

HUMAN INFORMATION BEHAVIOR, COPING, AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE CONTEXT
OF A PERSONAL CRISIS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE
VOICES OF BIRTHMOTHERS ON RELINQUISHING A CHILD FOR ADOPTION

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Information & Library Science.

Chapel Hill
2017

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ABSTRACT

Rachael Annette Clemens: Human Information Behavior, Coping, And Decision-Making In The Context Of A Personal Crisis: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Of The Voices Of Birthmothers On Relinquishing A Child For Adoption
(Under the direction of Barbara Wildemuth)

This qualitative and interpretive inquiry explores the information behavior of birthmothers surrounding the processes of decision-making, coping, and living with the act of child relinquishment to adoption. An interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology is used to reveal the phenomenon as experienced by eight birthmothers, women who voluntarily relinquished a child to adoption. The resulting text is analyzed to expose common patterns across cases, as well as idiographic themes that emerge at the individual case level.

This study contributes to research positioned within human information behavior by probing the boundaries of everyday life information seeking models to secure space in which to situate contexts of negative life events and personal crises. The significance of this work for practice, policy, and further research is in offering a deeper understanding of the experience of birthmothers during decision-making and coping processes, both pre- and post-adoption, with specific regard to information needs and information engagement.

Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study design, a purposeful sample of eight birthmothers from across the U.S. who relinquished a child within the previous 15 years (since 2000) participated in face-to-face interviews about their own lived experiences. Coincidentally all participants are engaged in some form of open adoption, meaning they

participated in selecting adoptive parents and have varying levels of ongoing contact with the adoptive family and the child(ren) they relinquished.

Information is central to expectant mothers as they consider and explore options, construct and evaluate versions of future possible selves (terminating pregnancy, parenting, or placing for adoption), and frame their situation in order to move forward. The phenomenon of child relinquishment is seeped in secrecy and shame; information sources are similarly tinged and filtered through the same stigma. Information is scarce and involves significant levels of trust on the part of information consumers. Navigating unfamiliar information pathways to support such an emotional and deeply personal decision impacts a woman's means to explore and critically assess options surrounding decisions about an unintended pregnancy. Lack of role models, relevant information, and support systems contribute to feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability, and powerlessness for women who make and live with an adoption decision.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The dissertation journey would not have been possible without the support of so many fellow travelers, role models, and faithful cheerleaders. My sincerest gratitude goes to the following people who have had a significant and extremely positive impact on my own lived experience.

To my advisor, Dr. Barbara Wildemuth, thank you for the expert direction and unfailing support; your generosity of time and sincere engagement made this journey through the pathways of qualitative research so much more meaningful. Your constant prompts to, "Go back to the data," will forever remind me of the value and importance of truly listening to people. No one has *ever* pushed me this hard, while at the same time instilling a confidence that I could actually rise to the occasion. To the members of my committee, Drs. Gollop, Hughes-Hassell, Westbrook, and Wrobel, thank you for the insightful feedback, guidance, and support.

To the eight women who shared their stories so willingly and fearlessly for this project, I thank you; this work would not have been possible without you. Traveling around the country to meet you and hear your voices was by far my favorite part of this process.

To the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina, thank you for the generous funding in support of my travels across the U.S. to interview birthmothers for this research. To the libraries and librarians at the University of North Carolina, thank you for the world-class access to all the material I needed to complete this work; particular thanks to Lorin Bruckner, Data Visualization Services Librarian at Davis Library, for helping me communicate some of my

findings in a visual manner. To all the amazing students whom I've been privileged to teach, thank you for always inspiring me and instilling such confidence in our next generations: undoubtedly you will make our world a better place.

To my fellow members in the Adoption Triad Dialogue Group of Greensboro, NC, thank you for keeping me grounded through your support and insight into the real life experience and effects of adoption. Thanks in particular to Francie Portnoy, our fearless leader, for all the questions, prompts, and support you have so generously given to me, both personally and professionally.

To my family, near and far, by birth and through marriage, warm thanks for the unending words of encouragement and authentic support. Thanks to my parents, John and Donna Ruth Green, for picking up the slack of my family life so many times over the last few years and for consistently demonstrating your unconditional love and support for me.

To my sister, Dr. Rebecca Green, you continue to inspire me both through your high caliber scientific research and your relentless effort to protect our living world. I remain envious of your ability to capture any audience with your amazing wildlife experiences and storytelling skills.

To my dear friend and fellow librarian, Polly McCord, thank you for encouraging me to share my story. To the friends I made through the Pollak Library at California State University Fullerton, thank you for the deeply rewarding experience you offered to me and for supporting my decision to pursue this degree; I am a better librarian and person for knowing and learning from you all. Thank you in particular to Collette Childers, Rob and Joy Sage, Carol Bednar, Ann Rimmer, Marilyn Slagle, Stacy Russo, and Susan Tschabrun for your continued support and belief in me.

To my beloved United Voices of Praise gospel choir, thank you for keeping music on my tongue, a beat in my step, and a song in my heart. To my sisters in the Women's Singing Circle of Hillsborough, thank you for reminding me of the freedom in liturgy and the power of singing together. To the clay studio community at the Arts Center, thank you for allowing me to pursue my passion of throwing clay and for the unending support you've offered to me.

I am particularly indebted to the amazing women comprising a very special *writing partners team*. Membership of the group has changed over the years but I am grateful to Angela Murillo, Ericka Patillo, Sumayya Ahmed, Leslie Thomson, Sarah Ramdeen, and Nina Exner. We all share Sumayya's vision to "keep hope alive". The many, many hours we spent sitting and working together (in the myriad of coffee shops across central North Carolina) gave me the strength and motivation to complete this project; I can never thank you enough and will always consider you among my dearest friends.

To my first daughter, Pyne Elizabeth, I thank you for allowing me to be a part of your life. I continue to be amazed and inspired by your beautiful spirit and fearless strength. You are the impetus for this inquiry and my love for you will never diminish.

To my daughter, Linden Lea, I thank you for the immense joy you have brought to our family. I hope my devotion (yet too frequent time away from you) to this work will instill confidence in you to pursue your own dreams and passions; I will support you wherever that leads. You are living up to the poem/song behind your name, "I be free to go abroad, or take again my homeward road; to where, for me, the apple tree do lean down low in Linden Lea". You will always be *home* for me and I hope the same will forever be true for you.

Finally, the unfailing love and concrete support of my precious husband, David, are what truly sustained me through this process. Dave, I cannot thank you enough for being my rock and

provider of refuge and resurgence. As the smartest, most rational, and truly compassionate person I know, your faith in me is appreciated; when you say, "Yes, Rachael, you can do this" I believe you. You are always at your best when I am at my worst; I remain the luckiest gal in the world.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Information plays a ubiquitous role in shaping the decisions we make in our everyday lives. The ways we look for information, perceive potential sources of information, engage with information, dismiss information, and create and share information influence our understanding of the world and our place in it. Through life experience we become familiar with the processes involved in making everyday decisions and generally develop a confidence in gathering information with which to make satisfying choices. But once in a while we may find ourselves confronted with a situation that shatters or confounds our established means of finding and using information to make a decision. A negative life event may launch us into unexpected and unfamiliar terrain that seems impossible to traverse with customary information pathways and coping resources. Stakes may be high, emotions overwhelming, and consequences life-long. Routine and habitual information behavior paths may be woefully inadequate to support decision-making in such a profoundly personal and deeply meaningful context.

This dissertation research explores information behavior, decision-making, and coping behaviors in response to a personal crisis situation – a context that likely entails extreme levels of emotion, life-long implications, and the potential for shame and stigma – and how these behaviors influence access and fruitful engagement with information that supports decision-making. Examining a particular personal crisis phenomenon allows us to probe the boundaries of existing models and theories surrounding Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) with an eye toward non-work-related experiences that are beyond the realm of everyday life. Instead of

contexts that are familiar, ordinary, and routine (Savolainen, 2004), this work examines the framework of personal crisis in which information pathways may be unfamiliar, circumstances extraordinary, and decision-making far from routine.

Research efforts in multiple disciplines have explored the dynamic relationship between human information behavior, decision-making, and coping behavior within diverse negative or stressful life event contexts: critical physical health diagnosis (Leydon, Boulton, Jones, Mossman, Boudioni, & McPherson, 2000; McCaughan, & McKenna, 2007; Miles, Voorwinden, Chapman & Wardle, 2008), death and dying (Hines, Babrow, Badzek & Moss, 2001;) mental health crisis (Franz, Carter, Leiner, Bergner, Thompson & Compton, 2010; van der Voot, Goossens & van der Bijl, 2009), domestic violence (Westbrook, 2009, 2015; Dunne, 2002), sexual identity (Bond, Hefner & Drogos, 2009), chronic physical or mental illness (Souden, 2008; Oliphant, 2010), caregivers of the chronically ill (Hickman, Daly, Douglas & Clochesy, 2010), natural disaster (Spence, Lachlan & Burke, 2007), political/civic crisis (Koo, Cho & Gross, 2011; Spitzer & Denzin, 1965) and negative financial investment news (Karlsson, Loewenstein & Seppi, 2009). But little attention has been paid to the information behavior of individuals facing a crisis of an extremely personal nature, decisions fraught with emotion and life-long impact, contexts encumbered with societal pressures and stigma, and circumstances far outside the territory of everyday life. Events such as home foreclosure, sudden job loss, unexpected divorce, or police arrest surely upend a person's life such that helpful information is challenging to ascertain, difficult to interpret or evaluate, compromised by a desire to retain confidentiality, or avoided outright in an effort to minimize cognitive dissonance.

The personal crisis context for consideration here involves an unintended pregnancy, a pregnancy confirmation that shocks a woman and sends her into a spiral of emotional overload

and overwhelming feelings of personal crisis, devastation, and uncertainty. Within such a context, this research focuses on the information behavior and coping process of an expectant mother who considers a choice to relinquish her child to adoption and ultimately follows through with that decision, i.e., a birthmother. In this study the term “expectant mother” refers to a woman facing an unintended pregnancy and considering a range of options that may include parenting, adoption, and abortion; the term “birthmother” refers to a woman who has followed through with a decision to voluntarily and legally relinquish her parental rights and place a child(ren) for formal adoption.

What role does information play in the decision-making process of a woman facing a crisis pregnancy? Where are information pathways found? How is information used in coping with the crisis? In retrospect, what information would have been helpful? How is information used in the years following child relinquishment in terms of long-term coping, grief resolution and making meaning of the event?

The phenomenon of concern in this study, the birthmother experience, is nested within a life juncture of sorts, a point where several channels or layers of life experience converge; each of the path markers is necessary in order to accurately pinpoint or label the phenomenon. The roads leading to this intersection are: adoption plan decision-making in light of an unintended pregnancy, human information behavior toward that decision, and informational coping efforts employed to work through both the short-term and long-term repercussions.

This juncture is situated within a complex milieu of emotional affect, unique life situation and relationships, social norms and stigma, and life-long consequences. As we consider the life road of a woman interrupted as she realizes there is an unintended pregnancy, we may ask questions such as: What does this interruption mean to her? Does she identify the pregnancy as a

full-blown personal crisis or more of an added life complexity? What are the options and outcomes she considers or explores? How does she seek out relevant information, what information does she look for, who or what does she consult, how does she process information in relation to her own situation? How does she determine what information to trust? What role does her information behavior play in coping with the situation and people around her? Does she share information with other people? If so, how does that work?

Following a formal relinquishment and adoption event, what is her information behavior like? Does she continue to monitor or seek pieces of information? What adoption-related information and/or artifacts does she collect, and how does she engage with such a collection? Reflecting back on the decision-making and earlier stages of the coping process, what information does she identify as helpful? Does she recognize any barriers to information access or use (including incomplete, misleading or inaccurate information)? Has she since encountered additional or alternative information that would have been helpful? What role has information played in how she continues to make meaning of the adoption experience?

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (Smith, 2007) found that “most women struggling to make decisions about unplanned pregnancies do not have accurate information with which to make an informed choice about whether this [adoption] is a reasonable option for them” (p. 5). Heeding this call to address such a gap and information need, this exploratory study approaches the phenomenon from the vantage of the primary experts, birthmothers themselves, and attempts to elucidate their experience of information behavior with regard to the adoption process. Clearly the experience of a woman and her engagement with information during and after the very intimate decision-making process of relinquishing a child to adoption is a deep and rich context to explore. The complexities of such an experience cannot be adequately captured

and fully examined through traditional methods of natural science. Case files, demographics, statistics, and survey responses may characterize incidents of adoption, predict decisions, and offer causal explanations for certain outcomes. However it is the human sciences that seek an understanding of lived experiences and the meaning made of them by women in the context of child relinquishment.

Looking beyond the quantifiable appearance of adoption, this study uses the methodology of *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA) to explore the birthmother experience through the lens of information behavior. The method of semi-structured interviews is used to expose common patterns across cases as well as the unique idiographic themes of individual cases, and provides a rich, contextual understanding of the experiences of these particular birthmothers. The guiding research question is: *How do women who have placed a child for adoption (birthmothers) seek and use information to make a relinquishment decision and cope with that decision and their life situation more generally?*

This study of the experience of birthmothers is significant for its contribution to a deeper understanding of human information behavior in the context of a personal crisis. The deep examination of the stories of eight birthmothers, recollections of their pre-adoption narratives and their post-adoption voices, allows us to characterize their information behaviors and document the information landscape they traverse. Probing the boundaries of existing models of human information behavior, this work exposes the gaps and opportunities for further research surrounding the complexities of authentic information behavior in the context of a personal crisis.

This study contributes to adoption-related research by focusing on the understudied experience of birthmothers. It can inform adoption professionals and policy makers by

addressing the unique information needs of women as they contemplate an adoption plan, their relationship with information during the decision-making phase, and as they move forward after the relinquishment and adoption event in terms of coping with the life-long decision and incorporating the role of birthmother into their identity and everyday life.

This introductory chapter orients the reader to the phenomenon of inquiry: the experience of birthmothers considered through the lens of information behavior. It suggests the significance of the work for information science and adoption-related research and policy making. Chapter 2 knits together the literature of several disciplines to help situate the phenomenon within existing research related to human information behavior, adoption, coping and informational coping, and decision-making. Chapter 3 describes and justifies the methodological approach to the phenomenon and details the methods used in collecting and analyzing data. Chapter 4 explores the findings of data collection on a case-by-case basis, highlighting the idiographic themes prevalent in the stories of each participant. Chapter 5 brings together the themes expressed across cases, exposing patterns of information behavior emerging in harmony through the voices of all participants. Finally, the discussion of Chapter 6 characterizes the information behavior trajectory of participating women both pre-adoption and post-adoption, describes the information pathways in which expectant mothers and birthmothers operate, identifies implications for both information behavior and adoption research, addresses limitations of this study, and suggests opportunities for further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review brings together research from several disciplines that intersect to inform a study into the information behavior of women considering and coping with a decision to relinquish a child for adoption. First I explore theories and models of human information behavior surrounding everyday life contexts in an attempt to situate a personal crisis context within existing framework boundaries [**Human Information Behavior**]. To introduce the specific personal crisis of interest here, I present an historical backdrop along with recent research focusing on birthmothers: expectant women who considered and decided upon an adoption plan, placing their child for adoption [**Adoption**]. The concept of personal crisis is examined more thoroughly as we move into the realm of coping theory; informational coping — preferences individuals have regarding the amount of information they pursue and/or receive in coping with a negative life event (Miller, 1995; Barnoy, Bar-Tal & Zisser, 2006) — is emphasized [**Coping & Informational Coping**]. A negative life event often involves critical decisions, so I delve into decision-making research that highlights information behavior and coping styles [**Decision-Making**]. A better understanding of the information and decision support needs of birthmothers throughout the adoption process may inform and provide evidence for improving the practice of adoption professionals and also lay the groundwork for further inquiry into information behavior situated within contexts of personal crisis from an information and library science perspective.

2.2 Human Information Behavior

Human information behavior has emerged as an umbrella framework (Savolainen, 2007a) in the world of information and library science, encompassing research surrounding “the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use” (Wilson, 2000, p. 49). Investigations into search processes, methods and strategies have produced several descriptive models of behavior: Wilson’s model of information behavior (1999), Kuhlthau’s stages of the information search process (ISP, 1991), Dervin’s Sense-Making Theory (1992), Pirolli and Card’s information foraging theory (1999) and Belkin’s anomalous states of knowledge (ASK, 1980), are seminal and provide solid scaffolding for forays into human information behavior. More recent models contrast active information search behavior with more passive, non-active and even accidental or incidental information acquisition (Heinstrom 2006; McKenzie, 2003a; Erdelez, 1999; Williamson, 1998).

Researchers in information and library science (ILS) frequently consider information seeking and use in terms of common domains of life activities: 1) activities surrounding research, school, and study; 2) the workplace; and 3) everyday life endeavors both large and small (Urfels, 2000). Clearly the lines between these three spheres are blurry at best, but the distinctions provide a pragmatic means of examining the phenomenon of information behavior.

Savolainen’s (2007a) everyday life information seeking (ELIS) model is widely used in constructing research frameworks of information behavior outside of the workplace environment or academic context. This third realm of life, the sphere of ELIS, is perhaps the most complex because of its individual-centric nature. Savolainen (1995) views information seeking as a natural component of everyday practice through which people orient themselves and solve

problems. He categorizes two types of information seeking common in everyday life situations as directed toward orienting and problem-solving information. These correspond to his concepts of way of life and mastery of life. Way of life relates to the order and coherence of things in one's life, the way one perceives a sense of normalcy that provides meaning. Mastery of life involves both passive and active efforts to maintain or reestablish this sense of normalcy. Mastery of life is "passive when people are satisfied with seeing that everything goes on as expected, at least on the whole. Active mastery of life is associated with pragmatic problem solving in cases where the order of things has been shaken or threatened" (Savolainen, 1995, p. 264). Savolainen offers a typology of the mastery of life arena in terms of problem-solving behaviors that includes dimensions of cognitive and affective responses as well as tendencies toward either optimism or pessimism. These aspects coupled with a variety of capital elements (e.g., values, current phase of life, material, social, and cultural capital) as perceived by an individual, contribute to the ways a person seeks information in various situations. Savolainen's way of life and mastery of life framework aligns easily with the decision-making models discussed later in this chapter and ties directly to the phenomenon under consideration in this study, i.e., the information behavior of expectant women considering relinquishing a child for adoption.

Of course different aspects and activities of one's life do not exist in insulated silos; information, thoughts and decisions about work, school and more everyday pursuits intermingle, overlap, and permeate our life experience. But we can characterize the phenomenon of everyday life information seeking as having a different focus than solely work or purely academic. "The key word is everyday life, which refers to a set of attributes characterizing relatively stable and recurrent qualities of both work and free time activities. The most central attributes of everyday

life are *familiar, ordinary, and routine*” [emphasis added] (Savolainen, 2004, p.1). Information seeking (or, more broadly, information behavior) research streams within the scope of ELIS explore a diverse array of contexts and populations: occupations (Ellis, 1989, 1997), role as consumers (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996), role as students (Kuhlthau, 1993), role as patients (McCaughan & McKenna, 2007), role as caregivers (Harland & Bath, 2008), enthusiasts such as gourmet chefs or hobbyists (Hartel, 2006; Lee & Trace, 2009), intimate partner violence (Westbrook, 2015), and demographic or social groups (Case, 2006; Gollop, 1997).

