopters' openness (communicative attitudes and behaviors) and the way adoption-related issues are discussed in the adoptive family, which may profoundly affect the adoptees' identity and adjustment in the adoptive family (Brodzinsky 2006; Von Korff and Grotevant 2011). According to Brodzinsky (2006), openness in adoption comprises both structural and communication aspects. Structural openness refers to the contact between adoptive and birth family members whereas communication openness refers to the discussion of the child's birth family and adoption history. Specifically, communication openness refers to the exchange of information between the adoptive parents and the adopted child. This communication in several cases may entail feelings, and emotions closely linked to the life-changing and traumatic events that the adoptee may have experienced (Barbosa-Ducharne and Soares 2016;

Santona et al. 2022). Research demonstrates that when communicative openness was present adoptees expressed a positive view on their adoption and adoptive parents considered that their children had fewer adoption difficulties (Hawkins et al. 2007).

In addition, research data show that communicative openness is related to adoptees' better psychological adjustment, fewer behavior problems, and increased self-esteem (Reppold and Hutz 2009; Santona, et al. 2022). In particular, the Wydra et al. (2012) research findings in a sample of 18 adult adoptees signify that participants who experienced a communicative environment about the topic of their adoption were comfortable with their adoption status. On the contrary, participants who experienced limited information about their adoption were not comfortable with their adoption. As Von Korff and Grotevant (2011) suggest, adoptees' coherent identity and adoption narrative are strongly related to their perceptions and connection with both the adoptive and the birth family. Previous research data have also highlighted that adoption openness is regarded as beneficial for all parties (McIntyre and Eisenstadt 2011). According to Berry et al. (2000), adoption openness is a dynamic process as several adoptive parents may preserve or even increase communication with birth/biological family whereas other parents may decrease contact or stop it completely.

Overall, adoption communicative openness is expected to have a positive effect on adopted individuals such as greater satisfaction with the adoption expressed by adoptees in adulthood, well-being, and lower rates of adoption preoccupation in adulthood (Colaner and Soliz 2015). Moreover, adoptive parents' openness resulted in their enhanced empathetic stance towards their adopted children (Neil 2004).

The stigma of adoption

Although the history of adoption echoes a beneficial solution to problems experienced by abandoned or orphaned children and infertile or childless couples, adoption is far more complicated than this viewpoint implies (Baden 2016). Adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents have experienced the adoption stigma as it is conveyed through attitudes, behaviors, and prejudices implying the need for a better understanding of adoption stigma (Baden 2016; Wegar 2000). The stigma of adoption concerns biased attitudes toward adoption and adoption-related issues (Baden 2016). Dominant socio-cultural norms about the "family" structure emphasize the biological connections (i.e., bionormativity) between parents and children (Farr and Vázquez 2020). These norms can have a significant negative impact on adoptive families (Baden 2016).

These biased societal beliefs towards adoption can be examined through Goffman's (1963) concept of social stigma. According to this concept of social discrimination, certain people are censured due to the possession of unusual traits or physical characteristics which distress the social majority "who do not depart negatively from the social expectations at issue" (Goffman 1963, p. 7). Therefore, the nearly universal application of bloodlines in defining families may hinder adoptees' emotional functioning and adequate adjustment in adoptive families (Leon 2002).

As Hammack and Cohler (2011) argue broad social and cultural scripts can significantly stigmatize adoptive families that are not defined by biological connections. Similarly, research data demonstrate that adoptive parents report feeling inferior to parents with biologically related children (Wegar 2000). Thus, the societal definition of kinship in terms of blood bonds may question the adoptive parents' sense of parenthood. Moreover, in many cases, societal norms and beliefs denote adoption as a second-best option for parenthood, since adopted children are not "natural" or "real" children (Morgan and Langrehr 2019).

As Leon (2002) notes, the connection of adoption with unavoidable losses, abandonment, personal rejection, and increased psychopathology reflects how stigmatization colors the adoption experience. The stigma of adoption surrounds adoptees as they are expected to experience endless trauma and are frequently asked about their knowledge of their birth family (Kline et al. 2006). The stigma also affects birth families. Lately, researchers began using "first parents" to underline the significance of these parents in their children's lives. This shift in language denotes the far-reaching strain of adoption-related stigma (Baden 2016).

Furthermore, adoption microaggressions represent usual subtle insults or overt prejudice that may occur frequently and be deliberately or not (see further Baden 2016). According to Baden (2016), this concept extends the framework of racial microaggressions (for example insults and/or oppressive actions based on racial and ethnic differences; Sue et al. 2007) to the experience of adoption. As regards adoption, a combination of stereotypes, misinformation, and biases lead to microassaults, microinvalidations, and microinsults that illustrate the dominant nature of adoption stigma usually in small interactions between individuals or groups (Baden 2016).