In addition to specific contexts, ELIS research explores information behavior through the lens of motivation and intent (Weiler, 2005; Todd & Edwards, 2004), through cognitive and behavioral facets such as information avoidance and selective exposure (Case, Andrews, Johnson, & Allard, 2005; Miles, Voorwinden, Chapman, & Wardle, 2008), and even through dimensions of human affect including information monitoring and blunting behavior (Baker, 1996; Baker & Pettigrew, 1999; Miller, 1987). In contrast to an individual-centric approach, Chatman’s ethnographic studies consider the social perspective of human information behavior, often focusing on populations at the margins of society. In a series of studies examining the information world of poor people, Chatman (1996) identified four major concepts that form the basis of information poverty: secrecy, deception, risk-taking, and situational relevance. Chatman’s work is particularly relevant to this study because of the nature of crisis pregnancy and adoption; the shroud of shame and secrecy surrounding both may impact a woman’s information seeking behavior regarding options in the face of an unintended pregnancy. Issues surrounding evaluation and authority of information such as Wilson’s cognitive authority (McKenzie, 2003) and the concept of relevance (Saracevic, 2007) are also prominent throughout

the literature and relate to this study as women must determine information credibility and relevance while navigating unfamiliar information pathways through a situation of crisis.

The growth and diversity of information behavior research in the arena of ELIS prompts us to consider the boundaries and scope of this framework. Have we established the necessary and sufficient conditions for everyday life information seeking, other than exclusion from the workplace or academic emphasis? Savolainen's (2004) characterization of everyday life suggests a nature of familiarity, ordinariness and routine that may represent the majority of life events. But alas, there are the occasional crises or negative life events, usually unanticipated but likely usurping our focus and derailing our routine momentum. What happens in terms of information behavior when we are forced to step beyond the realm of our everyday life? Is ELIS sufficient in addressing information behavior within the context of the deeply meaningful, the unfamiliar, the extraordinary, and the profoundly emotional?

2.2.1 Human Information Behavior in Crisis Contexts

At both the macro and micro levels, a crisis is some juncture or moment in which a decisive change, for better or worse, is imminent. At the individual level, a crisis presents as an internal reaction to an external peril (Stone, Cross, Purvis, & Young, 2003). Slaikeu (1990) describes a crisis as "a temporary state of upset and disorganization, characterized chiefly by an individual's inability to cope with a particular situation using customary methods of problem solving" (p. 15). Stone (1993) identifies three categories of crisis. *Developmental crises* are natural issues in the maturation process as described by Erikson (1982) in his Stages of Psychosocial Development; these emerge over the lifetime through events such as leaving home and taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. *Situational crises* erupt unexpectedly and are specific stressful events such as divorce, disease diagnosis, or job promotion. *Adventitious crises*

are also unexpected events but at a more physically harmful level such as murder, war, or natural disaster. The focus here is on situational crises. Sadly, there is an abundance of situational crisis contexts that would be useful to study in terms of the information behaviors they may evoke. Research from the information and library science perspective has enormous potential in contributing to the depth and diversity of research veins, already underway in several disciplines, that focus on the role information plays in coping with a personal crisis. Survivors of suicide, as well as individuals who have lost someone close to them to suicide, may use information to cope with loss, guilt, and stigma (Gawley, 2010). Family members of a patient lapsing into a traumatic coma do not always receive appropriate and meaningful information as they struggle to understand and cope with the situation (Verhaeghe, van Zuuren, Defloor, Duijnste, & Grypdonck, 2007). Families and caregivers of the mentally ill and psychiatric patients have identified the importance of obtaining and understanding information as a way of coping with the burden of care and resulting stress (Rose, 1996; Church, 2005).

Research addressing information behavior in crisis-driven situations is usually situated within the scope of ELIS (Westbrook & Gonzalez, 2011; Westbrook, 2015, 2009, 2008; Dunne, 2002; Perttilä & Ek, 2010). While ELIS serves as a map for navigating everyday information behavior, situations of an uncommon and unfamiliar nature may require a new model. Confrontation with some sort of crisis may sweep one into uncharted territory, far from the relative stability of an everyday routine. A crisis may necessitate decision-making unsupported by our familiar information pathways. A crisis may present as an acute stress situation involving an unusual, uncommon, or seemingly unnatural problem, time pressure, perceived dire consequences and a high level of uncertainty (Gohm, Baumann, & Sniezek, 2001). Individuals facing a personal crisis may experience cognitive difficulties (Sniezek, Wilkins, Wadlington, &

Baumann, 2002) or find themselves vulnerable to some form of information poverty by exhibiting behavior fueled by secrecy, deception, and risk-taking as described by Chatman (1996).

These complex and overwhelming issues are clearly evident in the nature of child relinquishment to adoption; birthmothers routinely identify the experience of surrendering a child to adoption as the single most stressful event in their lives (Stiffler, 1991; Winkler & van Keppel, 1984; Mantecon, 1994). Deciding to place a child for adoption implies immense and life-long consequences for both mother and child (Jones, 2004; Pugh, 2010; Lauderdale & Boyle, 1994). Uncertainty regarding options, outcomes, trustworthiness of information and even one's confidence in making such a decision are compounded by the pressure of having a nine-month (or less) time deadline. Information pathways relating to adoption plans, alternatives, resources, and support are usually foreign and abstract to the general population (Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016); thus, it is not surprising that the greatest barrier to adoption-related services for birthmothers is reported to be lack of knowledge (Conlon, 2005). Defensive responses to stress surrounding a birthmother's situation, through denial, fantasy, and repression, are commonly reported (Ryneearson, 1982).

Another factor in this crisis context that may stretch it beyond the boundaries of ELIS relates to social norms, stigma, and shame. A lingering legacy of mystery and prejudice still surrounds adoption (March, 2014); the image of a woman *putting up her child for adoption* is not an identity anyone would readily embrace. The parental loss that a birthmother experiences is socially unacknowledged, and the devastating grief has lifelong repercussions (Stiffler, 1991). Intentional concealment (secrecy) and outright deception surrounding child relinquishment may significantly impact the opportunities for information-gathering and evaluation as a woman

contemplates such a decision. The “conspiracy of silence” (Lifton, 1994), as reflected in adoption legislation and practice in the 20th century, is beginning to unravel but still shields information pathways from transparency and access (Winkler, Brown, van Keppel & Blanchard, 1988). Shame, social stigma, and familial disappointment may launch self-protective behaviors, such as those Chatman (1996) describes in the propositions of her theory of information poverty, and ultimately impede the search for information.

Information can often clarify a situation, uncover reasonable options, or offer hope for a positive resolution of a crisis. In some cases, though, information may add to the uncertainty and stress of the response process because of its unavailability, complexity, or overwhelming nature. Focusing research on human information behavior in the context of personal crises will enrich our understanding of both the information needs expressed by people in very real situations as well as our sensitivity to the processes involved in trying to make decisions in the midst of extremely emotional and highly consequential circumstances. Listening to and exploring the diversity of individual perceptions of relevance in terms of helpful information in a decision-making and coping process supports development of information behavior models from the ground up (i.e., based upon lived experiences). Likewise, exposing barriers and describing the unfamiliar and even elusive nature of potentially relevant and useful information throughout this stressful decision-making process provides evidence with which to confront issues of information access, information pathways, and information communication. Descriptive and explanatory research into contexts encumbered with decisions of life-long impact, extreme emotion, and of a deeply personal nature will move the field of Information and Library Science (ILS) forward in both practical and theoretical directions. Implications may provide evidence for improving practice not only in ILS but in the areas of adoption research and social work as well.

2.3 Adoption and Birthmothers

This section provides an overview of adoption with particular emphasis on the birthmother's experience in deciding to voluntarily relinquish a child for adoption and preparing to cope with the life-long impact of that decision. For some individuals the nature of this context meets the criteria of a situational personal crisis in which one is confronted with a precipitating event involving a distressing decision or transition outside the realm of a person's everyday experience and customary coping resources (Caplan, 1964; Puleo & McGlothlin, 2009). The organization of this section begins with a look at concepts and vocabulary within the adoption arena, followed by statistics, practice, and law relating to adoption in the United States. I then document some of the social traditions and stigmas that have cultivated a shroud of secrecy and shame surrounding adoption, as well as more modern shifts that have loosened these perceptions. Finally, research into birthmother grief, coping, information seeking and decision-making come primarily from the fields of social work and psychology. I explore these streams to provide support for building an information behavior research agenda.

2.3.1 *Adoption Concepts and Vocabulary*

Research in the area of adoption characteristically revolves around the “triad” which describes the three human elements of the relationship: biological parents (birthmother, birthfather, birthparents), adopted person, and adoptive parent(s). Positive adoption language is used to demonstrate respect for all those involved in joining people into a family by legal processes and prescribes the phrase *adopted person* as opposed to *adoptee* to recognize that “adoption does not define a person's entire being” (Moe, 2007, p. 32). This approach also changes historical phrases such as *gave up her child* or *put up for adoption* to more child-centric language such as *make an adoption plan* or *relinquish a child to adoption*. Positive adoption

nomenclature has been promulgated widely in the world of social work (Henry & Pollack, 2009). In a similar vein, the triad model itself is frequently rephrased as the “adoption constellation” to reflect the extensive and pervasive effect of adoption on extended family members on all fronts.

2.3.2 Adoption Statistics, Practice, and Law

Adoption presents in numerous forms but by definition is the legal transfer of parental rights from one parent(s) to another. Black’s Law Dictionary defines adoption in legal terms as “the statutory process of terminating a child’s legal rights and duties toward the natural parents and substituting similar rights and duties toward adoptive parents” (Black & Garner, 1999, p. 50). The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (Smith, 2007) estimates more than 135,000 adoptions occur each year in the United States. Adoption looks very different today from the stereotypes of the mid-20th century in which a pregnant teenage girl is sequestered away in a home for unwed mothers until the birth of her child, who is promptly whisked away to an upstanding but infertile married couple, thus freeing the birthmother to resume her life as if nothing had happened. Today, domestic infant adoption is the least common form of adoption, comprising only about 9 percent to 10 percent of all U.S. adoptions. “Of non-stepparent adoptions each year, approximately 59 percent are from the child welfare system, 26 percent from abroad” (Smith, 2007, p. 4).

Statistical and descriptive data characterizing adoption around the world is limited; data regarding birthmothers is extremely scarce; information on birthfathers is virtually non-existent (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009). No national adoption data collection system exists in the U.S. (Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016; Zamostny, O’Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003); a short-lived effort between 1945–1975 by the U.S. Children’s Bureau and the National Center for Social Statistics to collect adoption statistics depended upon

the voluntary actions of states and amounted to mere patchwork rather than a descriptive grasp on adoption figures (Carp, 1998; Herman, 2009). The Child Welfare Information Gateway, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, assembles estimates on adoption numbers in the U.S. Adoptions peaked in the early 1970s with approximately 175,000 children placed annually (Herman, 2009). Numbers dropped and leveled off at approximately 125,000 per year in the late 1980s (Stolley, 1993). “The percentage of infants given up for adoption has declined from 9% of those born before 1973 to 1% of those born between 1996 and 2002” (Jones, 2009, p. 1). Since 1987, however, the number of annual adoptions has remained relatively constant. Several societal changes prompted the decrease in the number of children placed for adoption. First, improved birth control options and legalized abortion provide women alternatives surrounding pregnancy decisions (Child Welfare League of America, 2000). Second, the choice to parent as a single mother (or single father) is much more common and socially accepted than in previous eras (Gibson-Davis, 2011; Mosher & Bachrach, 1996; Miller & Coyl, 2000; Edwards & Williams, 2000). In 1970, 11% of all live births in the U.S. were to unmarried women compared with almost 41% of all live births in 2012 (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Mathews, 2013). The choice to parent within a cohabitating union (unmarried) is also much more common. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012) reports an increase in the proportion of non-marital births to women living with a partner. Third, the teen birth rate has declined overall since 1970 and, “since teenage mothers historically were most likely to relinquish their infants for adoption, this has had a significant effect on the number of infants available” (Jones, 2008, p. 2). Fourth, legislative efforts to preserve and reunify families have impacted adoption numbers (Hollingsworth & Ruffin, 2002). Jones (2008) identifies The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 as an example

of governmental influence on social work priorities and support to keep biological families intact.

In the U.S., adoption law varies state to state but there are some common support systems in place, including a requirement for the birthmother to sign consent and parental relinquishment paperwork before a judge, notary public, or other witnesses (Moe, 2007). Public state agencies manage child placement from foster care to adoption; public agencies may contract with private adoption agencies to facilitate this process (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Private adoption agencies (nonprofit or for-profit) coordinate voluntary infant and child adoptions and may specialize in domestic and/or inter-country adoption. Public and private adoption agencies must be licensed as a Child Placing Agency by their state. Many states allow independent adoption, which bypasses agency involvement, wherein adoptive parents work directly with birthparents and/or a facilitator (attorney, physician, or other intermediary) to transfer parental rights (Moe, 2007). The Child Welfare Information Gateway, as part of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, provides extensive online documentation on adoption law and practice, addressing the statutes of each state.

This review and dissertation focus exclusively on birthmothers in the U.S. who voluntarily relinquish a child for adoption and work with a private adoption agency or adoption professional intermediary for domestic placement. Within the realm of domestic voluntary child relinquishment, adoption practice in the U.S. has been shifting from a secrecy model to a more open model since the early 1970s (Fravel, McRoy & Grotevant, 2000). Openness in adoption refers to the exchange of information and/or contact between birthparents and adoptive (or prospective adoptive) families, pre-adoption and/or post-adoption. There are many different kinds of “open adoption,” including practices such as birthparent involvement in selecting

adoptive parents, prearranging ongoing contact, information exchange, and visitation between parties, collaborative naming of the child, etc. Post-adoption contact agreements are legally binding in some states, but not all. Details regarding post-adoption contact agreements legislation for each state are available through the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2014).

2.3.3 Adoption: Social Traditions and Stigma

A brief look at the history of adoption in the U.S. is important in understanding the legacy of secrecy surrounding adoption in society. Adoption in varying forms has been part of societies since ancient times (for an extensive history, see Presser, 1972), but only in the last 150 years has adoption moved beyond serving as a means to create an heir or family legacy, political alliance, or some form of apprentice or indentured labor structure (Sokoloff, 1993; Silverman, 2001; Herman, 2008). Widely cited as the first modern adoption legislation, Massachusetts passed the Adoption of Children Act of 1851, which placed unprecedented emphasis on the welfare of the child over strictly adult interests. The statute empowered judges to assess the fit and proper nature of the adoption decree itself and of the adopting adults specifically as sufficiently able to care for the child (Henry & Pollack, 2009). It also imposed requirements such as written consent of the birthparents or legal guardian (Sokoloff, 1993). Prior to this point, adoption was not addressed in U.S. law nor in English Common Law, from which it largely evolved (Herman, 2008). At this same time in the mid-1800s, philanthropic and religious groups concerned with the poverty and blight of the large Eastern cities envisioned and organized movements to “rescue” children from urban squalor and release them to “wholesome” farming families in the Midwest, South, and West. Charles Loring Brace founded the Children’s Aid Society of New York in 1853 with the intent to provide better social support services for impoverished youth than existing orphanages or almshouses offered. His radical *placing-out*

plans (as opposed to institutionalization and indentured apprenticeship) operated on the premise that “By removing youngsters from the poverty and debauchery of the city streets and placing them in morally upright farm families, he thought they would have a chance of escaping a lifetime of suffering” (Children’s Aid Society, 2008). Thus began the Orphan Train Movement, 1853-1929, during which 150,000 children were taken from Eastern cities by train to start new lives on family farms across the country. Though controversial even at the time, Brace’s belief that children should be cared for in family homes was subsequently reflected in state legislation such as New York’s Act to Legalize the Adoption of Minor Children of 1873. By 1929 all states had ratified some form of adoption legislation (Presser, 1972).

In 1917, when Minnesota passed the first law in the country sealing adoption records (Gonyo & Watson, 1988), secrecy and “confidentiality became an integral part of adoption practice in the U.S.” (Ayers-Lopez, Henney, McRoy, Hanna & Grotevant, 2008, p. 551). Beginning in the late 1910s, formal adoption practice and law moved to curtail public access to adoption records as states enacted statutes that: 1) sealed the original birth record identifying the biological parent name(s); and, 2) produced a second amended (falsified) birth certificate for the adoptive child which replaces the names of the biological parent(s) with those of the adoptive parent(s). Around the time of World War II, recommendations from professional social work organizations such as the Child Welfare League influenced states to enact these statutes, which denied access to adoption records to all members of the adoption triad (Racine, 2002). The rationale behind these statutes was two-fold: 1) protect the birthparents and adopted child from the stigma of illegitimacy, and 2) protect the adoptive parents from the shame of infertility and strengthen the bond among the newly formed family (Rueff, 1998). This shift to sealing birth records was not immediate or uniform across all states. Although a point of contention, Carp

(2002) points out that, during the first half of the twentieth century, “with the exception of two states, adult adopted persons were legally able and often accessed their adoption records, including birth certificates and identifying information in adoption agencies’ files” (p.61).

Information about birthparents is generally collected during pre-placement interviews by the adoption agency or case worker and falls into two categories: *non-identifying information* such as medical and social history (race/ethnicity, age, occupation, education level, etc.); and *identifying information* such as original birth certificate, adoption decree, and names of birthparents and relatives (Fair, 2008). Access to original birth certificates in cases of adoption is forbidden except through court order in all states except Alabama, Alaska, Maine, Oregon, and the Virgin Islands, which allow adult adopted persons to request these records (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Since the 1970s several organized efforts led primarily by adopted persons and birthparents, have lobbied for changes in state laws to permit exchange of non-identifying and identifying information among members of the adoption triad (Carp, 2007; Sanger, 2012). Mutual consent registries exist in some states allowing parties to an adoption to register if they want to find one another, and a growing number of states have statutes that authorize a public or private agency, or designated individual, to act as a confidential intermediary in actively searching for birthparents and adopted children. Often the process requires a court to authorize disclosure once both parties consent to meet. Details surrounding confidential intermediary service legislation for each state are available through the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016).

Privacy, secrecy, and information concealment have permeated adoption regulation in the U.S. since the early part of the twentieth century, enforced both through law and through custom (Modell, 2002). “When adoption was first codified in 1851, confidentiality was not part of the

legislation” (Silverman, 2001, p. 85). Several opinions exist as to the rationale behind this directed and on-going concealment of information, three of which will be discussed here briefly: 1) protection of birthparents’ identity; 2) protection of adopted child’s illegitimate status (if that is the case); and 3) protection of adoptive parents’ privacy.

Many religious and moral traditions view extra-marital sexual relations as inappropriate at best, and the proof of such promiscuity in the birth of a child as a disgrace, with both mother and offspring subject to social ostracism (Child Welfare League of America, 1960). It is easy to see how such a stigma might prompt the pregnant woman/girl and/or her family to search for a way out of a disreputable predicament. Fleeing the situation to give birth and relinquishing the child for adoption in secret was a common response in the early to mid-1900s. Maternity homes or homes for unwed mothers provided a temporary escape destination for pregnant girls and also served as a conduit through which to place an illegitimate child in a more traditional (i.e., married couple) family home. Group homes in the U.S. were largely funded and run by the Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, or the Florence Crittenton Association (Liebmann, 1993). In addition to providing food, shelter, and medical services, the focus of many of these maternity homes “was on ensuring, through moral and religious teaching, that the mother did not bear further children out of wedlock, on shielding her from the community during and after her confinement, ... and on assisting the placing of children for adoption” (Liebmann, 1993, p. 38). As early as the 1920s social work professionals were largely critical of this institutional care approach and instead lobbied for increased funding and attention to a foster care and caseworker system (Kunzel, 1988; Morton, 1988). Regardless of the methods of assistance, standard practice in traditional adoption involves sealing the original birth certificate to avoid any reference to legitimacy of birth. In the 1950s–1960s the Child Welfare League of America Standards for

Services for Unmarried Parents explained the use of birth cards that verify only the date and place of birth in lieu of original birth certificates because, “In our present-day society it is particularly important not to embody his [the child’s] out-of-wedlock status in the official documents available to the public” (1960, p. 64).