The current study

In Greece, the dominant family ideology defines real family as entailing two heterosexual parents with their biological children and their kinship bonds tied together genetically. Plans for couples to start a family are high in Greece. As well, there are strong social and family pressures on heterosexual couples to have children (Grigoropoulos 2019a, 2022a, b; Iraklis 2020, 2021a, b). According to Paxson (2004, 2006), "it is gestation and birth, rather than conception, that is both definitive and emblematic of true motherhood" in Greece (2004, p. 221).

In Greece, adoptions are at low levels, with 2.970 adoptions happening during the economic crisis (ELSTAT 2019). Child adoption in Greece is time consuming as the bureaucracy has enlarged the waiting period to up to 6 years, upsetting many of the potential adoptive parents (Anastasiou 2021; Grigoropoulos 2019a).

According to Nanou (2011), Greece has two forms of domestic adoption, adoptions through state institutions and by private agreement. The model most practiced in Greece is closed adoption (without the involvement of a social organization), in which there is no contact between the adopted child and his birth family. The tradition of secrecy still dominates adoption in Greece due to societal stigma (Papadaki 2020).

Despite the aforementioned obstacles to the desire to adopt, many Greek couples also have significant worries as regards the child's biological history (e.g., genetic disorders) or their ability to love and care for a non-biological child (Chatjouli et al. 2015; Grigoropoulos 2019b, c, 2021).

Since parents and children may often have different views on many issues, it seems important to acquire the views of the adoptees themselves (Palacios and Brodzinsky 2010). Therefore, the main aim of this study is to examine the experiences and challenges of the participating Greek adult adoptees and the extent to which adoption issues are openly discussed within the adoptive family.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is scarce research emphasis on adult adoptees' experiences in Greece. In addition, Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010) note that the adoption research is mainly focused on adopted children and adolescents. Given all these aspects, this study adds to the limited research in this field in Greece and provides data from a different socio-cultural context.

Method

This study is part of ongoing research exploring adoptees' experiences of their adoption. The current study focuses on cases of domestic adoption from private arrangements and the welfare system and uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine participants' experiences and challenges. Taking into account that IPA focuses on how individuals experience circumstances and attribute meaning to their own life experiences (Larkin et al. 2006; Smith and Osborn 2003; Tomkins 2017), rather than appraising preconceived theories (Smith and Eatough 2006), IPA was considered as a suitable method for examining how the participants of this study understood their realities. Smith and Osborn (2003) note that due to the lack of any presumed assumptions, any themes stemming from the data are afterward examined in the view of the literature and research considered relevant to the material. In addition, this study's sample size follows IPA research where numbers of participants range from one to 30 (Brocki and Wearden 2006) with a mean number of participants of 15 (Reid et al. 2005).

Participants

Convenience sampling was used as the study was advertised on social media accounts (e.g., LinkedIn) and adoption support groups and social networks. In addition, participants were asked to send the study advertisement to other possible respondents. Fourteen adult adoptees participated in this study. The fourteen participants comprised five men and nine women, ranging from 20 to 47 years old. At the time of adoption, participants ranged in age from 11 months to 4 years old. All the participants of this study lived in the northern part of Greece. The participants had no prior contact or any relationship with the researcher. All participants came from a middle socio-economic background. The participating adult adoptees contributed

their experiences and challenges illuminating the aim of this study (Palinkas et al. 2015). The characteristics of participants are described in Supplementary Table 1.

Data collection

Qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. Interviews took place between June 2020 and November 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic all interviews were conducted using internet applications (e.g., Zoom) and lasted approximately 45 to 85 min each. The interview schedule was structured into two sections: (a) demographics and (b) the examination of the participating adoptees' experiences and challenges. The interview schedule was to assist participants to "tell their story" (Smith and Osborn 2003). This means that there was no pre-established interview grid. The aim was to obtain unprompted speech about the participants' experiences and challenges (Palmer et al. 2010; Smith 2007). The interview started with the following instruction: "Can you tell me about yourself today and about what you think or feel as regards your adoption?" All questions were expressed in an open-ended manner and followed the direction taken by the participant.