An historical culture of shame stigmatizing infertility issues is a substantial buttress to the wall of secrecy surrounding adoption. Couples distressed by infertility issues may seek to adopt a child to fulfill familial desires without drawing attention to their inability to conceive. Adoption agencies in earlier decades often unwittingly or purposefully placed focus on the adoptive parents by keeping birthparent identifying information brief and non-identifying (Baran, Pannor, & Sorosky, 1975). The emotional and sentimental value of young children, particularly infants, grew considerably over the course of the twentieth century, replacing the preference for older children who could contribute economically to households prior to the enactment and enforcement of child labor laws. In the post-World War II era of widespread economic prosperity, a new definition of the family emerged in which children were now seen as social necessities (Carp 1998; Lobar & Phillips, 1994). Infertile couples created a high demand for adoptable infants.

The literatures of psychology, sociology, social work, education, and law provide extensive exploration into the experience of adopted persons and a significant amount into the adoptee-adoptive parent relationship. As early as the 1910s, field studies were used to create aggregate profiles of adoption and investigate the adequacy of and adherence to state regulations (Herman, 2009). Outcome studies aimed to craft more long-term descriptions of the adoption experience. The 1924 landmark study, *How Foster Children Turn Out*, published by the New York State Charities Aid Association, tracked 910 children placed in foster homes and found

statistical evidence that placing-out had overwhelmingly positive outcomes as they matured: the majority of grown subjects met school success, self-support, and law-abiding benchmarks (Theis, 1924).

2.3.4 Birthmother Grief, Coping, Information Seeking, and Decision-Making

Research has developed significantly in the last 20-30 years with an eye toward considering the complexities and long-term experience of adoption. The perspective and experience of adopted persons is represented in studies focusing on the search for information about birthparents (Farr, Grant-Marsney, Musante, Grotevant, & Wrobel, 2014; Müller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2001; Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004; Wrobel, Grotevant, Samek, & Korff, 2013). Issues surrounding communication, openness, information sharing, and associated outcomes for all members of the triad have become common (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Wolfgram, 2008; Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrich, 1996).

Research focusing specifically on the birthparent member of the traditional triad, is the most limited in quantity and scope (Freundlich, 2002; O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003). Traditionally studies that focus on birthparents tend to use case-record data (Cushman, Kalmuss, & Namerow, 1993) and typically examine demographic and socio-economic variables; teenage pregnancy; psychological wellbeing, grief, mourning, and counseling; reunion; and the open-closed adoption continuum. In order to place the birthmother context into an information behavior research framework, two specific research veins are explored here: 1) the grief and coping process; and 2) the decision-making process.

Expectant parents considering adoption today face complex and emotional choices fraught with uncertainty; such a context does not necessarily offer desirable options, but a selection of tough and painful outcomes. This decision is usually reported as the most difficult

decision an individual will ever have to make (Winkler, Brown, van Keppel, & Blanchard, 1988; Winkler & van Keppel, 1984). Although small in number, studies of birthparents (almost exclusively birthmothers) identify several common manifestations of grief. Relinquishing a child means the loss of a child, which is an experience of physical, emotional, and psychological loss (Millen & Roll, 1985), and has a significant impact on feelings of personal worth and integrity (LaMonica & Koterski, 1997). Lifelong grief is reported, the severity of which may increase over time (Haugaard, Schustack, & Dorman, 1998; Shawyer, 1979; Inglisk, 1984; Winkler & van Keppel, 1984). Feelings of sadness, depression, guilt and even anger at the time of adoption frequently range from “intense” to “the most intense ever experienced” (Condon, 1986). De Simone (1996) found that birthmothers’ high levels of unresolved grief correlate with perceptions of coercion by others in the decision-making process. As with any personal loss, a grieving process is instrumental in coping with and adapting to a crisis. However, the grief experienced by birthmothers is often unrecognized in society because of the secret and shameful legacy surrounding adoption; “consequently, the birthmother is forced either to grieve silently or deny her emotional needs” (Lancette & McClure, 1992, p. 86). Unlike the loss of a child through death, loss through adoption may be socially stigmatized; family and friends may be unsure how to respond or even unaware of the need for support (Greenblatt, 1978).

In the last few decades, though, research in fields such as social work, psychology, counseling, and nursing have made efforts to address the unique needs of those considering adoption and birthparents after making such a decision (Wiley & Baden, 2005; Weinreb & Murphy, 1988; Lancette & McClure, 1992). Recommendations call for adoption professionals “to facilitate, rather than discourage, parental mourning for the surrendered child” (Deykin, Campbell, & Patti, 1984, p. 271).

A large, on-going, longitudinal study, The Minnesota / Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP), focuses on the consequences of variations in openness in adoption arrangements for all members of the adoptive triad: birthmothers, adoptive parents, and adopted children. This project provides substantial scaffolding on which further exploration into the birthmother experience is based. Using a subset of data from the first wave of birthmother participants (n = 75), Christian, McRoy, Grotevant and Bryant (1994) probed the complexities of grief resolution in birthmothers at a post-adoption point in time of 4-12 years using interviews and written measures to elicit evidence of current resolution of grief. In addition to a vivid picture of birthmother coping and grief resolution processes, their findings demonstrate the relationship between the level of openness (in terms of information sharing) and degree of grief resolution in birthmothers. Analyzing data from two waves of the MTARP study (169 birthmothers interviewed 4-12 years post-placement and a majority of the same birthmothers interviewed again, 12-20 years post-placement), Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, and Grotevant (2007) further explored birthmothers' experience of grief and loss at varying points following relinquishment and in relation to the type of openness of each adoption event. Based upon their findings that grief reactions are highly personal and may change with an individual's life stage or situation, they identify a need for a "contemporary theory of birthmother adjustment across the lifespan, particularly regarding resolution of grief and loss" (Henney, Ayers-Lopen, McRoy, and Grotevant, 2007, p. 887). Specific guidelines and practice recommendations surrounding the adoption process continue to develop, focusing more and more on birthparents, the information they seek, and the support they deserve (Siegel & Smith, 2012; Smith & Brandon, 2008). This dissertation work adds to this effort by examining the relationship between information behavior and the decision and coping processes of birthmothers.

Investigation into the decision-making process of women deciding whether or not to place a child for adoption is limited but certainly exists. The primary focus of research in birthmother decision-making examines factors influencing the process; different eras have tended to concentrate on different variables. In the 1950s and 1960s the aim of research into the decision process of “unmarried mothers” was to identify demographic characteristics commonly associated with, if not predictive factors of, the final decision outcome to relinquish or parent the child. Researchers in the developing fields of social work and sociology at that time frequently examined case files of women who received some level of assistance through a social service agency in attempts to identify background characteristics that correlated with a decision to place or parent. Research during those decades identified several fairly consistent factors that purported to incline a woman to decide to place the child for adoption (Meyer, Jones, & Borgatta, 1956; Yelloly, 1965; Grow, 1969; Festinger, 1971). In their extensive review of the literature surrounding birthparents’ decision-making period, Wiley and Baden (2005) extended a call for research into *relinquishment coercion* as an important variable in the process — the degree to which a birthparent feels empowered to make their own adoption plan. Curtis (1990) conducted an ethnographic study of pregnancy counseling to examine the decision influences allowed by and affecting a birthmother. Social workers “ranked the birth mother’s own mother as most influential, followed by her father (if present), and then the father of the child...because relinquishment means pain and loss, workers reported that the birth mother’s ability to tolerate this loss depended on her mother’s ability to tolerate it” (Curtis, 1990, p. 252). An investigation into the decision-making process of pregnant teens (to parent or place for adoption) identified two social influence variables, which consistently predicted the decision: the mother’s preference (mother of the birthmother) and the birthfather’s preference (Dworkin, Harding, & Schreiber,

1993). However, these studies did not address the specific information seeking processes of these birthmothers or how they identified, evaluated, and used information in their decision processes.

Criticism of birthparent research is often aimed at the sources of data under consideration, which include clinical data, convenience samples, large-scale survey data sets, and agency data (Namerow, Kalmuss, & Cushman, 1997). Concern arises when studies are based on samples that may or may not represent the larger population of women who relinquished a child for adoption. Birthmothers are not a population with wide visibility, so researchers often recruit participants through adoption support groups and adoption agencies. For example, Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) is a natural recruitment source for birthmother research (Deykin, Campbell, & Patti, 1984), but obviously membership is comprised of self-selected individuals who at some point seek support and communication.

Confirmation of an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy by a woman might yield mild surprise, spawn a full-fledged personal crisis or something in between. A decision to pursue an adoption plan for the child is a fairly rare response in such a situation but an interesting crisis context in which to study human information behavior because of its unfamiliar, highly emotional, deeply personal, and historically stigmatized nature. Researchers at the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute estimate that each year in the United States, 13,000 to 14,000 babies are voluntarily relinquished for adoption domestically (Smith, 2007). Findings from their 2007 report indicate, "Principally because adoption is not well understood by the public generally, most women struggling to make decisions about unplanned pregnancies do not have accurate information with which to make an informed choice about whether this is a reasonable option for them" (Smith, 2007, p. 5).

2.4 Crisis, Coping, and Informational Coping

In the realm of human behavior and psychology, the concept of coping focuses on a person's "cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction" (Folkman, 1984, p. 843). The function of coping is two-fold: 1) regulate distressing emotions, and 2) do something to change for the better the problem causing the distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Thus both a behavioral reaction and an emotional reaction may be present. These distinctions are recognized across much of the literature (Endler & Parker, 1990).

Research into coping began by looking at stress and human response to stress. In the 1940s and 1950s, researchers in behavioral and health sciences repurposed the concept of *stress* from an engineering or physics sense of the word, while launching a path of inquiry into the physical and/or psychological stress that often affects human beings (Mason, 1975). In both cases, external forces are identified as potential stressors (McGrath, 1982), whether the pressure is applied to a structure or an individual (Selye, 1976). Theories of human stress are often clustered into one of two approaches: 1) "*systemic stress*" as evidenced in bodily processes studied in physiology and psychobiology, or 2) "*psychological stress*" as addressed in cognitive psychology (Krohne, 2002).

Definitions of coping converge into similar verbiage from numerous researchers. Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141) explain coping in terms of process(es): "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person." Snyder and Dinoff (1999, p. 5) describe coping as "a response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional, and psychological burden that is linked to stressful life events and daily hassles." Although coping research

diverges in terms of varying emphasis on potential explanatory or predictive factors in coping response, social scientists generally agree that individuals “differ in the way information is processed to facilitate effective coping processes” (Hickman, Daly, Doubles & Clochesy, 2010, p.411).

Coping research and theory has been approached using different but complementary lenses; researchers often consider human coping by contrasting various facets. A long-standing approach is the focus on coping style versus coping process (Lazarus, 1993). The style or diathesis-oriented perspective emphasizes coping behavior as related directly to one’s personality trait(s) (Costa, Somerfield, & McCrae, 1996; Wagner, Chaney, Hommel, Andrews, & Jarvis, 2007). This research vein views personality and disposition as fairly stable and consistent, so we are able to predict and/or explain a person’s choice of coping strategy across time and context. For example, Menninger (1954) describes a hierarchy of pathological behavior based upon the constitution or strength of one’s ego. When faced with stress or trauma a person with a *healthy* ego will react with positive adaption; the *feeble* ego will fail and follow a psychotic adaptive process. Research developed around this idea now includes descriptions, measurements, and instruments to link one’s traits with different coping styles (Cohen, 1987).

In contrast to the personality trait approach, Lazarus and Folkman define a process-oriented approach in which coping behavior changes over time and through different contexts (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Olff, Langeland, & Gersons, 2005). Popular use of the term coping usually implies effective and rational management of the reaction to a stressful situation, while “not coping” suggests failure (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, it is important to note that coping as defined in the process approach refers to the *effort(s)*, not the outcome (success-failure continuum) (Folkman,

1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). This perspective abandons the hierarchy of universally good or bad coping behavior (but does recognize some patterns in effectiveness/ineffectiveness). The coping as a process theory identifies at least two dimensions of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves strategies that try to solve, reframe, or minimize the effects of a stressful situation; emotion-focused coping attempts to turn the focus away from the distressing situation and regulate the distressing emotions through distraction, relaxation, and calming self-talk (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

More recent work from process-oriented coping research (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010) attempts to combine elements from both perspectives in a more holistic approach by recognizing several facets: 1) coping has multiple functions, including but not limited to the regulation of distress and the management of problems causing the distress; 2) coping is influenced by the appraised characteristics of the stressful context, including its controllability; 3) coping is influenced by personality dispositions including optimism, neuroticism, and extraversion; and 4) coping is influenced by social resources. Efforts to master, tolerate, reduce, or endure stressful events may be purely behavioral (e.g., take action to overcome the threat), purely psychological (e.g., crying), or a combination of behavioral and psychological responses (Morgan, 2007). In this review I focus on the psychological stress model developed largely by Richard Lazarus (1966; 1993) and his student, Susan Folkman (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). Rebutting the behaviorist perspective of the time that typically eschewed the importance of emotion in explaining human behavior, Lazarus embraced the complexity of adaptive human response and “contributed substantially to the ‘cognitive revolution’ that occurred in psychology during the 1960s” (Nagourney, 2002). They crafted a relational definition of stress emphasizing the connections between an individual, their

environment, and resultant psychosocial outcomes. “Psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Interested in the causes of psychological stress, they examined two crucial processes that mediate the person-environment relationship: 1) cognitive appraisal of a stressor as potentially harmful, followed by 2) initiation of coping behaviors to mitigate the effects of the stressor (Folkman, 1984). Both of these processes have the potential for information behavior, be it seeking, avoiding, evaluating, dismissing, or using information to reduce uncertainty and cope with a crisis.

Research in the area of coping examines human response to a threatening situation at both the cognitive and behavioral levels. Folkman and Lazarus (1988) identify a two-stage process in mediating or navigating a stressful incident. First, a cognitive appraisal raises one’s awareness of the existence, nature, and scale of a “threat.” Then a process of managing the threat is set in motion. This second effort is known as coping. The way one chooses (albeit not necessarily overtly) to address and deal with such a stressful and threatening environment may be influenced by several factors, including the perception of control. An impending threat that one feels is completely outside their ability to influence or control may suggest a coping response focused more on emotion and tempering the unpleasant feelings of stress. However, problem-focused coping reactions and strategies may be more likely if the person senses the possibility of control or change in the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

When confronted with a potentially stressful or hazardous situation, we first engage in cognitive appraisal. Lazarus and Folkman describe the appraisal model (1984) as an iterative process of evaluating the perceived nature of the threat, degree of risk, and our own coping

resources. By gauging the fit between our stress level and coping adequacy (or inadequacy), we formulate an appraisal of the situation. “Cognitive appraisal can be most readily understood as the process of categorizing an encounter and its various facets, with respect to its significance for well being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 87). We may determine that our resources for dealing with the situation are sufficient and we are prepared to face this *challenge* (high level of self efficacy). However, perceived inadequacy relative to the situational demands may result in a *threat appraisal* that typically heightens the anxiety level, escalates fear intensity and freezes coping abilities (low level of self-efficacy). It is important to note that the cognitive appraisal process may involve a variety of resources including beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, biases, and self-concept. However, information behavior (information seeking, evaluation, use, etc.) may also play a valuable role in both understanding the stressor and identifying options to advance a positive outcome.

Identifying and describing facets of cognitive and behavioral coping is challenging at best; measuring the extent, depth, and completeness of coping styles or processes appears almost insurmountable. Nonetheless, multiple measures and scales have been developed, primarily questionnaires based on self-evaluations (Suutama, 2003). Typically these instruments instruct participants to vividly imagine themselves in a real-life recent stressful encounter, or hypothetical scenarios are provided in the questionnaire. Lists or statements representing various ways of coping follow these scenarios. Subjects identify which responses best represent their personal coping strategies. These questionnaires usually yield scores on several coping dimensions.

The *Encyclopedia of Psychological Assessment* (Suutama, 2003) identifies the most frequently used coping measurement instruments as the Ways of Coping Questionnaire

(Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) and the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (Endler & Parker, 1990). These two questionnaires have been modified and adapted for use by different age groups (children, adolescents, etc.) and various problem areas and translated into other languages.

The measurement of cognitive and behavioral coping styles is frequently criticized (even among researchers themselves) for inconsistent and nebulous depictions of coping behavior, self-reported single-point-in-time measurement, and even a lack of clear theoretical underpinnings (Sweeny, 2008). For example, the Folkman and Lazarus (1988) Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) reports fairly low internal consistency among the eight scales, which range from *Confrontive Coping* to *Positive Reappraisal*. According to a 2004 review of the WCQ in the *Mental Measurements Yearbook*, the Cronbach's alpha for *Distancing* is .61 and the estimate for *Accepting Responsibility* is .66 (range = .61 to .79 for all scales). The instrument's authors shine light on these potential shortcomings, dismissing the notion that the instrument is a test — but instead presenting the tool as an evolving strategy for measuring the coping process rather than coping dispositions or styles.

Most coping measurement tools developed in the 1970s–1990s involve scales that assess two coping dimensions: problem-focused coping (task orientation) and emotion-focused coping (person orientation) (Parker & Endler, 1996). However, a third dimension of coping was added to the mix in the 1990s: avoidance-focused coping. Avoidance refers to behaviors and cognitive adjustments aimed at eluding the stressor. Endler and Parker (1990) note two varieties of avoidance coping: 1) distraction, engaging in a substitute task, and 2) social diversion, seeking out other people to help divert attention away from the stressor.

Information often plays a significant role in the coping and decision-making strategies of one trying to resolve a crisis (one way or another). Different frames of reference lead to different

conceptualizations or appraisal of a potential personal crisis; likewise, different internal and external coping resources influence one's information behavior. The relationship between information preference and coping style is often referred to as *informational coping* (Barnoy, Bar-Tal, & Zisser, 2006; Kelly, Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Porter, DeSimone, & Andrykowski, 2011; Hickman & Daly, 2008) and is usually described and measured on a continuum scale of monitoring—blunting behavior (Miller, 1995; Miller, 1996; Case, Andrews, Johnson, & Allard, 2005). The existence and awareness of information about the threat may trigger a parallel behavioral reaction: 1) attention to and active engagement with threat-related information, or 2) non-pursuit and intentional avoidance of information. This phrase, informational coping, appears to bridge the work of information behavior and coping theory in a very clear and useful fashion.

The framework of monitoring and blunting is based upon this idea of a vigilance/sensitization – repression/avoidance continuum. The monitoring-blunting framework focuses on the behavioral reactions to stressful events or situations with respect to information preference and information seeking behavior (Miller, 1983, 1987; Lambert & Loisel, 2007; Glycopantis & Stavropoulou, 2011; van Zuuren & Wolfs, 1991). In keeping with the coping-as-process approach emphasizing the influence of specific stressful contexts or situations (instead of strictly personality traits), one might monitor, scan, and actively pursue information relevant to a stressor in coping with the particular incident. Facing a different stressful context, the same person may react by engaging in blunting behavior, preferring to avoid or disregard threat-related information and instead seeking distraction from the stressor and related information. Monitoring and blunting styles of information seeking are not mutually exclusive, but can be viewed as extreme points on a continuum (Sweeny, 2010). The styles do not necessarily represent consistent behavior in an individual over time and across diverse situations. However, they are

useful in exploring human behavior and information seeking in the context of a crisis. To identify and measure how individuals cope with threat-related information, Miller developed a self-reporting inventory. The Miller Behavioral Style Scale (MBSS) “divides individuals into high and low monitors and high and low blunters based on their self-reported preferences for information or distraction in a variety of naturalistic stress situations” (Miller, 1987, p. 346).

Drawing on Littlejohn’s criteria for evaluating a theory (1992), the framework of monitoring and blunting scores fairly high. The concept is general enough to apply to coping strategy and human information behavior research across diverse populations and multiple contexts. The description and explanations embedded in the framework are both logical and consistent with previous work in the study of coping and cognitive science. Numerous research studies and exploratory work have been generated from the monitoring and blunting construct, especially in the fields of medicine, nursing and health education.

Two studies in particular illustrate the opportunities for real-world application of monitoring and blunting concepts in order to improve practice, one in nursing and another in library and information science. Lalor, Begley, and Galavan (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of women who received an unexpected (and naturally stressful) diagnosis of fetal anomaly during a routine ultrasound. Sequential in-depth interviews with the women throughout their pregnancy focused on information preference, decision-making, and coping and included the concepts of monitoring and blunting. In the second study, Baker (1996) examined information preferences of women in the active coping stage following a fairly recent (within three years) diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS). Building upon the monitoring and blunting framework, Baker constructed a “short” and “long” version of an information pamphlet on an MS-related topic (such as fatigue) and randomly assigned participants to receive one or the other. In addition

to taking the MBSS, respondents completed a questionnaire to elicit their prior knowledge of the topic and the helpfulness of the information provided in the pamphlet. Discussion of the study findings indicates different coping styles should be met with different levels of information flow and presentation. Both of these studies provide concrete evidence of the importance for practitioners, when acting as information conduits, to be sensitive to the diverse needs of individuals as they face a negative life event and to develop a range of strategies to support varying types of informational coping.

Coping theories contribute substantially to this dissertation project by providing extensive descriptive research that we may apply or use to interpret the particular phenomenon under consideration. The study is oriented around the concept of *informational coping*, which brings together the relevant cognitive and behavioral aspects of a negative life event, information behavior, and coping. Coyne and Racioppo (2000) caution however, that “Coping researchers should not depend on existing coping instruments to inform them of what they need to know about the phenomena” (p. 661). Instead, they recommend a systematic approach to describing responses of participants who have experienced a common stressor. I followed that recommendation and pursued a qualitative and interpretive approach in order to hear and understand the lived experience of birthmothers in terms of their information behaviors, coping strategies, and decision-making processes.

2.5 Decision-Making

Decision-making and information behavior are intricately connected in theory and practice. Both involve cognitive processes, engage evaluation measures, and are subject to heuristics and potential bias. The scope of the concept of *information* itself is not always congruent between behavioral decision theory and information behavior. Whereas the latter

typically involves external sources such as other people, media, written communication, statistics, and other data in context, it is possible within decision theory to rely exclusively on internalized knowledge, feelings, and beliefs. Information or evidence consists of any belief or potential belief that helps the decision-maker determine the extent to which a possibility achieves some goal. This research however, focuses on decision-making by individuals in real-life situations, highly likely to involve some amount of external information seeking and use.

Rationality in the context of decision theory is largely defined and recognized through consistency and coherence among one's judgments and decisions. Choices and behavior should be in harmony with the decision-maker's internal beliefs, values, and goals — patterns of self-contradiction may indicate irrationality (Dawes 2001). Since our beliefs may change over time, our decisions should change accordingly. Decision theory involves a wide array of models, theories, and concepts through which we may analyze the process of decision-making. Decision theory is concerned with goal-directed (as opposed to random) behavior in the midst of alternatives/options. Although a discipline in its own right, decision theory exists within and draws from economics, psychology, statistics, political science, philosophy and ethics. Three approaches to decision-making include: 1) normative models — how decisions *ought* to be made (best rational choice), 2) descriptive models — how decisions *are* made (empirical study of behavior), and, 3) prescriptive models — how to make the best decision given limitations of cognitive capacities. This phenomenological study explores decision-making from a purely descriptive perspective, based upon the lived experience of birthmothers.

The cognitive process of decision-making is typically illustrated in terms of phases — analogous to stages commonly describing information behavior: 1) recognition of problem requiring a decision, 2) formulation, 3) alternatives/options generation, 4) information search

regarding problem and options, 5) judgment or choice, 6) action, and 7) feedback (Carroll & Johnson, 1990). Just as in the information seeking process, phases in decision-making are not necessarily sequential or discrete. As one investigates and reflects on a problem, different options may come to light, advantages/disadvantages may be readjusted, conflicting information must be addressed, etc.

Decision-making invokes one's heuristics seemingly involuntarily. Common sense, anecdotal evidence, evolutionary and environmental experience, and personal value structures usually provide a decision-maker with a *sense* of which option most closely matches her goals. We use heuristics to "reduce the complex tasks of assessing probabilities and predicting values to simpler judgmental operations" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, p. 1124). Rarely if ever does the legendary "economic man" materialize; Herbert Simon (1955) scoffs at this über-rational figure: "This man is assumed to have knowledge of the relevant aspects of this environment which, if not absolutely complete, is at least impressively clear and voluminous" (p. 99). Further, his powers include "a well-organized and stable system of preferences, and a skill in computation that enables him to calculate, for the alternative courses of action that are available to him, which of these will permit him to reach the highest attainable point on his preference scale" (Simon, 1955, p. 99).

In broad terms, Simon's notion of satisficing recognizes that decision-makers can rarely obtain and consider all the information pertinent to the decision, potential options, potential consequences, and likelihood or probabilities involved (1955), so instead we work with limited and simplified knowledge. We aim for acceptable, compromise choices, rather than pursue "maximizing" or "optimizing" strategies as described in rational choice theory (Scott & Marshall, 2009; Byron, 2005).

Most decision-makers are typically left to rely on their own efforts for decision support — gathering, evaluating and using information to make decisions. The ability to consider alternative possibilities is a fundamental component in Barron's (2008) *active open-minded thinking*, which may fend off irrational behavior in decision-making. Relying on heuristics and prior beliefs is not sufficient; the decision-maker should seek out and evaluate information/evidence in order to identify, examine, and weigh viable options surrounding the decision. Exclusively employing heuristics to gauge probabilities and predict values can lead to biased and erroneous decisions (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). The ideal decision support system might scan the environment for the most credible, timely, objective, and relevant information, quickly identify all the options consistent with the decision-maker's particular set of values, calculate utilities, and deliver an executive summary of the top recommendations.

Examination of human information seeking behavior is abundant in the decision theory literature. Numerous parallel, complementary, and occasionally conflicting lines of research address questions about influential factors in decision-making and surrounding information behavior, specifically the various preferences, biases, and avoidance tendencies people exhibit as seemingly irrational behaviors. In the studies reviewed here, Festinger's (1957) *dissonance theory* is frequently cited as the underlying framework of these biases: "...once committed to an alternative, people prefer supportive (consonant) information compared with opposing (dissonant) information to avoid or reduce post-decisional conflicts" (Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, & Thelen, 2001, p. 557). People prefer agreement / consonance with and among their beliefs — so they are likely to pursue information that supports their own predispositions. Likewise they are apt to undervalue, discount or even avoid evidence that conflicts with their belief structure — an inclination to reduce/eliminate dissonance. Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, and Thelen (2001)

observed another interesting interplay between information behavior (active seeking, selective exposure, and avoidance) and decision-making: “...simply avoiding dissonant information would not reduce any experienced dissonance; thus, seeking additional supporting information is a more effective strategy” (p. 569).

According to decision-making research, engagement with information surrounding decision-making may be influenced by:

- Decision-focus vs. information-focus in search (Frey & Greenberg, 2008; Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, & Thelen, 2001; Jonas, Traut-Mattausch, Frey, & Greenberg, 2008)
- Screening (Beach, 1993)
- Strength or weakness of attitude (Brannon, Tagler, & Eagly, 2007)
- Selective attention (Karlsson, Loewenstein, & Seppi, 2009)
- Information avoidance (Case, Andrews, Johnson, & Allard, 2005)

Selective exposure to information that supports a decision-maker’s initial inclinations has been documented in numerous studies. Experiments typically describe a scenario and ask participants to make a decision (e.g., should a hypothetical company renew a manager’s contract?). Researchers provide prescribed and pre-labeled pieces of information (some supporting one possible outcome and some supporting the other possible outcome). Previous studies offered the entire collection of evidence to study participants at one time — described as *simultaneous searching* — and found patterns of information selection bias that support the outcome preferred by participants. Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, and Thelen (2001) modified the experimental structure by presenting each piece of information separately — *sequentially* — but still measuring patterns of selective exposure and confirmation bias (i.e., preference for supporting information). An even greater incidence of confirmation bias was found in sequential search than in simultaneous search. They postulated that the sequential interaction with information bits encouraged participants to focus more on the decision itself — how does this one piece of evidence relate to my evaluation of the scenario (consonant or dissonant)? —

whereas examining several pieces of evidence promoted a more information-oriented focus, allowing comparison and active evaluation.

Another way that confirmation bias may infiltrate decision-making is in the initial identification of options. Before actually considering and selecting a decision option, the decision-maker must (or should, anyway) recognize what alternatives exist. However, in real life situations there are typically limitations on the quantity and depth of options that one can effectively analyze. Beach (1993) describes the pre-choice screening of options people actually put on the table as a way to ensure some degree of consistency with their heuristics. This builds on the *Image theory* he developed to describe decision-making from a behavioral point of view. He identifies three components to decision-making: 1) a person's values and belief system, 2) their image of what is desired for their future or goals, and 3) objectives or plans to achieve those goals. These three facets make up one's decision standards. Decision-making involves two actions: screening of options and choice. As decision-makers determine potential options, they measure the fit of each with their internal (or organizational) standards. Some option candidates will be rejected outright (i.e., they do not meet the "rejection threshold"). Those options that make it to the table are, in effect, rated according to number and strength of any "violations" of the decision-maker's standards.

Brannon, Tagler, and Eagly (2007) investigated the role of attitude strength in mitigating selective exposure to information and confirmation bias. Is someone with a stronger and more extreme attitude on the topic more susceptible to prejudicial selection of supporting evidence? Experiments with university students were configured to illicit each participant's attitude to a traditionally contentious topic (abortion) in terms of the strength and extremity of his/her position. In a subsequent session participants were presented with articles representing the

prolife and the prochoice arguments and asked to rate each article's desirability and value to read. They found that "attitude strength moderated selective exposure such that holding increasingly stronger attitudes is associated with an increase in the desirability of attitudinally consistent article titles relative to attitudinally inconsistent article titles" (Brannon, Tagler, & Eagly 2007, p. 614).

Seeking out information typically requires some effort and action on the seeker's part, be it a trip to the library or a couple of clicks with the mouse. Karlsson, Loewenstein, and Seppi (2009) suggest a decision theory model attending to the impact of good and bad news during the pursuit of additional and more complete information. They analyzed finance investors' information behavior surrounding account-monitoring patterns in conjunction with stock market activity. "Given preliminary bad news—or, as it turns out in our model, ambiguous news—people may optimally choose to avoid collecting additional information: They 'put their heads in the sand' (*ostrich effect*) to shield themselves from further news. In contrast, given favorable news, individuals seek out definitive information" (Karlsson, Loewenstein, & Seppi, 2009, p. 96).

In contrast to Barron's (2008) warning against passive closed-mindedness, Case, Andrews, Johnson, and Allard (2005) found that a self-defense mechanism of information avoidance toward a threat might be prompted by a number of variables:

- Perception of salience (Is there any information that is relevant and applicable to my situation?)
- Self-efficacy (To what extent do I think I can control the situation?)
- Feelings of powerlessness (Does it matter if I learn more about the situation if cannot control it?)
- Treatment efficacy (Do I believe that treatment will help?)
- Proximity to the threat (Did I receive the diagnosis, a close family member, or a more distant relation/friend?)

Such avoidance may be interpreted as a coping mechanism, rather than irrational behavior. Drawing upon coping theory, the authors chart the explicit and purposeful *avoidance* of information in the context of a stressful and life-altering situation — threatening health information, specifically cancer and genetic testing — and explore the meanings and reasons for tendencies to disregard or evade distressing information. Case et al. (2005) contribute significantly in bridging the fields of information and library science and psychology with their literature review examining information avoidance regarding genetic testing in relation to coping with cancer. Their work draws attention to a common implicit assumption of information behavior research itself: the assumption of an innate impetus and natural momentum toward information seeking. To contrast this assumption that people choose to seek information, they highlight Wilson’s (1997) model of information behavior as a model that includes a point of opportunity for a person to drop an information pursuit. Wilson’s later model “incorporate(s) the concepts of anxiety and self-efficacy as motivating or inhibiting factors” (Case, et al., p. 258), specifically referencing coping theory as an activating mechanism in the process of information seeking. Case et al. (2005) conclude by recommending more research in the area of information avoidance, particularly identifying and analyzing factors (ranging from demographics to cognitive and behavioral aspects) that may impact one’s reaction to disconcerting information and the resulting decision to seek / not seek / avoid additional information. The Case et al. (2005) piece is cited by many other studies, particularly in the fields of nursing, journalism, public health and policy, and, of course, information science. Several of these studies revolve around appropriate/effective dissemination of health information. For example, Miles, Voorwinden, Chapman, and Wardle (2008) found a correlation between the level of cancer fear and information avoidance in older adults: Those with “higher levels of cancer fear and fatalism are

less likely to learn about positive developments made in the field of cancer control” (p. 1872).

These lines of research continue to expose variables of potential influence in information seeking and decision-making contexts, and many lend themselves to consideration and exploration within the context of my own research inquiry.

2.6 The Research Question

The literature presented above stitches together research from several fields of study that address the primary facets of the phenomenon under exploration in this study, namely, human information behavior in the context of a personal crisis (birthmothers and the experience of relinquishing a child for adoption), coping, and decision-making. The multidisciplinary fabric of previous research strengthens our understanding of the issues surrounding information behavior and the birthmother experience and prepares us to approach the overarching research question of this work: *How do women who have placed a child for adoption (birthmothers) seek and use information to make a relinquishment decision and cope with that decision and their life situation more generally?* The following chapter outlines the methods I used in addressing this question from an interpretive phenomenological perspective based upon the lived experience of birthmothers.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

3.1 Introduction

The selection of an appropriate research methodological approach is vital in any attempt at scientific inquiry; it frames the questions, units of analysis, sources of data, and analysis tools, and ultimately undergirds any findings. This research seeks to understand the ways in which birthmothers made (and continue to make) meaning of their experience of child relinquishment, their interaction with information surrounding that decision, and subsequent coping strategies. We begin without benefit of a theoretical model adequate to fit every angle of this phenomenon, no hypothesis to test. Instead this exploratory research pursues the rich description of the phenomenon with the purpose of gathering in-depth narrations from birthmothers about their own understanding of their experience and behavior. A qualitative and interpretive design is a logical choice in exploring human behavior with the intent to better understand people's experience within a specific context.

This chapter first offers an in-depth description and justification for the methodological approach to this inquiry. Next, I detail the specific methods of data collection and data analysis employed for this study. This is followed by the procedures I incorporated to attend to issues of quality and trustworthiness throughout the research process. Lastly, the strengths and limitations of this study are addressed.

3.2 Exploring and Interpreting *Lived Experience* through Phenomenology

The phenomenon for consideration in this study focuses on the information engagement, coping, and decision-making behavior of women through and following their experience of relinquishing a child through adoption. How might we begin to understand the context of such a personal crisis? Methodological paradigms from the realm of natural science suggest we narrowly define the concept for study, identify variables, formulate hypotheses, and develop tools for measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, all while using a lens of objectivity (Flick, 2007). Indeed this approach has been used to a certain extent in adoption and birthmother research, primarily to identify characteristics, demographics, and factors relating to an adoption plan (Yelloly, 1965; Bachrach, 1986; Kalmuss, Namerow, & Bauer, 1992). But this approach is inadequate and inappropriate for intensively exploring a phenomenon fraught with dimensions of such a subjective nature: emotion, uncertainty, life-long impact, stigma, stress, and grief. An interpretive framework supports such an endeavor for several reasons: 1) We assume a socially and locally constructed reality that is reflected in the unique experience of each birthmother; 2) The role of the researcher is to facilitate the revelation of these experiences from participants (Andrade, 2009); 3) In contrast to methodological paradigms in the realm of the natural sciences concerned with “objects of nature,” we are flexible with the understanding that participants have consciousness, act purposefully, and “create objects of meaning that are expressions of how human beings exist in the world” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 304); and 4) Instead of focusing on measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, we focus on a “nonmathematical process of interpretation, carried out for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11).

The framework of phenomenology is an interpretive approach poised to support exploration in this area of information behavior in the context of personal crisis. Interpretive approaches to research in the social sciences enable us to explore questions of the human experience and the meanings people use in making sense of the world by focusing on the voices of those who have lived a particular phenomenon. The object of study is the lived experience of the individual and/or the group and the meaning that results through that experience (Sandberg, 2005). The lineage of interpretive research traces its history back to German intellectual tradition, phenomenology, and hermeneutics but “a rich variety of constructionist, ethnomethodological, conversation-analytic, and interpretive strains” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, p. 262) have produced an assortment of variations to address previously unexplored phenomena (Sandberg, 2005). Within this paradigm, research aims to understand the meaning of social phenomena and human action (Schwandt, 1994). But the human experience is complicated, awash in subjective interpretations, motivations and choices (Schwandt, 1994; Dougherty, 2002; Jupp, 2006). The German word for “understanding,” *Verstehen*, encapsulates the gist of this fundamental strand of interpretivism: experience, expression, and understanding — the methodological triad necessary for exploring the meaning of human action (Dilthey, [1910] 2004; Kögler, 2007; Schwandt, 1994).

In the following section I describe the research perspective of phenomenology and offer my explanation and justification for its appropriateness in supporting this study. I then present a rationale for a specific phenomenological framework, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as the best design fit for examining the information behavior experience of birthmothers in their decision-making and coping processes surrounding relinquishing a child for adoption.

3.2.1 Phenomenology

Generally speaking the phenomenological approach to inquiry aims to reveal the common threads of meaning attributed to a phenomenon as ascribed by those who have lived through the experience. The approach focuses on *what* is experienced and *how* it is experienced (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Rooted in the philosophical study of consciousness and experience, phenomenological inquiry began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the work of European philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As the study or science of phenomena, phenomenology begins with the examination of things themselves as they appear in our experience, what it is like to find oneself in a particular experience; indeed the descriptions of personal experience are the source of all claims to knowledge (Smith, 2013; Spinelli, 2005). A phenomenological approach is best suited to understanding the nuances and variations in experience across individuals and the meaning those individuals ascribe to the phenomenon (Conklin, 2007; Creswell, 2013). The term *lived experience* is often applied, since lived experiences are those that reveal the immediate and pre-reflective consciousness one has regarding events in which one has participated. In essence the researcher attends to the descriptions of the phenomenon given by participants and attempts to discover essential meanings and interrelationships through a rigorous process of dissecting the descriptions.