Procedure

All participants agreed and electronically signed the informed consent. None of the participants expressed any further concerns about taking part in the study. The emails of the researchers were given to the participants in case they had any further questions about the study. No follow-up email was received. Measures were taken to ensure that the collected data did not expose any personal information. Participants were indicated as initials (i.e., P1: Participant 1, P2: Participant 2...). This study followed all principles of the Declaration of Helsinki on Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects and all the ethical instructions and directions of the institution to which the researcher belongs.

Data analysis

The analysis of transcripts was conducted according to the IPA guidelines presented by Smith and Osborn (2003). This analysis relies on a double hermeneutic wherein the researcher tries to understand how the participant comprehends his/her own subjective experience (Eatough and Smith 2008; Smith et al. 2009). IPA essentially focuses on understanding an individual's lived experience. In particular, IPA emphasizes understanding an individual's lived experience and seeks to approach the data with no preconceived hypothesis. As there were not any specific hypotheses (i.e., Smith and Eatough 2006) any data and themes emerging from participants' narratives were explored using literature research relevant to the material.

Specifically, each transcript was read and re-read, along with the recorded audio, to familiarize the researcher with its contents. With each reading, any interesting or significant points were written down in the form of initial ideas, comments, or summaries (Sparkes and Smith 2014). After several readings and when no extra

points of interest could be identified, the initial notes were examined for patterns and/or connections and evolved into emerging themes. Themes were then cataloged on a list. Comparisons were made across transcripts looking for areas for convergence and divergence. Any relations identified between them led to the grouping of these themes, which finally emerged as superordinate concepts (see further Smith and Osborn 2003). These themes are presented in the results section. All themes emerged directly from participants' accounts as there was no pre-existing theoretical framework used following the basic principles of IPA methodology (Smith and Osborn 2003).

Themes and interpretations were validated by an independent rater with expertise in the IPA method (i.e., Osborn and Smith 1998). Any dissimilarity in the analysis was discussed, and a mutually agreed-upon decision was made about their inclusion (e.g., editing themes names, combining and dividing categories; Silverman 2013). The aim was to ensure that the interpretative account produced was a reliable one, validated by a systemic analytic procedure (Smith et al. 2009), and not to establish objectivity (Brocki and Wearden 2006, p. 98).

Results

Three themes relating to the aims of the current research emerged from the data: (a) adoption secrecy, (b) adoptees' expectations for communication openness, and (c) adoption stigma.

Theme 1: adoption secrecy

From the adoptees' perspective, adoptive parents did not want to openly discuss their adoption. Several respondents mentioned their mothers' refusal to discuss any adoption-related issues. Some adoptees also stated that their adoptive parents did not want to think about it. This secrecy may have hindered participants' understanding of their adoption.

I have tried to ask my parents about my birth parents but nothing came up.... They always tried to avoid this issue..... it seemed that it was better for them to forget it... to not talk about it ... we all acted as if (adoption) never happened.... (P8)

I would like to say ...from my own experience that it is a major mistake for adoptive parents not to say anything to their child about her/his adoption.... to think that they should keep this secret to themselves.... (p14)

This secrecy made several participants feel bad about themselves while at the same time it became a distancing reason between adoptees and their adoptive families. This secrecy directed adoptees' bitter feelings to their adoptive parents.

...to tell you the truth... we were arguing a lot... we were arguing because they did not understand my need to meet my birth parents and..... and many other things... now we do not mention it all...(P9)

I've tried to discuss things, but they did not want to.... no... maybe this is why I felt so uncomfortable around them (P13)

Truth is always better... I wish I knew my adoption story early enough... it would have saved me from a lot of troubles and quarrels with my parents... (P3)

I found out myself that I was adopted... by chance... my parents did not even know that I have found out... so as you understand...this did not improve our relationship...(P12)

In most cases, participants' narratives reveal their adoptive parents' unwillingness to disclose the adoption and postpone 'the telling' maybe for some future time.

...From what my parents told me, I understood that it was very difficult for them to take me out of the institution.. ...they went through difficult times and great stress.... however, although it was difficult for them to discuss my adoption they tried to answer all my questions.... But I am sure they would prefer not to say anything at all to me(P6)

In all, participants' narratives show that adoption remained a highly forbidden issue in their adoptive families. According to adoptees' accounts, adoptive parents may have been overwhelmed and hesitant about what to share and how to disclose it.

This theme indicates that the tradition of secrecy still dominates the experiences of this study's participants. Additionally, in some cases, participants who experienced limited information about their adoption were not comfortable with their adoptive family. In addition, this theme represents an adoption microinvalidation as adoptive parents' behaviors and messages conveyed the meaning that adoptees' needs, feelings, and thoughts were devalued. In particular, adoptees' interest in their biological origins and primary relationships were deemed as insignificant and/or unnecessary.