The starting point in investigating our world begins with the *experiencer* or the self and an object outside of the self, specifically consciousness of or experience of something (Sokolowski, 2000). The focal point of phenomenological inquiry is the connection between the “self” and an “object” (people, spaces, time, etc.). Indeed, this intentional relationship between the self and the object is referred to as the phenomenon and is the unit of analysis in

phenomenology. Vagle (2014) offers a helpful map of the phenomenology landscape by using prepositions as guides in moving from philosophical starting points to methodological pathways. To the transcendental or descriptive branch of phenomenology in the vein of Husserl and Giorgi, Vagle assigns the preposition “of” to depict the focus of inquiry on epistemological concerns and form questions such as, “What is the experience of grief?” Methods of transcendental phenomenology involve a deep commitment to *description* of experiences rather than *explanation* or analysis in order to retain and illuminate the phenomena. Initial focus is on the data or phenomena of consciousness described directly by the participants in order to stave off leaps to explanation based upon preconceived theories from the researcher. A fundamental principle of transcendental phenomenology is identified as *epoché*, in which we attempt to set aside preconceived ideas and assumptions about things in order to focus on the immediate data of experience. Bracketing, bridling, or intentionally trying to suspend preconceptions is a critical component of data collection and analysis in the transcendental style (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Vagle, Hughes and Durbin, 2009).

In the hermeneutic or interpretative branch usually associated with the work of Heidigger, Gadamer, Van Manan, and many others, questions become more ontological,¹ and Vagle (2014) ascribes the preposition “in” as we study what it is like to be in a certain state of

¹ Four degrees of understanding underpin qualitative inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1994): ontology—what is the nature of reality?; epistemology—what counts as knowledge of the real world?; methodology—how can we understand reality?; and methods—how can evidence be collected about reality? In crafting this research and selecting an appropriate methodological approach with respect to these questions of understanding, we reframe them in the following manner: ontological—what constitutes the reality of the birthmother’s world in terms of information behavior both in the pre-placement decision-making process and post-placement?; epistemological—what should we count as knowledge within the birthmother’s world with respect to information behavior?; methodological—are there means at our disposal for accessing knowledge of the reality the birthmother makes of her world regarding information behavior?; and data collection methods—how can evidence be collected of the reality the birthmother makes of her world in light of information behavior?

being. An interpretive or hermeneutic approach might ask, “What is it like to find oneself in grief?” As the label suggests, this approach incorporates both descriptive and interpretive components (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011) and leverages a more interactive and dynamic response on the part of the researcher in both collection and analysis of data (Smith, 2011). Heidegger (1962) rejected, to an extent, the notion of bracketing so prevalent in the work of his mentor, Husserl, and promulgated the value of engagement on the part of the researcher as a means of knowing (Ladkin, 2005; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Situating one’s work properly within the formidable phenomenological tradition is a daunting experience. Navigating the numerous variations of phenomenology forces one to consider carefully and repeatedly the intent and focus of research questions. But at its core, a phenomenological inquiry begins with only three requirements: a phenomenon, individuals willing to describe their lived experience surrounding that phenomenon, and a researcher actively attentive to the commonalities and variations amongst the shared experiences. I am interested not only in the description of the phenomenon but also the meaning that a participant makes and continues to make of her experience as a birthmother. So I follow the interpretative or hermeneutic pathway in trying to uncover and bring to light the information behavior embedded in the decision-making and coping experiences of participating birthmothers.

As a qualitative research technique, phenomenology entails the descriptive investigation of the contents of conscious phenomena, both objective and subjective (Atkinson, 1972), based strictly upon the subjective or first person point of view (Smith, 2008). It is the study of human perception of an event or object through lived experience as distinct from the event, object, or reality itself. Phenomenology considers the world as we immediately experience it pre-

reflectively, rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect upon it (Husserl, 1970). So phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can explain and/or control the world, but like other interpretive approaches it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us into more direct contact with the world.

In terms of research design and data collection, phenomenological research is typically situated in the paradigm of qualitative field research and often within the ethnomethodology tradition through which study participants describe their world as they make sense of it (Babbie, 2001). The fields of psychology, health sciences, and education have contributed substantially to the development of phenomenological research. In more recent years, almost all professional disciplines have adapted these techniques to explore underlying and interpretive meaning, relations between language and experience. These disciplines include information and library science (Dalbello, 2005; Epperson & Zemel, 2008; Light, 2008; Savolainen, 2007).

Operationalizing phenomenological research opens a tangled and sometimes contentious door between and even within various disciplines. Phenomenological researchers generally agree that the principle concern is the “experiential meanings, aiming for a fresh, complex, rich description of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived” (Finlay, 2009, p. 6). But from this central point, competing visions and practice diverge. Issues of divergence include: normative or idiographic understanding; researcher reflexivity; intent to describe the experience of a particular phenomenon in general (multiple participants) or in individual experiences; and distinguishing between description and interpretation (Finlay, 2009). But in this complexity there is strength. Garza (2007) notes, “The flexibility of phenomenological research and the adaptability of its methods to ever-widening arcs of inquiry is one of its greatest strengths” (p. 338).

Phenomenological methods use empirical and reflective methods to collect experiential data. The empirical component aims to capture the raw, native, and concrete lived-through narrative of experience (Husserl, 1970). In this regard both the researcher and the study participant attempt to “bracket” assumptions and constructed meaning of the event under consideration, embracing a state or principle of epoché (Husserl, 1970). This relates to the mathematical concept of separating one part of an equation by using brackets in order to focus on it in isolation. Similarly, in Husserl’s descriptive phenomenological approach, the researcher attempts to separate his or her own assumptions and preconceptions in order to avoid influencing the participant’s understanding of the phenomenon (Priest, 2002). Bracketing, or epoché, or phenomenological reduction is important in descriptive phenomenology as it allows the researcher to enter the life-world of the participant (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Empirical data often take the form of interviews, observations, and written descriptions from participants. The focus is on the participant's description of a particular phenomenon from lived experience without summative explanations or interpretive generalizations.

These data are best collected in the form of descriptions of lived-through moments, experiential anecdotal accounts, remembered stories of particular experiences, and narrative fragments. Thus, phenomenological experiential accounts as presented by the participant should not be confused with generalized opinions, interpretations, views, or explanations of certain phenomena that are not based upon one’s lived experience (Adams & van Manen, 2008).

Defining precise and authoritative phenomenological method is slippery at best; there is no canonical set of doctrines, no orthodox procedure (Chamberlain, 1974). The research methodological approach depends upon the phenomena under consideration; indeed “it is a method that can only be progressively developed by applying it to itself” (Schmitt, 2006, p. 283).

3.2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

A fairly recent incarnation of the interpretive or hermeneutic branch of phenomenology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers guidance in designing studies into how people make sense of major and transformative life experiences, matters that are of *existential import* to the participant (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2011). IPA research focuses on the experience of individuals and their reflections on the significance and meaning surrounding it. This aim aligns well with the context and sensitive nature of the phenomenon in this study. Placing a child for adoption is a major decision, a transition of tremendous import; a woman making such a decision is highly likely to spend a considerable amount of time in reflection about the experience, all necessary ingredients for a strong IPA study.

Three theoretical channels undergird and help delineate IPA in the research methodology landscape. First, it is a qualitative approach concerned with the lived experience of individuals and the meanings they make of their own experiences, and thus phenomenological. Second, it requires a process of engagement and interpretation on the part of the researcher (Smith, 2011); therefore is tied to an interpretive or hermeneutic tradition. Smith repeatedly describes IPA as *double hermeneutic* in nature (2004; 1996; Shinebourne & Smith, 2009 — a parallel process in which, “The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). Third, IPA is idiographic, tending toward the particular rather than the general, investigating not only the commonalities among individuals but highlighting variance and equivocality across experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Because of this commitment to idiography as well as the intensity level of data analysis, sample sizes in IPA studies are typically small and homogenous in nature (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Pringle,

Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). In-depth, semi-structured interviews are the most common form of data collection, and verbatim transcription of each interview is the norm. However, additional or supporting streams of data are welcome; examples of *additional data* in previous IPA work include case notes or files that add context to an interview, field notes and observations from the researcher, diaries or other writing activities generated by participants, and even focus groups (e.g. Flowers, Duncan, & Frankis, 2000).

The in-depth, semi-structured nature of an IPA interview is dialogical, empowering the participants with a significant role in determining what is said. Questions or prompts asked of participants are a critical part of the in-depth interview in a phenomenological study (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). The researcher should carefully word each question to ensure it is as open as possible. Questions should never assume anything about the participants' experience, lead them toward an answer, or be closed in any way. Moustakas (1994) identifies two fundamental questions: 1) *What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?* 2) *What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?* It is critical that the researcher assume a stance of dialogical openness, meaning the researcher is ready to allow the participant to speak and the researcher is ready to listen. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggest researchers prepare an *interview schedule* ahead of time that formulates a loose agenda and identifies questions or topics that *ideally* will be addressed by participants. The interview schedule is intended as a tool for facilitating a comfortable and productive interaction and should include opportunities for participants to move easily between descriptive narration regarding their experience with the phenomenon and a more evaluative or analytic role as they discuss their experience. During an interview the interviewer/researcher works in flexible collaboration with each participant in identifying, describing and interpreting relevant meanings

that are used to make sense of the phenomenon (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). The setting of the interview should be carefully selected to ensure comfort. In-person interviews allow for observable nuances of the participants' experience to be recorded as well. IPA study interviews are audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before the analysis phase.

Personal accounts of the phenomenon as reported by participants make up the primary source for all findings in a phenomenological study (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). Data analysis is directed toward participants' attempts at making meaning of their experience, and so any claims or implications must be rooted in their words; direct quotes from participants are frequently used in analysis reporting. Following in the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition, IPA also places value on the researcher's involvement, engagement with, and interpretation of data through "an intensive qualitative analysis of detailed personal accounts derived from participants" (Smith, 2011, p. 9).

Although there is no strictly prescribed recipe for data analysis in IPA, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) offer several suggestions regarding analysis strategies, heuristic framework, and structure, all undergirded by the clear reminder that analytic attention should center on participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences. The process is inductive (moving from particulars to the shared) and iterative (moving back and forth between description, reflexive engagement, and interpretation). Each interview and corresponding transcript, field notes, and other supporting data are addressed in a consistent fashion, attending to the unique particularities of each case by:

- 1) **reading and re-reading an interview transcript** (and other supporting data) to become immersed in the data
- 2) **initial noting** to highlight comments which appear interesting or significant (includes descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments)

- 3) **developing emergent themes** in a whole-part-whole process; the whole of the interview is parsed into discrete chunks for analysis and then sewn together into a new whole of abstractions and themes
- 4) **searching for connections across emergent themes** by clustering themes together according to conceptual similarities (may include abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and/or function), (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009)

Throughout these phases the researcher focuses intently on the lived experience of participants as expressed in their own words and begins the process of interpretation (by nature a subjective and reflective process). The connections between the primary text (interview transcript) and layers of interpretation must be maintained with vigilance on the part of the researcher (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005).

In an effort to reinforce the integrity of the idiographic nature of IPA analysis, it is important to bracket themes percolating from one interview and not let those influence analysis of a different case; one should try to contain ideas emerging from each individual account as much as possible in this phase of analysis. Adhering to this process in a systematic and rigorous way leaves the researcher open to hear and see new themes and particularities within each account.

Once this process is repeated separately for each interview or case and we have developed exploratory comments and emerging themes from each account, we are ready to look for patterns and variances across cases. This fifth and final stage of analysis involves developing some form of structure that illustrates the relationships between themes. A certain degree of creativity and flexibility is encouraged (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) so that the presentation captures the salient and important aspects of the themes in a satisfactory manner. Shinebourne and Smith (2009) depict this final stage of analysis with particular flair:

The table of themes provides the basis for constructing a narrative account of the interplay between the participant's account of her experience and the

interpretative activity of the researcher. The narrative account contains relevant extracts in the participants' own words, not only to enable the reader to assess the pertinence of the interpretations, but also to retain the voice of the participant's personal experience (p. 155).

Crafting the analysis or results section of an IPA project write-up must be approached with careful thought to balance as this section should clearly depict for the reader the lived experience of participants (the P of IPA) as well as the interpretation of the meaning by the researcher (the I of IPA). A strong IPA narrative "represents a dialogue between participant and researcher and that is reflected in the interweaving of analytic commentary and raw extracts" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 110). Transcript extracts provide the reader immediate access to the data (voices of participants), thus empowering readers to form their own evaluations as they follow the researcher's analysis and interpretation with a high level of transparency. Some degree of freedom is displayed across published IPA studies in terms of what a results section looks like, but it is common to identify themes and then describe and support each theme with excerpts from interviews. The experiential account of each participant is presented using pseudonyms to an extent sufficient for the reader to follow each story throughout the analysis. In addition to thematic patterns of similarities across accounts, the idiographic element of IPA accommodates and even highlights variations and complexities within the data, so we find results sections carefully describing any unique experiences, ambiguities or paradoxes. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) note that early drafts of IPA studies are often heavy on the descriptive side, but researchers are encouraged to move deeper into the interpretive water with subsequent drafts.

3.2.3 Rationale for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected to shape this research study for three primary reasons. First, information behavior of birthmothers surrounding adoption decision-making and coping processes in present-day society is not well understood generally. IPA is particularly suited to researching such *unexplored territory* through its inductive nature. IPA starts at the phenomenon of interest with no tether to a particular theory or hypothesis. Lived experience of participants is the source of all data. IPA privileges the voices and accounts of individuals intimately familiar with the phenomenon based upon their own personal experience, in this case women who relinquished a child for adoption. Second, relinquishing a child for adoption is a major life decision, an experience around which a birthmother is prone to spend considerable amounts of time in reflection (pre and post-decision). The intensity of the experience along with its life-long impact likely enables a birthmother to recount the experience with the richness of detail necessary for a strong IPA inquiry. Third, the methods of IPA allow me to construct a detailed picture of the subjective and unique experience of birthmothers that is not possible with a quantitative approach. Also, unlike some qualitative methods that pursue primarily commonalities in experience, the idiographic nature of IPA empowers me to focus on what is distinct amongst participants' experiences while also balancing shared themes as they emerge as commonalities across participants. Heeding the call for methodological rigor (Maggs-Rapport, 2001; Flick, 2007) this research aims to describe and justify with utmost transparency the methodological approach, specific data collection methods, and processes of data analysis in pursuit of best research practice.

3.3 Methods

This section details the methods and procedures employed in this study in terms of sampling, sample size and recruitment, ethical considerations and privacy of participants, interview procedures, data analysis, and findings.

3.3.1 Sample

The participants or key informants in this study were women who voluntarily relinquished a child for adoption and who were willing and able to share their experience in light of their decision-making, coping and information behavior. Criterion-purposeful sampling was used to identify prospective participants. Criterion sampling requires that all cases meet some criterion (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and was useful in restricting the scope of the sample to individuals with some level of commonality in experience, as suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, (2009). Because this research focuses primarily on interaction with information in the exploration and decision-making process of adoption, it was helpful to have participants with a certain degree of similarity in terms of their experience and opportunities for access to information. In this study, the child relinquishment event had occurred within the previous fifteen years corresponding with significant online information availability and supporting technology saturation. Anonymous, autonomous, and free/inexpensive Internet search tools became pervasive in most sectors of U.S. society by the year 2000, with more than 50% of American adults reportedly using the Internet at least occasionally (Pew Research Center, 2014). Although there was no requirement that participants actually consulted online information sources, the assumption was that they could have done so easily. Sampling criteria excluded minors (at the time of interview), involuntary relinquishment, international birth/adoption, and non-English speakers. Sampling criteria included willingness on the part of birthmother

participants to share their stories and describe their experiences relating to the process of relinquishing their child for adoption.

3.3.2 Sample Size and Recruitment

Recruitment of birthmother participants followed IPA norms toward a small, purposeful, and homogeneous sample in keeping with the idiographic focus (Brocki & Wearden, 2005; Frost, 2011; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest a sample size of 3-6 in order to effectively address the significant volume of data with appropriate depth of analysis. Several precedents are described in Table 1 below, to give the reader a feel for the range of sample sizes in IPA studies, amount and type of contact with participants, and overview of data analyzed. These particular studies focus on phenomena of a deeply personal and potentially stigmatizing nature similar to the phenomenon under consideration in this dissertation work. All of the studies identified in Table 1 used semi-structured interviews and detailed readings of the transcription as the source of data for analysis.

Table 1 Sample size and data collection in selected IPA studies

IPA Study	Phenomenon	Number of Participants	Amount of Contact
Smith, J.A. & Rhodes, J.E. (2014)	Experience of depression	7	1 face-to-face interview Duration: approx. 60 min
McNeilly, K.D. (2012) [dissertation]	Experience of children in a LGB-led family	9	1 face-to-face interview Duration: 70-150 min each (mean 93 min)
Aparicio, E.M. (2014) [dissertation]	Experience of teen mothers in foster care	6	3 sequential face-to-face interviews Duration: not disclosed
Shinebourne, P. & Smith, J.A. 2009	Experience of addiction	1	3 face-to-face interviews Duration: 1 hour each (3 hours of data)
Heintzman, J.C. (2013) [dissertation]	Experience of stigmatization and coping efforts of recovering alcohol dependent individuals	6	1 preliminary telephone conversation Duration: 15 min 1 telephone interview Duration: 30-45 min

Based upon IPA precedent and insight from the study designs highlighted above, I recruited 8 birthmothers to participate in a one-time, in-depth, semi-structured interview. It is important to remember that this study draws from a limited pool of potential participants. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2007) estimates 13,000-14,000 women voluntarily relinquish a child for adoption each year in the United States.

Recruitment of participants involved the use of email, in-person announcements and flyers, to-wit:

- In-person announcement at two adoption support group meetings (Adoption Triad Dialogue Group in Greensboro, North Carolina and C2Adopt in Richmond, Virginia)
- Mass email advertisement to UNC Chapel Hill students, faculty and staff
- Flyers posted at local public libraries, coffee shops and public advertising boards

The flyer and the customized text used in each of these outlets are found in Appendices A and B. The language encouraged recipients to consider passing the invitation along to others, if appropriate, with the aim to generate a quasi-snowball effect and reach potential participants beyond the original scope of distribution. Indeed there was something of a snowball effect as recipients of the recruitment announcement forwarded the call for participation to several online adoption support groups around the country, which generated interest and resulted in inquiries from across the U.S.

Participants made the initial contact with the researcher, thus ensuring the privacy and voluntary nature of recruitment. This method allowed birthmothers to determine their own interest and comfort level with participating in the study. As individuals responded to the call for participation, I replied to each immediately in the order of initial contact and in the manner they requested (telephone or email) to discuss the participation criteria, determine their eligibility for participation, and address any general questions or concerns. I scheduled a brief screening conversation via telephone (text of screening conversation in Appendix C). During the screening

conversation, I described the purpose of the study, explained the semi-structured interview procedure, and answered any questions. This conversation gave me an opportunity to start to develop rapport with each participant, make sure they considered the potential for an emotional experience during the actual interview, and more accurately gauge their interest level in participating in the study.

When an individual expressed interest in participating at the conclusion of the screening conversation, I scheduled an interview as soon as possible, secured an interview location (at their recommendation), and made travel arrangements. I emailed a combined information sheet / informed consent document (Appendix D) to each participant before the scheduled interview that detailed the purpose of the study and described the semi-structured, face-to-face interview procedure.

3.3.3 Ethical Considerations and Privacy of Participants

Due to the highly emotional and deeply personal nature of placing a child for adoption, subjects in this study could be at risk for emotional distress. In particular, birthmothers would reflect on a point in their lives that many would consider a personal crisis. Although the circumstances surrounding the unintended pregnancy are not the focus here, such an experience is difficult if not impossible to compartmentalize. In addition, the act of relinquishing a child to adoption is very likely to have a life-long impact on the birthmother — the child may never be forgotten and thoughts of regret, guilt and grief are certainly common. Although social stigma surrounding birthmothers and adoption has diminished to some degree in recent years, the experience of placing a child for adoption is still shrouded in secrecy. The researcher was acutely aware of the emotional and personal nature of the birthmother context and tried to make the comfort, confidence, and emotional well-being of each participant a primary concern through the

following efforts as reflected in the information sheet / informed consent document (Appendix D).

1. Voluntary nature of study

- As individuals considered participation the researcher verbally recognized and discussed the emotional and sensitive nature of the topic.

2. Non-judgmental nature of study

- Recruitment and informed consent material expressly assures potential participants that the study is focused only on the information behavior and information needs surrounding the decision-making and coping processes; there are no right or wrong answers; there is absolutely no judgment or ulterior motive regarding adoption, abortion, sexuality, teenage pregnancy, or lifestyle.
- Participants might be sharing an *untold story* (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007), meaning they may have kept all or parts of their experience of relinquishing a child for adoption hidden from family and/or friends. Informational self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer was used to prompt reciprocal conversation and develop rapport between researcher and participant (Abell, Locke, Condor, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2006). During the screening conversation, I disclosed my own status as a birthmother with the aim to assuage any potential self-consciousness on the part of the participant and establish an element of trust.

3. Extent of personal privacy

- A participant could refuse to answer questions or request to turn off the audio recorder in the interview at any time.
- Names, places, and any other details that could reveal personal identity were omitted from the transcripts; pseudonyms were assigned to each account/narrative by the researcher.
- For the duration of the study, the recordings from the interview were kept in a secure place (locked/password protected). The audio files were only heard by the researcher and will be destroyed following completion of the dissertation.

4. Professional mental health and counseling referrals

- Along with the information sheet for the study (Appendix D) the researcher provided each participant with a list of professional mental health resources in their local area and encouraged them to follow-up with a counselor if any emotional distress was lingering. See sample in Appendix E.

It may be interesting to add a note here reflecting on a pilot study I conducted in 2010 involving conversations with birthmothers (Clemens & Cushing, 2010). Each of the birthmother participants in that study expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share her story; everyday

life does not often provide an occasion to talk about such a profoundly personal and deeply meaningful event in a context as “safe” as research study participation.

3.3.4 Interview Procedures

In five different states, primarily in the Midwest, Northeast, and the South, interviews were arranged at a venue and time convenient and comfortable for each participant and included local public libraries (2 cases), public parks (1 case), coffee shops (3 cases), and the participant’s own home (2 cases). A face-to-face meeting was the format I used for interview data collection (as opposed to telephone or online synchronous communication). The interview of each participant lasted between 90-200 minutes. The interview was audio recorded with the permission of the participant.

A pre-crafted interview schedule (Appendix F) served to shepherd each interview conversation. This guide was the product of numerous revisions with the ultimate aim to allow participants to tell me “what it is like to live in their personal world” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 61). Questions and prompts were developed to elicit responses that helped me address the overarching research phenomenon: the birthmother experience of decision-making and coping, seen through the lens of information behavior. The interview schedule was developed around the loose chronological process of the decision-making journey: 1) *decision-making pre-adoption*; 2) *adoption placement event*; 3) *post-adoption phase*. However, in keeping with the inductive epistemology of IPA, the interview guide was treated as a flexible tool to help facilitate each participant’s ability to tell her own story in her own words. As the interviewer, I was keenly open to what and where each participant led our conversation, as well as the priorities and nuances they placed within their own story.

In addition to the words of each participant through our largely one-sided conversation,

when scheduling the interview I asked each birthmother if she was amenable to showing me any material relating to the adoption experience that she has kept; if so, I asked her to bring it to the interview. Examples I suggested included: legal documents, photographs, diaries, or other artifacts that mean something to her with regard to the adoption. I asked her during the interview to give me a *guided tour*, explaining the item and what it means to her. But this did not entail any content analysis on my part; I made some field notes to supplement the interview transcript. The intent behind asking about these types of documents was to foster rich description from participants about their experience and their own interpretation of what information looks like. A guided tour as a means of data collection puts the participant in the driver's seat during an interview, uses a personal object around which participants purposefully generate rich description (Everett & Barrett, 2012), and may cultivate a more relaxed and immersive experience for both the interviewee and interviewer (Hartel, 2007). In some cases, examining and explaining personal documents provided the participant a concrete artifact about which to share part of her story, offering an occasional welcome break from the cognitive demands of responding to questions and probes. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked each participant if they were willing to be contacted in the weeks following their interview for any brief follow-up to clarify their responses (not required for participation). I did not ultimately find a need to follow up with any participants, but wanted to leave the door open.

Immediately following each interview, I transcribed the conversation captured via the recording device into a Word document. During the transcription process, I assigned the participant a pseudonym and eliminated or modified any specific details of a potentially personally identifying nature. For example, several participants noted the specific name of the adoption agency they worked with; in such cases I modified the transcript to replace the official

name with “adoption agency.” I also replaced all names from the interview with first name pseudonyms or familial relationship titles. In two cases, I used a local transcription service to transcribe the audio recordings; in both cases I modified the transcript to replace all names with pseudonyms and de-identify any potentially identifying information. All field notes were modified to reflect these pseudonyms.

3.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of all collected data followed the route outlined in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and described earlier in this chapter. Initially each interview transcript was addressed separately through a process of deep engagement in order to yield a within-case thematic structure that represented the unique experiential account articulated by the birthmother in keeping with the idiographic nature of IPA. Next, I looked for patterns across cases to identify cross-case emergent themes.

3.4.1 Case-by-Case Analysis

The specific steps in analyzing each interview were: 1) reading and re-reading the transcript multiple times; 2) initial noting of descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments; 3) developing emergent codes; and 4) searching for connections across emergent codes to develop overarching themes.

No qualitative data analysis software was used; instead I crafted five individual Word documents for each case: interview transcript, line-by-line analysis spreadsheet, case memos, episode profile including theme inventory, and a story narrative. The first document included only the raw interview transcript (modified to de-identify information with pseudonyms and replace any identifying information with general terms). The second document was a spreadsheet chunking the entire transcript text into short paragraphs or individual sentences that served

several purposes. Line by line, I analyzed the text, first adding my descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Comments of a *descriptive* nature highlight the things that seem to matter to the participant — people or relationships, pieces of information, events, places, feelings, etc., and the meaning of these things to her. *Linguistic* comments attend to the specific use of language and may involve terminology, metaphor, repetition, tone, pauses, etc. *Conceptual* comments move into the level of interpretation and required the most investment of time and intellectual effort on the part of the researcher. An excerpt sample of the analysis spreadsheet from one case is provided in Appendix O.

On subsequent passes through the data, I added or clarified my comments to the spreadsheet. With each pass the focus shifts altitude somewhat in order to look at the participant's overarching understanding of their experience rather than particular meanings of specific instances. The interpretive role of the researcher is an integral yet potentially nebulous element of IPA research. The researcher focuses first on the participant's expressions regarding her experience *in* the phenomenon, the P in IPA. During this process I began to leverage an interactive dynamic with the participant (and later, with the narrative developed from the transcript) in order to craft comments that explore and highlight points that speak to the essence of the experience with the phenomenon. These efforts move from description to interpretation, the I in IPA. This is slippery and admittedly subjective labor, but the intent is to capture and ultimately understand the meaning made by participants of lived experience.

During this intense engagement with the original data I explored small chunks of data at the line-by-line level, dicing the whole into discrete parts. In order to begin looking for patterns and connections, I shifted analytic focus and turned attention primarily to the exploratory comments themselves. IPA research precludes a pre-planned provisional list of themes or codes;

instead, themes emerge from the close analysis of the exploratory comments and associated quotes of participants. As the basic building block of an inductive qualitative approach, emergent themes “are derived from the lifeworlds of research participants through the process of coding” (Williams, 2008, p. 249). As this research is intentionally directed toward the information behavior aspect of the birthmothers’ experiences, I looked for expressions related to information sources, information searching, discerning, evaluating, trusting, avoiding, using, processing, hiding, collecting, saving, etc. At the same time, I remained vigilant in documenting other elements of each story regardless of their direct tie to information behavior, trying to capture the unique context evident in each participant’s experience. Finally within this spreadsheet document, I began to consider and develop themes pertinent to the sentences or chunks of text.

In the third document I charted memos for that particular case, including my thoughts, reactions, and questions surrounding my re-readings of the transcript. I maintained one memo file for each case and continued to add memos throughout the analysis phase.

The fourth document served as a sort of “episode profile” (Maietta, 2006), a workspace in which I developed the major themes within that case. I inventoried the key quotes of the transcript, occasionally diagrammed the flow of the interview, and pulled together my own memos regarding what I learned from the transcript and why it was important to the study. The list of themes within each case was crafted based upon the ingredients presented from two sources: the experience-based expressions of participants and my own interpretive thoughts and comments. This production of themes is really a collaborative effort of participant and researcher. To document this synergistic process, each theme is directly supported by evidence from the text (i.e., words of participants). The guiding mantra for this process was: *What is this expression an example of?*

The last document I crafted for each case was a detailed narrative of the participating birthmother's journey with adoption. Using the transcript and my own field notes from the interview, I tried to capture the storyline of each birthmother in a sequential fashion, beginning with her point in life at the time of pregnancy, continuing through the decision-making process and adoption event, and finally detailing her current relationship with the adoptive family and child(ren). The intent of this narrative is to provide the reader an opportunity to get to know each participant and her unique story as well as empower the reader in evaluating my analytical interpretation of each case. The full-text of all narratives is found in the appendices; an abbreviated version of each is included in Chapter 4.

Ultimately I created five files for each case as described above. The five files for each case serve as an audit tool for the transition to a more interpretative role of the researcher, tying the birthmother's original words to conceptual labels and themes.

After all interview transcripts and supporting documents were analyzed as individual cases, I crafted Chapter 4 of this dissertation, to document and explore the emergent themes of each individual case. Direct quotes from participants are included to illustrate the manifestation of each theme and ensure that each theme is actually represented in birthmother accounts (Jarman, Smith & Walsh, 1997).

3.4.2 Cross-Case Analysis

After establishing a set of themes for each participant, I began to look for connections across cases that speak to the overarching interest in the phenomenon: in this study, engagement with information by birthmothers with respect to decision-making and coping with the adoption process. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe this step as "looking for a means of drawing together the emergent themes and producing a structure which allows you to point to all of the

most interesting and important aspects of your participant's account" (p. 96).

The product of this step "should have a satisfactory sense of completion, capturing the most important things you want to say about the participants and a suitable ordering of those things" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 103). It is presented in Chapter 5. To aid the reader in clearly following my analytic route, I delineate evidence from the text itself to anchor each theme that is shared across the group to illustrate and validate the manifestation of each theme and truly ground my interpretation in examples from participants. Selecting extracts to use as exemplars of a theme is a common practice in IPA, though not specifically required (Brocki & Wearden, 2006); the nature of a dissertation provides plenty of space for this display of my analysis route in order to allow the reader to make an informed assessment of the interpretations made.

In keeping with the idiographic nature of IPA, I have tried to remain acutely sensitive to both convergence and divergence within the sample in order to represent the common themes accurately throughout analysis: while themes are shared, they play out in different ways for individual birthmothers, and participants express vastly different priorities. Indeed this balance between shared and idiosyncratic understandings of a phenomenon based upon the lived experience of participants is a key feature in an IPA study (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). To be clear, identifying and refining the major themes across cases was not an easy process; I grappled with the variety of potentially-important themes to highlight and the relationships among and between them. In addition, I consulted with peer experts in the form of my academic advisor, my former psychology professor, and members of my local adoption support group to find the appropriate terminology and expression of thought to accurately depict and interpret the emerging common themes.

As an inductive study, the data analysis strategy depends to a large degree on the nature of the data set. The lived experiences of birthmothers are indelibly linked to the unique context of their individual experiences. I have attempted to report this contextual information and link it to the focal phenomenon (information behavior of birthmothers in decision-making and coping processes) in such a way that all interpretation is transparent for the reader.

3.4.3 Summary of Analysis

The findings section of an IPA study has two aims: 1) to describe to the reader what the data are like by building a detailed picture of the subjective experience of participants (Shinebourne & Smith, 2009); and 2) to offer an interpretation of the data, address the original research question, and illuminate the phenomenon under consideration through an analysis process that is logical, transparent, and plausible (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). “Ideally the final narrative should move between levels of interpretation: from rich description through to abstract and more conceptual interpretations” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 187). I pursued a *dual level of analysis* by intentionally seeking patterns across cases as well as bringing attention to the particularities of the individual accounts from which these patterns emerge. I chose to separate these two levels of analysis by crafting two “findings” chapters: Chapter 4 presents a case-by-case examination of the idiographic themes prevalent in each birthmother’s story, while Chapter 5 offers an interpretation of themes common across cases.

3.5 Ensuring Quality and Trustworthiness

The study under consideration here, an exploratory inquiry into the information behavior of birthmothers related to child relinquishment, is situated within a phenomenological framework and adheres to an interpretive approach. Ontological and epistemological assumptions in this study stipulate that knowledge is constructed through lived experience; key informants (i.e.,

study participants) lead us to in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon with particular respect to process, variation, and personal meaning (Yardley, 2000). These assumptions also recognize that, however informed and thorough, assertions of knowledge generated through interpretive efforts — claims of truth — are part of an overarching process that is both iterative and comparative. Such claims are *unfinished* in nature: “Truth achieved within interpretive approaches will never be one final and unambiguous truth but rather is an ongoing and open process of knowledge claims correcting each other” (Sandberg, 2005, p. 52). Labels, meanings, and means of operationalization surrounding scientific issues of rigor, validity, and reliability are complex and often contentious when asserted within the interpretive research tradition (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Since this study is designed and produced within an interpretive approach, it follows naturally that criteria for justifying and evaluating results (truth claims) should be consistent with these underlying assumptions.

Yardley’s (2000) highly cited work offers a core set of four broad principles or characteristics for assessing quality in qualitative inquiry and has been used successfully in IPA studies that are similar in nature to this project (e.g., Brohan, Evans-Lacko, Henderson, Murray, Slade, & Thomicroft, 2014; O’Sullivan, Boulter, & Black, 2013; Preston, Marshall, & Bucks, 2007; Pringle, Drummond, & McLafferty, 2013; Ryninks, Roberts-Collins, McKenzie-McHarg, & Horsch, 2014). These principles are: 1) sensitivity to context, 2) commitment and rigor, 3) transparency and coherence, and 4) impact and importance. The intent and techniques embodied in these four tenets parallel and incorporate many of the same recommendations for ensuring quality proposed by more familiar qualitative methods texts (e.g., Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Westbrook, 1994). Yardley’s (2008) chapter on demonstrating validity in qualitative research further describes these four principles with greater depth and provides concrete

examples of how each might be operationalized. Building upon Yardley's principles, the following paragraphs detail the strategies that were employed for ensuring quality and enriching trustworthiness in the design and findings of this study.

3.5.1 Sensitivity to Context

Sensitivity to context is considered in relation to several contexts, including existing theory and previous research, the socio-cultural setting of participants as they have experienced the phenomenon, the relationship between investigator and participants, and differing perspectives amongst participants in the study and the wider community affected by the phenomenon. The design of this study is informed by previous research in the areas of information behavior, informational coping, and decision-making in the face of negative life events. The underlying research question of this work targets a phenomenon that has not been sufficiently addressed in adoption literature or human information behavior literature. I attempted to demonstrate sensitivity to the perspective and position of birthmothers and their unique experiences surrounding information behavior throughout the process of collecting data. To maximize privacy, security, and accessibility, several strategies were in place. Each in-person interview was conducted at a venue selected by the participant in order to increase their comfort level; and interviews were conversational and non-judgmental in nature. Sensitive to the very real potential for emotional distress as participants recounted and relived their experiences, I encouraged participants to take a break or stop the interview if they became overwhelmed, and provided contact information for local grief or mental health resources to participants at the conclusion of each interview. As the sole interviewer, my actions and persona unavoidably affect the dynamic and context of data collection. IPA describes this relationship as collaborative and an important part of the double hermeneutic (researcher trying to make sense of the participant's

process of sense-making in the context of their personal and social world). I made every effort to present an open, non-judgmental, sincere, and patient presence throughout all correspondence and engagement with participants. The interview schedule was designed as a conversation, encouraging each participant to tell her own story in her own words and included non-leading verbiage such as, “Can you tell me more about that” and “What do you mean by...?”

The idiographic nature of IPA dictates sensitivity to data itself and incorporates proactive attention to unique experiences of individual participants, of which context and socio-cultural identity and influence are natural components. Each birthmother’s story includes descriptive (though de-identified) self-disclosed biographical information in an attempt to provide insight into the socio-cultural context of her experience for the reader. To provide additional contextual information, I occasionally augment each story to include historical and/or legal information surrounding adoption practices in effect at the time and place of relinquishment.

3.5.2 Commitment and Rigor

Commitment and rigor may be demonstrated by prolonged and substantive engagement with the topic on the part of both researcher and participant. In this study, commitment and rigor are evident initially with the recruitment of participants with intimate familiarity of the birthmother phenomenon. The experience of child relinquishment is likely a matter of existential import to a birthmother. The purposeful sample in this study is comprised of birthmothers, meaning that participants have probably invested a considerable amount of time and emotion contemplating their experience. Such an experience, steeped in thoughts of deep meaning, high emotion, and life-long impact, is conducive to significant previous engagement with the topic on the part of participants even before the interview, thus contributing to the degree of commitment. In parallel, extensive review of the literature and prolonged reflection during the crafting of this

study on the part of the researcher demonstrate a significant level of commitment.

Commitment and rigor also need to be addressed through the depth and breadth of analysis; I provide evidence of spending time *dwelling with the data*, exploring and interrogating for competing explanations of the phenomenon at every step in data analysis. Recording my initial impressions after reading and rereading each transcript exposed my thinking and intentional setting aside of early assumptions; creating the exploratory comments (descriptive, linguistic and conceptual) based upon each line or segment of the transcript documents the degree of in-depth analysis within each account. Subsequent steps in the analysis, developing emergent themes and looking for patterns across themes, forced me to interrogate the transcript data for competing and alternative emergent themes surrounding the phenomenon. This consistent and systematic treatment of data within and across accounts speaks to the completeness and trustworthiness of data and subsequent interpretation.