Theme 2: adoptees expectations for communication openness

Participants' narratives reveal their need to acquire information and answers about their unknown past and in this way learn about the reasons for relinquishment and resolve the secrecy in their lives.

...truth is always redeeming If you know the truth from the start... this includes meeting your birth family....you do not have to live in a fallacy... which it is difficult to change and accept later in life...(P10)

In addition, the understanding that you do not have answers to specific questions about your own life may provoke or intensify a sense of difference.

...at some point, I would like to know about my biological parents and ask them all the questions that I have.... I do not know if I will ever meet them and if they will answer them.... For now, I do not have any information about them.... I keep searching though.... (P4)

I would like to meet them... when I think about it... it's difficult for me to express how I feel.... This is why I prefer not to think about it and leave it behind..... (P9)

Overall, this theme reflects the significance and importance of knowing your life story from the very beginning. Participants' narratives echo and expand the issue of communication openness emphasizing their need to understand their origins. Also, this theme indicates that supporting adoptees' curiosity about their origins is a key task in adoptive parenting. However, this search for their biological origins does not mean that all the participants experience an adoption trauma from which they may never fully "recover." This misconception reflects how the stigma of adoption surrounds adoptees as they are expected to experience endless trauma (Kline et al. 2006).

Theme 3: adoption stigma

This theme echoes participants' beliefs about how society views adoption. Specifically, participants' narratives reflect their personal interactions with others and how society views adoptees. P3's, P6's and P12's narratives are indicative:

I am not used to discussing these issues.... I wish I could help you more... I feel that I have already said a lot.... (P3)

When I do mention that I am adopted I do it very carefully and of course, I do not discuss it with everyone I meet for the first time.... Only with close friends... (P6)

..I try to avoid discussions regarding this issue... I feel pressured... from all those questions and sometimes the others' curiosity feels awkward... (P12)

In some cases, participants' narratives reveal the notion that some questions reflect the underlined societal implications about adoption and their uncomfortable status having to answer such questions that point to their being somehow different.

Knowing the truth and having a chance to meet your birth parents cannot hurt you....

Can you please explain to me what exactly do you mean?

It is my answer to the countless questions regarding my adoption and if I would choose to not know the truth... ..truth is the only way...(P2)

Several participants believe that society has a negative viewpoint on adoption because of the stigma projected onto the adopted individual possibly based upon various beliefs such as that an adopted child will never be the family's real child, or that adopted children are "unwanted" or "rejected" (Baden 2016). These negative societal beliefs may as well be internalized affecting participants' self-esteem as they consider themselves as somehow defective, leading them to avoid any questions and conversations regarding their adoption. This may happen because questions and conversations might operate as triggers that remind them that they are adopted and result in negative emotions within them. Overall, adoptees are treated differently as they have to answer numerous questions concerning their adoption status.

Discussion

This study explored adult adoptees' experiences and challenges regarding their adoption and the extent to which adoption issues were openly discussed within their families. Three themes related to the aims of the current research emerged from the data: a) adoption secrecy, b) adoptees' expectations for communication openness, and c) adoption stigma.

This study's participants' experience of secrecy as regards their adoption was antithetical with the trend towards adoption openness (MacDonald and McSherry 2011). Thus, according to the participants' narratives, there was neither structural nor communication openness on behalf of their adoptive parents. Hence, based on the adoptees' perspective, adopters exercised control over their child's background history. Participants' narratives concerning the adoption disclosure theme are clear as regards the obligation of adoptive parents to disclose the adoption status to the adoptee. This study's findings coincide with research demonstrating that early disclosure of adoption status to the adopted children is crucial (Wydra et al. 2012). For several participants also, this loss of communication and information led to the loss of something most important—the parent–child connection. Thus, the participants completely insisted that communicating the adoptive status to an adoptee is crucial and a significant obligation of the adoptive parents. In addition, participants' accounts echo that the adoptive parents' silence over these issues may cause more trouble. According to the participants, telling the truth allows an adopted child to accept and understand the reality of being adopted. Moreover, this theme emphasizing the need for open communication about adoption counteracts the stigmatizing societal belief of the adoption as a second-best solution of raising a child and, thus, requiring secrecy (Baden 2016). In addition, this theme counteracts the rhetoric of adoption entailing the false expectations that love would be enough for successful adoptive parenting and that adopted children would forget (Baden and Wiley 2007). This study's results coincide with research data reporting that talking about the birth family constitutes a major challenge for adoptive families (MacDonald and McSherry 2011). Also, this study's results are in line with previous studies emphasizing the crucial role of the adoptive parents in open communication about adoption and in helping the adoptee to understand his /her roots (Harrigan 2010).