During the analysis phase, I conducted periodic peer debriefing with fellow researchers familiar with the methods of IPA; for these debriefing sessions I enlisted the help primarily of my advisor but on one occasion my former psychology professor. During these debriefings, I presented small subsets of de-identified transcript data as well as my corresponding exploratory comments and emergent themes for peer review. The purpose of this exercise was to expose the way I was capturing and describing my process of analysis to other qualitative experts in order to make sure my interpretive trail is clear, logical and appropriate. In both cases the debriefing sessions were helpful in encouraging me to push further through the descriptive layers of data toward a deeper level of interpretation. This is different from some forms of inter-coder reliability, as I was not asking others to code data in order to compare with my interpretation. An outside coder would simply add a third layer of interpretation; IPA involves a double-

hermeneutic only, participants' interpretations of their experience and the researcher's interpretation of the participants' interpretations (Fade, 2004; VanScoy, 2013; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). Such feedback helped to bolster my commitment to sensitive, thorough, and plausible analysis of the phenomenon as described in participant accounts.

Another source of more informal feedback involved my regular participation in a local adoption support group comprised of all members of the triad (birthparents, adoptees, and adoptive parents). I began attending this group before designing the study and continued throughout the processes of data collection and analysis. Listening to the stories of individuals affected by adoption but not participating in my study was helpful and in a sense offered a form of member checking. My own status as a birthmother allowed me to take on an insider's role with this support group. While I did not share study transcript data at these meetings, I did discuss some preliminary findings and emerging themes with the group to elicit feedback. Considering this additional stream of information prompted me to reflect on the potential impact the support group had on my analysis efforts and positionality. Engaging with other birthmothers as well as adoptees and adoptive parents broadened my understanding and appreciation for the wide range of experiences, emotions, and perspectives related to adoption. Often the stories and sentiments shared at group meetings resonated with what I was hearing from study participants (e.g., scarcity of and/or dissonant information that expectant mothers encounter when considering adoption as well as the level of trust women must invest in both adoption professionals and prospective adoptive families). However, some stories provided a stark contrast with the voices of study participants. For example, many support group members have been affected by closed adoption and the rigid state statutes impeding access to information and so, for them, a primary focus and information need revolves around search and reunion. This was

a non-issue for my study participants as they all participated in some form of open adoption. Nonetheless, both study participants and support group members expressed concerns about navigating and strengthening ongoing relationships within the adoption dynamic. Conversations with support group members also deepened my understanding of particular issues such as legal aspects surrounding adoption including access to original birth certificates, rights of birthparents and adoptees in terms of legal access to information, and the role of adoption professionals in providing options counseling to expectant mothers considering adoption. My ongoing participation with the adoption support group prepared me to listen with a more informed and sensitive ear to the voices of study participants; reactions from support group members to the preliminary findings and emerging themes provided confidence that I was on plausible footing.

3.5.3 Transparency and Coherence

Transparency and coherence reflect the clarity of the data collection process and the cogency of the interpretive process in data analysis in the write-up of the study. To facilitate transparency of the data collection process, specific details of the journey are noted, including time length of each interview and amount/type of follow-up contact with participants (none in this case). A key aspect of IPA lies in presenting the process of analysis clearly to the reader (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In the findings chapters, sufficient verbatim quotations from participant interviews (grounding in examples) are presented to exemplify each theme/subtheme in the accounts and allow the reader to feel they have *vicariously experienced* the phenomenon and discern/follow the level of interpretation applied to the data. The peer debriefing exercises described also bolstered efforts to make sure that themes hang together logically and ambiguities or anomalies are addressed clearly (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Another significant element of IPA that relates to transparency is the recognition of the

researcher herself as an entity with life experiences and assumptions; thus, it is important to reflect and disclose these factors to some extent and consider how one's own lived experience may influence the product of the research inquiry. Here, I present three brief and personally reflexive paragraphs reflecting on my own birthmother story in a concerted effort toward transparency. As Fade (2004) notes, "The researcher is the primary analytical instrument. The researcher's beliefs are not seen as biases to be eliminated but rather as being necessary for making sense of the experiences of other individuals" (p. 648).

In formulating this dissertation work, I pursued my interest in human information behavior and decision-making within the context of a personal crisis and initially considered many *personal crisis* scenarios that involve potential elements of social stigma or shame (e.g., home foreclosure, DUI arrest, job termination, mental health crisis, etc.). I wanted to select a context that was 1) somewhat unusual in that information pathways are likely to be unfamiliar to the average person; 2) some sort of decision is imminent within a concrete time frame (including passing on all options to avoid a decision and letting things simply play out); 3) the context involves significant and potentially life-long consequences, so that emotion may have substantial influence; and 4) the subject matter carries an element of social stigma such that barriers to information might impede access to information or prompt an individual to be somewhat clandestine in searching for information. These elements characterize my own experience with an unexpected pregnancy and decision to relinquish a child for adoption. As a young woman in the mid-1990s, I became emotionally overwhelmed when I learned I was pregnant; for me this was absolutely a personal crisis, and I didn't know what to do. Raised in a close, caring, conservative, and religious home, my parents were always a significant part of my life decisions, so I turned to them for support. After recovering from the initial shock and disappointment of my

pregnant-outside-of-wedlock situation, my parents encouraged me to consider placing the child for adoption with a married, Christian family. Initially I had turned to friends and mentally explored the potential path of raising a child on my own; ultimately, however, I felt I lacked the fortitude, financial means, and personal/social support to become a competent and successful single mother.

Although the decision was the most painful experience of my life, at that time I felt adoption was the best option for my child; it was my intent that she would be raised in a loving home with stability similar to my own childhood. In the intervening years, however, I struggled with grief and regret, specifically with things that I came to understand more fully later. For instance, I could not understand how the adoptive parents could simply decide to end all contact with me; I felt abandoned by the adoption agency when they would not intervene on this broken promise. I became bitter that I was not presented with information on options surrounding a choice to parent, that I was not informed of options regarding varying degrees of openness in adoption. But perhaps I was most frustrated with myself, that I had not pursued more information on my own during the decision-making process. I realized how reliant I had been on the intentions, words, and good nature of other people; many of those turned out to be misleading. My own self-constructed, fantasy vision of a perfect family for this child ultimately had no basis in reality.

My underlying personal intentions in selecting the birthmother context as the dissertation focus revolve around my belief that information should be easily accessible to individuals making life decisions of significant import, unencumbered by filters or barriers of social stigma; tools, professionals, and best practices should make information navigable even by someone overwhelmed with stress or emotion. With that said, I was eager to listen and better understand

the accounts of other birthmothers and how they continue to make meaning of their experience with information, decision-making, and coping with child relinquishment. The idiographic nature of IPA lends itself to a balance between patterns of similarity across participant experiences (shared themes) and instances of disconfirming or unique experiences amongst participant accounts (dissimilar/ambiguous themes). The intent to present both similar and disparate results speaks to the compatibility with the selected method of data collection and analysis, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, thereby lending substantial coherence and transparency to this work (Yardley, 2008).

3.5.4 Impact and Importance

As described by Yardley (2000), the evaluative criteria of *impact and importance* are “assessed in relation to the objectives of the analysis, the applications it was intended for, and the community for whom the findings were deemed relevant” (p. 223). The findings from this work have the potential to make a difference in the way practitioners think about and support women considering child relinquishment to adoption by understanding the birthmother experience at a deeper level. At the theoretical level, this work aims to strengthen and advance research in the area of human information behavior. Existing frameworks describing everyday life information seeking (ELIS) are perhaps inadequate to address contexts surrounding a personal crisis, contexts that are of existential import, profoundly personal, deeply meaningful, and imbued with life-long consequences. Probing the boundaries of ELIS from the perspective of individuals’ lived experience, their engagement with information and sense-making through and following a personal crisis can certainly provide us with evidence to improve both information behavior models and practices that support improved decision-making and coping strategies.

Table 2 highlights the specific efforts I made toward strengthening the quality and

ensuring the trustworthiness of this study based upon Yardley's core principles for evaluating validity.

Table 2 Features demonstrating Yardley's principles for evaluating validity

Sensitivity to context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research design informed by previous research • An interview schedule designed to elicit disclosure by participants through their personal narrative including decisions, behaviors and contextual elements that impacted their experience • Capturing and probing the variance amongst participants (in addition to shared meanings) in the summary narratives demonstrates mindful sensitivity to differing socio-cultural profiles and perspectives • Augmenting summary narratives with relevant historical and legal information reflects the recognition of wider social elements that may have affected (and continue to influence) the lived experience of the phenomenon • Recognition of the collaborative relationship between investigator and participants in making meaning of the phenomenon
Commitment and rigor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposeful sample comprised of birthmothers recounting their lived experience • Depth and breadth of analysis demonstrated through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Initial impressions recorded during first reading ○ Exploratory commenting ○ Consistent and systematic treatment of data ○ Periodic peer debriefings with qualitative experts
Coherence and transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear documentation and presentation of data collection process • Process of data analysis toward emergent themes presented with a level of detail that allows reader to feel they have <i>vicariously experienced</i> the phenomenon and discern/follow the level of interpretation applied to the data • Periodic peer debriefings bolster efforts to present themes logically and ambiguities clearly • Disclosure and reflection regarding the potential influence of the researcher's experience and assumptions
Impact and importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepen understanding of birthmother experience for adoption and counseling professionals • Strengthen theoretical understanding of human information behavior in contexts of existential import

3.6 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This research aims to elucidate the information behavior of birthmothers in the decision-making and coping processes surrounding child relinquishment. Limitations, boundaries, and issues of vulnerability are inherent to any scientific inquiry so, with a healthy dose of reality, let me address these here. The epistemology of IPA is built upon the principles of phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics; these features contribute to certain strengths and limitations in this study. Phenomenology is one approach to the study of lived experience; it is explicitly “committed to the detailed exploration of personal experience” (Smith, 2004, p. 50). IPA stresses an idiographic variety of phenomenology that embraces the particular rather than the universal; the particularities of and meanings made in personal lived experience are the building blocks of knowledge (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Thus, my intent is to focus with significant depth on the *particularities* of the personal and social worlds of a few (8) birthmothers. The methodology used is discovery-oriented rather than verification-oriented (Giorgi, 1985). IPA does not lend itself to easy or immediate empirical generalizability (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011); however, by gaining insight into the experience of individuals, we can begin to think about theoretical transferability (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This study provides the groundwork for a large-scale and/or longitudinal survey into the information behavior of birthmothers. Similarly I hope it generates a foundation on which to launch similar information behavior studies focusing on other personal crisis contexts.

The hermeneutic nature of IPA recognizes the interactive and dynamic nature of the researcher’s involvement with the data and is reflected on a dual front: 1) individual participants grapple to describe and explain the meaning they have made (and continue to make) of personal lived experience with the phenomenon; and 2) the researcher attempts to make meaning of the

participants' expression of their experiences. The primary data sources for this inquiry are the detailed personal accounts offered by participants and captured during interviews and resulting transcripts. The quality of an IPA study thus depends upon the two-fold interpretive collaboration between participant and researcher. As key informants, participating birthmothers provide the original data for this study with their words through the semi-structured interviews. These verbal expressions are naturally bound within the limits of participants' ability to articulate their experiences and express clear and accurate accounts of their thought processes, emotional states and actual behaviors. The exclusive use of verbal reports from birthmothers is a potential weakness in this study design because of the complexities of language itself; individuals have different verbal abilities, communication styles, and capacities of language. Birthmothers shared their stories and explanations of their experience in a retrospective manner (spanning up to fifteen years); these reflections are almost certainly colored by subsequent experiences or inaccurate memories of their experiences. Corresponding issues relate to the researcher's ability to communicate effectively with participants by expressing effective questions and probes as well as listening with the intent to understand.

Unencumbered by a pre-engineered and rigid research hypothesis, this interpretive approach initially withholds judgment and specificity regarding the universal essence of a particular phenomenon. It is this freedom and flexibility to listen first to the voices of participants, carefully examining the expressions of their own lived experience, that empowers the IPA researcher throughout the process of interpretation and guides our understanding of the phenomenon. With freedom comes responsibility; interpretation is the process through which the researcher construes meaning from data (Firmin, 2008), so the burden of transparency lies with the researcher to ensure the clarity of findings and coherency of explanations.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS CASE BY CASE

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study findings in terms of the experiences of each of the eight participants; the next chapter looks across cases in presenting findings. With that premise, this “findings by case” chapter focuses on the *particular* experience that each participant brought to light through her interview. Examining the unique themes that emerge from each interview allows us to consider the specific context and meaning that an individual makes regarding her situation and engagement with information that are not always revealed in patterns across cases. It also allows the reader to become familiar with the narratives of individual birthmothers. Chapter 5 highlights the major themes that appear in all or most of the cases in an attempt to understand what is *shared* across experiences. This dual level of analysis follows IPA tradition by intentionally seeking patterns across cases as well as its idiographic intent to highlight the particularities of the individual experience.

Table 3, below, provides a brief overview of the 8 participants who participated in this study; the table identifies each participant by an assigned pseudonym, their age at the time of the interview, the year of birth for the child(ren) relinquished for adoption, the state in which the birth and adoption took place, the age of the adopted child at the time of the interview, and a brief description of the type of adoption in terms of contact at the time of the interview.

Table 3 Overview of participants

Pseudonym	Age at interview (2015-2016)	Year of child's birth	State of child's birth	Age of child at interview	Adoption description and contact
Laurel	27	2009	MO	6 years daughter	Open and identified*, child lives in same state; frequent contact via social media, phone; regular meetings
Liz	25	2012	MO	3 daughter	Open and identified, child lives in another state; frequent contact via social media, phone, Skype; occasional meetings
May	27	2008	MO	7 son	Open and identified, child lives in another state; regular contact via phone, Skype; occasional meetings
Robin	34	2011	NC	4 (twins) sons	Open and identified, child lives in same state; regular contact through email, phone, pictures; regular meetings
Stella	20	2001	AK	4 years daughter	Open and identified, child lives in another state; frequent contact via social media, phone; occasional meetings
Jenny	32	2014	MI	18 mos (twins) sons	Open and identified, child lives nearby, in same state; regular contact via phone; frequent meetings
Becky	31	2006	MN	9 daughter	Open and identified, child lives in different state; regular contact via phone, email; regular meetings
Bronwyn	29	2003	NC	12 daughter	Semi-open, unidentified initially but now identified, child lives in same state; regular contact via email and social media; no ongoing meetings

*Identified means full identifying information is shared between birthmother and adoptive family; this includes full name, address, phone, email, and social media.

Each participant case is presented here in four sections: 1) brief synopsis; 2) emergent themes; 3) primary sources of information and support; and 4) reflection on information experience. First, the brief synopsis of each birthmother's story provides the reader a look into

the unique context each woman experienced at the time of pregnancy and follows through her engagement with information surrounding the adoption decision-making process. Each summary also describes information behavior relating to current and on-going coping processes. A more extensive narrative for each participant is provided in Appendices G-N. The idiographic nature of IPA relies on sensitivity to context and the unique experiences of individuals; presenting the self-disclosed biographical information of participants empowers the reader to follow and evaluate my analysis, development, and discussion of themes.

Following the abbreviated story of each participant, the primary theme(s) of her case are identified and explored as they relate to the original research question: *How do women who have placed a child for adoption (birthmothers) seek and use information to make a relinquishment decision and cope with that decision and their life situation more generally?* The nature of data collection through semi-structured interviews offered each participant the opportunity to describe and explain her experience in a holistic manner, often a wider scope than a focus solely on information behaviors. To provide an authentic representation and analysis of participants' voices, I include themes addressing the birthmother experience more broadly. Data analysis moves from a phenomenological description level to a more abstract and conceptual interpretation. Table 4 delineates the emergent themes from each case; these will be discussed in turn in this chapter.

Table 4 Emergent themes case-by-case

Participant (pseudonym)	Year of child's birth and gender	Emergent themes
Laurel	2009, daughter	Informational coping Information scarcity
Liz	2012, daughter	Co-crises Intuition Ripple effects
May	2008, son	Ripple effects Unanticipated complexities
Robin	2011, twin sons	Co-crises Misinformation / broken promises
Stella	2001, daughter	Relinquishing and reclaiming control of information
Jenny	2014, twin sons	Emotional savings account
Becky	2006, daughter	Informational coping
Bronwyn	2003, daughter	Safe space

The third segment of each case analysis probes the information sources each participant identified as playing a role in her decision-making process and subsequent coping journey. Lastly, using interview data, my own memos, and field notes, I explore how each participant reflects on the relinquishment experience and its meaning for her in terms of information behavior.

4.2 Birthmother Participant: Laurel

4.2.1 Laurel: Case Summary

Laurel was a recent college graduate living back home with her family in Missouri in 2009 when she found out she was unexpectedly pregnant with her boyfriend. Abortion was not an option for her and initially they thought they would parent the child. But as Laurel tried to picture how that would work, she had serious doubts that they were prepared financially and emotionally to parent a child so she started thinking about adoption. A friend introduced her to an adoption social worker who met with Laurel and her boyfriend to lay out the options and processes surrounding adoption. Laurel conducted extensive information searches online to learn more about the credibility of the agency and adoption in general. She looked specifically for information about the birthmother experience but was disappointed in the lack of relevant material. This particular agency focused solely on open adoptions, so Laurel and the birthfather were soon looking through the prospective parent profiles and considering what sort of relationship with an adoptive family would work best. The social worker facilitated a meeting with a birthmother who had already relinquished a child in an open adoption; Laurel expressed how useful and informative that meeting was in helping them process information and make decisions. Laurel got to know the couple they selected to parent their daughter a few months before the birth, and they developed a significant level of trust and even friendship. Both Laurel and the couple wanted a very open relationship, and they continue to be in frequent communication; since they live in the same state, Laurel and the birthfather see their daughter and her adoptive family on a regular basis. Laurel is involved with some adoption support groups and finds this helpful to her personally as well as giving her an opportunity to share information on the birthmother experience—the type of information she found so fragmented, scarce, and shrouded in stigma during her search.

4.2.2 Laurel: Emergent Themes

The themes of informational coping and information scarcity emerge as primary themes through analysis of Laurel's interview. Gathering and engaging with information provided Laurel a sense of control in a crisis situation and characterized her informational coping behavior. However, she experienced a scarcity of relevant information, which negatively impacted her efforts to engage with information.

4.2.2.1 Informational coping

We can follow Laurel's informational coping behavior quite clearly through her story narrative. Early-on she assessed the pregnancy as a personal crisis. Although negative emotions were high she moved to confront the situation with full attention. Exploring information and options relating to adoption supported her desire to exert some control over the outcome of the situation. Engaging with information empowered her to make a decision she could live with.

I think whenever I'm in a crisis I do like to find out as much as I can. And I think that's like wanting to be able to speak knowledgeably on what I'm going to do and what decision I'm going to make. Not knowing really stresses me out.

Laurel's informational coping behavior also involved time constraints; she wanted some control over the limited amount of time she had for decision-making because of the pregnancy.

So there are some things that it's like, okay, this is serious; I need to have a deadline...So that's how I handle those things. So I guess when it's serious stuff, it's like, you gotta have a deadline, I guess that's how I function. I set arbitrary deadlines for myself. So by like 5 months I wanted to decide whether or not I was going to do adoption, 6 months I wanted to be talking to an agency, at 8 months we needed to have a couple. And that was because I really didn't want to feel like I was going to be making a last minute choice, like we were just going to be throwing a Hail Mary and going with a couple that we weren't really comfortable with.