As Barbosa-Ducharne and Soares (2016) argue, adoptive parents may wait for their children to ask questions. However, the children may not ask questions as they perceive their adoptive parents as incapable of communicating openly about adoption issues. This could have a profound impact on the emotional distance within the family underlining the crucial role that adoptive parents play in open communication. Overall, for this study's participants secrecy still exists.

Secrecy about one's birth family seems to intensify adoptees' sense of stigma (March 1995). Based on the adoptees' accounts, the adoption stigma is present as participants have to answer several interrogative questions related to their adoptive status. As Baden (2016) argues, adoption microaggressions can be sincere or well-intended questions and remarks that subtly devalue adoptees. For example,

when adoptees are questioned about their “real parents” this may imply that the familial relationships formed through adoption are inferior. Thus, although adoptees’ identity is both influenced and constructed by biology, social contexts, and multiple family arrangements as everyone else’s (Yngvesson 2003), they have to cope in a society that the genetic and blood ties are deeply emphasized (Müller and Perry 2001).

Moreover, this study’s results show how several adoptees assimilate the societal beliefs about adoption and how their social relationships are influenced by these notions. Specifically, participants seem to internalize society’s negative viewpoint of adoption, and therefore, in some instances conceal their adoption or avoid questions and conversations that emphasize their adoption because they may operate as triggers that remind them of their negatively perceived adoption status. The internalization of negative judgments can be seen as an integral part of stigma (Hinshaw 2005) and can affect significantly one’s self-esteem and sense of identity (McIntyre and Eisenstadt 2011; Thornicroft et al. 2007). Thus, research findings underline the societal significance of the established kinship relations as they constitute a social stigma for this study’s adoptees.

Overall, adoptees emphasized the importance of honesty about their adoption confidently conveying the message that there is nothing to hide or to keep secret. According to the participants’ accounts, this secrecy presented their adoptive parents with major parenting challenges related to participants’ curiosity and need to know their birth history. The adoptees interviewed reported feeling that their adoptive parents did not acknowledge the importance of the “telling” which points to the need for more intervention programs to enhance adopters’ awareness of the possible positive consequences of adoption openness. In all, even though adoption openness is commonly recommended by adoption professionals, according to this study’s results adopters did not respond to the participants’ curiosity about their unknown history (Palacios and Sánchez-Sandoval 2006). Either way adoption openness through the eyes of the participating adoptees represents a significant challenge for their adoptive parents and imposes significant pressure on them. Most importantly, listening to the perspective of adoptees is important as their experiences and expectations can influence their well-being and the success of their placement (Palacios and Sanchez-Sandoval 2006). Thus, it seems necessary for all adoptive families to be given the necessary information and knowledge to overcome any challenges that may occur. This could include the preparation of adoptive parents in open adoption communication. Hence, the need for adoptive parents’ training and evidence-based adoption policies is also highlighted in this study.

Future research could emphasize the effects of communication openness training on the attitudes of adoptive parents. Future research could also explore adoptively and birth family members’ willingness to negotiate power positions and their beliefs about the benefits of contact. In addition, the identification of adoption microaggressions could improve adoptees’ support strategies and change culturally ingrained assumptions that adoption for example is second best. All in all, this study’s results underline that research and treatment strategies should emphasize the interaction and communication of both parents and children.

Limitations

This study's findings are grounded in each participant's experiences, their own way of perceiving and talking about them, and the way the researcher understood them. Research data were gathered from a small sample of adult adoptees who volunteered to participate in this study. Their experiences from their adoption are unique and cannot be generalized. The findings portrayed in this study are unparalleled and not characteristic of other regions in Greece or other countries. Therefore, it must be viewed with reasonable caution.

Conclusion

This study examined adoptees' experiences and challenges providing valuable insight into adoption communication openness and recognition of adoption stigma and adoption microaggressions. Increased sensitivity and understanding over open communication and adoption stigma may improve pre- and post-adoption practices and services. In addition, it should be noted that the life circumstances of this study's participants and their adoptive families vary widely, and most importantly that adoption cannot be perceived as a unitary entity. Finally, given the adoptive parents' crucial role in the communication process, interventions should also focus on changing the social image of adoption that emphasizes biological connectedness over social kinship in Western culture.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval 'All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.'

Informed consent 'Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.' Grigoropoulos Iraklis was the (only) author of this manuscript.

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