We can see Laurel processing her situation and her options through her engagement with information and planning activities. These efforts appear to help her deal with the upheaval of

emotions and stress of the situation overall. This behavior corresponds to the type of informational coping that Miller (1995) describes as “monitoring.” In response to a stressful event, a monitor actively seeks and attends to information about the situation while a blunter will avoid such information and prefer a distraction from the stressor. Along the monitoring–blunting continuum, Laurel exhibits monitoring behavior to cope with the unintended pregnancy. But she reflects on the process as slow and gradual; Laurel took her time and approached the information-gathering and evaluation in a methodical fashion.

So it was rocky for a while but eventually I was able to maybe start looking at adoption, kind of like baby steps, like meeting with an adoption counselor, looking at what our rights would be and what we were looking for in a couple, looking at couples, meeting one, and eventually we finally found a couple.

Laurel’s monitoring tendency during the pregnancy and decision-making process reflects her self-described personality and preferred coping style: “I think whenever I’m in a crisis, I do like to find out as much as I can.” Exerting control over processes that she can influence helps her navigate and cope with the emotional whirlwind surrounding the unexpected pregnancy. Engaging with information and planning how/when things will unfold are constructive and positive investments for her. While this informational coping strategy may not suit every prospective birthmother’s situation and style, we must consider the possibility and likelihood that many women benefit from progressive information engagement opportunities (allowing them to take baby steps) and support in controlling the timing of interim actions throughout the decision-making process.

Through Laurel’s experience we see clear and ongoing monitoring informational coping behavior. In approaching the adoption decision, she used information gathering and planning to process and cope with the experience. Engaging with information about adoption in general as well as continuing exchanges of information with her daughter and adoptive family post-

adoption, she continues to expand and deepen her knowledge base and ultimately bolster her confidence and sense of control.

4.2.2.2 Informational scarcity

In reflecting on her engagement with information relating to her adoption experience, Laurel expressed frustration and disappointment with the amount and relevance of information available about the birthmother experience itself. One of her primary and expressed information needs was, “What is it like to be a birthmom and give up a child for adoption?” She wanted information *from* birthmothers *about* birthmothers, but had a difficult time finding anything to help address that question.

I remember when I was pregnant trying to find information about what it was like to be a birthmom. And there was like nothing. I had the hardest time finding anything because I think for a really long time adoption was like this shameful thing that women did in the dark of night at a Catholic hospital and just, like, try to move on. But now this trend seems to be shifting more toward open adoption these days—at least it seems that way in this area. And I think a lot of that has to do with past experiences, learning from those, but there’s not really a lot you can find online. There’s so many blogs and stories of what adoptive couples experience but there really wasn’t much about what birthmoms experience. And I think that was what really drove me to talk to the social worker about – and that’s what drove her to pull in the other birthmom.

The adoption social worker arranged for Laurel and her boyfriend to meet with a woman who had placed her child for adoption a few years prior. Laurel credits this conversation as a real coup in terms of hearing the woman’s first-hand experience, listening to what worked and didn’t work for her, and having the opportunity to ask questions. Based upon this one conversation, Laurel and her boyfriend made several decisions about the details of the adoption plan they wanted: They confirmed that they wanted an open adoption, and determined that ongoing contact would be easier if the adoptive family lived in the same state. Laurel is adamant that dialog with

birthmothers who have already been through the adoption process is vital in presenting a true, unfiltered picture of the realities of adoption.

For a lot of birthmoms they don't think to ask for those things, they don't know what to ask for. Because there's not a ton of information out there as far as, this is what a negative situation looks like or this is what a positive situation looks like. They don't know what it's going to be like. There's no real kind of playbook out there for how to go about any of it.

The scarcity of relevant information surrounding the birthmother experience was frustrating to Laurel during the decision-making process surrounding the adoption itself. But the lack of accessible information continues to have an impact as she and other birthparents look for guidance and support in figuring out how open adoption progresses over a lifetime.

4.2.3 Laurel: Information Sources

In describing her engagement with information, Laurel focuses on three sources that were helpful and meaningful for her throughout the decision-making process: the Internet, the adoption agency social worker, and a meeting with another birthmother. When she initially thought about adoption, Laurel used the Internet as an orientation tool. "I went on the Internet and just sort of tried to click around on different agencies and just kind of see what I could get from... just a feel." The social worker at the adoption agency was her primary source of information about the process, though. Information included legal details about the rights of birthparents surrounding the relinquishment and adoption process. This adoption professional made sure Laurel understood that any contact agreement created with an adoptive family was not legally binding in the state of Missouri; while this adoption agency promoted open adoption with on-going contact between birthparent(s) and adoptive family, contact agreements are ultimately not enforceable in her state. In addition to providing profiles of prospective adoptive families, the social worker encouraged Laurel to methodically explore what sort of adoption plan would work

best; she offered information and examples from other birthmothers she had worked with, things they considered, what worked well or did not work, etc. Laurel credits the social worker with providing information in digestible chunks and reiterating information on multiple occasions. She supplied Laurel with such extensive and detailed information that Laurel felt prepared to face the birth, relinquishment and grieving process. The depth and duplication of information was helpful to Laurel as she was incorporating things into her knowledge base and understanding of the situation. As part of this preparation process, the conversation with a birthmother was extremely meaningful and helpful to Laurel. She recalls the woman saying that it took her about two years to get back to some semblance of normalcy; Laurel took that information to heart and agrees that her experience has been about the same; two years after the adoption she found herself in a more stable frame of mind.

4.2.4 Laurel: Information Experience

Through Laurel's narrative about her experience as a birthmother, we see a clear manifestation of the two-stage process described by Folkman and Lazarus (1988) in how she navigates the stressful incident of an unintended pregnancy: first by appraisal then by engaging a coping strategy. Through cognitive appraisal she processes the situation and focuses on a decision to place the child for adoption. She then actively engages in seeking information as a means to manage the situation, i.e., coping. Along the monitoring-blunting continuum (Sweeny, 2010), Laurel identifies her own behavior as attentive to the crisis rather than intentional avoidance. Perhaps more than any other participant in this study, Laurel's experience models active informational coping, mitigating some of the potentially crippling stress and emotions she was facing. Laurel directed her efforts into exploring the adoption option in great detail. The

planning and personal deadlines she implemented put her in the driver's seat so she felt more in control.

During the information-gathering phase, Laurel was frustrated and disappointed at not finding substantive information about what birthmothers truly experience. She wanted to examine personal accounts from birthmothers to better understand what she was facing if she chose adoption. Her social worker was ultimately able to arrange a meeting with another birthmother so her need was met at least in part. Now, six years after the birth and relinquishment of her daughter, she continues to seek information about the birthmother experience. She monitors adoption support groups online and actively engages in opportunities to talk with other birthmothers. She takes things a step further in occasionally sharing her own story and experience with adoption with other people. Exchanging information about her experience as a birthmother is therapeutic in dealing with her own grief but also helps her feel like she is contributing to a more open dialog about adoption. Chipping away at the information barriers she identified early-on (i.e., lack of relevant information on the birthmother experience and social stigma) motivates and empowers Laurel as she works through the life-long impact. She continues to seek insight and support in figuring out how to integrate open adoption into her life and to relate to the adoptive family and her daughter as time unfolds.

This desire to exchange information and personal stories with other birthmothers is not unique to Laurel. Attending numerous adoption support group meetings, I hear this sentiment echoed in the voices of other birthmothers—as well as adopted persons and adoptive parents. The impact of adoption is life-long, and the experience is outside everyday life pathways. Safe and supportive gatherings of individuals (either online or in-person) with some connection to

adoption allow for therapeutic dialog and increased understanding of the complex emotions surrounding child relinquishment.

Laurel's case opens up questions for both information science and adoption practice. Informational coping and information scarcity are primary themes in this particular birthmother experience. Active engagement with information and planning throughout the decision-making process facilitated a sense of control over the crisis situation for Laurel, and this feeling of control allowed her to design an adoption outcome she could live with. However she experienced some barriers in her information search process, specifically the difficulty in accessing direct contact with other birthmothers, information she deemed relevant and essential in coping with the crisis.

4.3 Birthmother Participant: Liz

4.3.1 Liz: Case Summary

In 2011, Liz was in her early 20's, a single mother of a toddler, and struggling to make ends meet in Missouri. Just prior to our interview, Liz was clinically diagnosed with major depression; she indicated that this realization has helped her better understand why she chose adoption for her second child. Liz had been dating someone for a few months when she realized with frustration that she was pregnant. Abortion was not an option for her, and after a series of disappointments and lack of support from the birthfather she began to consider adoption. She felt all three of them, herself, her toddler and her unborn child, deserved better than what she could manage at that point. Liz searched for information online about adoption, different agencies, and how to determine the legitimacy of an agency. She contacted an agency that provided the credentials she had researched and began communicating with a social worker. The social worker sent information to Liz and talked extensively and frequently with her about what she

wanted the adoption to look like. Liz thought the idea of an open adoption felt right and things started to fall in place. From the prospective parents brochures, Liz selected a couple that also wanted an open and ongoing relationship so the social worker set up their initial meeting. Communication continued throughout her pregnancy and she developed a significant level of trust with the adoptive couple. They came into town for the birth of her daughter and were with her in the hospital. Liz and the adoptive family are in frequent contact through text and Skype, and exchange photos, artwork, and mementos. In the intervening years, Liz has married and has a new baby; the adoptive family has welcomed her and her expanding family at their gatherings a couple of times a year.

4.3.2 Liz: Emergent Themes

Themes of co-crises, intuition, and ripple effects emerge from analysis of Liz's interview. In addition to the unintended pregnancy, simultaneous negative life events such as undiagnosed depression and financial instability presented as co-crises of significant impact in her experience. In evaluating information throughout her decision-making processes, Liz relied on the relationships and the trust she developed with both the adoption professional and the adoptive couple. Moving forward following the adoption event, Liz expressed concerns and a need for information in terms of shaping her relationship with the adoptive family and integrating the nature of open adoption into her family life.

4.3.2.1 Co-crises

Liz's pregnancy news coincided with other life crises. Struggling financially to support herself and her 2-year-old daughter had pushed her to a breaking point. Looking back she recognizes that she was also struggling with major depression.

Can I, I guess, mentally along with financially and physically, do it all for two babies? I felt like sure, I could have done it to a point, but what would their quality of life have been? I mean Dakota [older daughter] and I were already in what you could call looking back, a crisis situation. I guess a lot of people do it, but it's that paycheck to paycheck, barely making it, going to my dad's sometimes for dinner kind of stuff. I felt that this wouldn't end well if I kept her.

During the interview Liz reflected on her own mental health and a possible connection with her crisis pregnancy and adoption decision. She wondered if other birthmothers had any experience with major depression prior to or in conjunction with their unintended pregnancy. Indeed, research demonstrates a link between mental health (elevated levels of depression in particular) and risk of inconsistent contraceptive use by young women (Hall, Moreau, Trussell, & Barber, 2013; Hall, Kusunoki, Gatny, & Barber, 2014). Liz recalls being very disappointed and even angry with herself for getting pregnant, "Why? I'm smarter than this! Why did I do that?" This sentiment of self-frustration at not taking preventative measures is echoed in other participant narratives. Both May and Robin recall a co-crisis involving depression and mental health at the time of conception. Liz speculates that her low self-esteem and emotional fragility may have inhibited any sense of self-efficacy such that she didn't make efforts toward birth control. She had already experienced one unexpected pregnancy and was struggling with being a single mother. Feelings of worthlessness may have set the stage for a second unintended pregnancy. Liz also speculated that issues of mental health, particularly depression, might influence a woman's determination of whether or not she could effectively parent a child.

4.3.2.2 Intuition

The theme of intuition is prevalent in Liz's experience with information evaluation and the decision-making process. She talked about knowing when something "feels right" and making decisions empowered by that feeling. Liz searched for information online as she began to explore and consider adoption as a potential option. In addition to identifying prospective

adoption agencies she also researched information about “legitimacy”—what sort of licenses and credentials exist that she could use in evaluating an agency.

I wondered, how do I know if these are legitimate, and so I remember trying to look up—I don’t even know what I looked for exactly but I probably just Googled that: How do I know if this adoption agency is legitimate or legal or whatever? And so there’s some accreditations that I looked for on this website and they were there. I don’t know. I kind of felt like it was okay and then after calling and talking to her, she seemed really nice and really legitimate, and they had whatever degrees and titles and stuff.

In addition to the credentials she was looking for, the personal connection she felt in talking with the adoption social worker made her feel at ease and confident, boosting her intuitive evaluation of the “legitimacy” of that particular information source.

Reflecting on her experience throughout the decision-making process, Liz explains how she evaluated and used information. In some respects she followed principles of rational choice theory, e.g., delineating potential options, examining various consequences and probabilities and ultimately calculating and selecting the option that best serves her goals and preferences (Baron, 2008). Liz followed this model to a certain extent: She contemplated raising the child by herself, the support she might/might not receive from the birthfather, and the financial and emotional viability of herself as a parent to a second child. She also explored the adoption option in her mind, what that might mean in terms of opportunities and advantages for her child as compared with the type of financially challenged lifestyle she would likely provide as a single mother of now two children. She also weighed the outlook and quality of life for herself and her older daughter; she felt like they also deserved a better life than what she could provide with two children. So she did explore and calculate factors relating to her options to identify the option that best supported her goals. But ultimately Liz suggests that her decisions surrounding the adoption came from listening to her own feelings and intuition: “For me, when I feel like

something is right, I'll usually go with it. And so I kind of felt like it [adoption] was okay." A decision-tree in a normative sense was not as trustworthy or helpful as her internal instinct.

Another example that Liz shared involving intuition relates to the contact agreement with the adoptive family surrounding the open adoption. The adoption social worker suggested various ideas that she and the adoptive couple could prearrange such as scheduled visits, regular exchange of photos, etc. Before the birth, Liz and the adoptive mother had developed a strong relationship through regular communication; they discussed a similar desire and plan to make the adoption relationship an open exchange of information and involvement.

We started to [draft a contact agreement], but we didn't have anything in writing. There was no, "I get to see her at this age" or "I get pictures on this date or whatever." She [adoptive mother] and I had talked so much and were able to kind of connect and relate to each other. She called me her friend one time. We wanted it to be more natural—which is really trusting, I guess, but we just talked about it, and I was comfortable with that.

So again, Liz trusts and relies on her intuition and the personal connection as she moves forward with the adoption decision and subsequent outcomes. Her intuition tells her that she can trust the adoptive mother regarding the contact arrangements.

4.3.2.3 Ripple effects

Adoption conversation typically focuses on the "triad," of the birthparents, adopted person, and adoptive family, but Liz reflects on the impact adoption can have on people beyond this triad. Ripple effects are prominent in her reflection on how the adoption has affected her relationship with her husband and will soon touch both her older and younger daughters that she is parenting.

It's not like you just have your baby and oh, I'm fine now. It's something you deal with and my husband has had to deal with, and he is a totally innocent bystander. Of course he knew about the adoption before we got married, but still sometimes like from her birthday time, or even just after talking to them [adoptive family] on the phone, afterwards I would kind of get on edge, and kind of snap,

and it took me a while to realize that. My husband pointed that out, he's like, "Every time you talk to her, to them, you kind of get upset and take it out on me".

This is unfamiliar territory; how does a birthmother integrate the experience of child relinquishment into her ongoing life? These questions are compounded with open adoption, as the child may continue to be a visible part of the birthmother's life. Consequently the open adoption relationship impacts her social and family circles. Liz expressed an information need in terms of material examples (e.g., children's books), advice, and strategies that support a healthy integration of adoption conversation amongst her family.

Talking to a child you are raising about the child you placed for adoption is really complicated. I went through that point where I felt like I had to talk to Dakota, the daughter I am raising about it and of course I Googled and tried to figure out what things are age-appropriate.

Integrating adoption into the experience of a birthmother is a life-long endeavor; with open adoption in particular, her familial and social circles are subject to ripple effects that may be unfamiliar, unsettling, and emotional. Birthmothers have a unique challenge in balancing the information flow about the adoption event amongst her loved ones.

4.3.3 Liz: Information Sources

Liz actively searched for information online as she explored adoption as an option for her situation. She oriented herself to adoption agency alternatives and licensing credentials that she used in evaluating agency websites. Once she made a connection with the counselor at the adoption agency she relied primarily on the information they provided. Liz spent significant time and effort reading the brochures describing prospective parents. The brochure information included detailed descriptions of couples, their priorities in parenting, opportunities they planned to provide, etc. Liz used this information to help clarify what she wanted for her baby. The adoption counselor offered many suggestions to Liz in terms of what the adoption could look

like, including differing levels of ongoing contact, and suggested Liz draft an agreement with the adoptive couple.

People in her everyday life had a significant impact on how Liz started to frame the situation. Liz appreciated the non-judgmental support from the manager at her place of employment. She also remembers her good friend and babysitter telling her, “I couldn’t do adoption myself, but if that’s what you have to do, it’s your decision. I trust you to do what’s best, and I’ll support you.” In a sense, Liz used such feedback as “information,” information about herself: She could trust herself to make the decision; she did have the capability to determine the best outcome for the situation.

4.3.4 Liz: Information Experience

Throughout her information seeking efforts, Liz gathered the details she needed to make her decision about adoption. In assessing information from and about the agency and the adoptive parents, Liz relied heavily on her own intuition and gut feelings. Evaluation of information is a foundational tenet in information science and an integral part of decision-making research. While not unusual, the *gut feeling* or *intuition* is challenging to define outside of one’s internal reaction in relation to a choice, either positive or negative, to trust information or dismiss it. Indeed it is challenging to communicate or explain how one justifies decisions based upon intuition. This process is not unique to Liz in the context of the birthmother experience; several other participants mentioned how things “felt right” either in selecting a particular adoptive family or with the adoption plans overall.

Liz identified several information needs directly related to the birthmother experience for which she could find few if any supporting resources. Specifically, she still seeks guidance and information on how to integrate the adoption experience into her life. Liz found the grief

counseling she received in the weeks following the adoption event helpful but she has on-going questions and concerns about managing relationships with her husband, other children and the adoptive family.

4.4 Birthmother Participant: May

4.4.1 May: Case Summary

In 2007, at age 20, May faced dual crises: She had just entered a drug rehabilitation program when she learned she was pregnant. The unexpected news overwhelmed her and she struggled to accept the situation. Nonetheless, she quickly started exploring her options. May gathered information from Planned Parenthood and a crisis pregnancy center, the latter at the request of her mother. Neither resource offered a satisfying solution for her, so she began looking for information online and doing some internal processing to try to envision an outcome that would work for her. The idea of adoption appealed to her as she looked for something to help her feel better about herself and the situation; she intentionally reframed her perspective to focus on a positive outcome: Maybe she could do something positive for the baby, other people and herself. May contacted an adoption agency and met with a social worker who oriented her to the process and supplied her with portfolios of prospective adoptive families. Because of a high-risk pregnancy related to a genetic condition, the number of prospective families was small which fueled the fire of her emotional stress. She regrets feeling rushed to select a couple and not having more time to explore the fit before the adoption. The agency lawyer forced her to track down and disclose the pregnancy to the birthfather; although he signed relinquishment papers, the fallout from his family added another layer of grief and anxiety for May. Her parents were very supportive and stayed with her during the birth of her son. The hospital stay was extremely emotional for May and her family; they immediately fell in love with the child and started

second-guessing the adoption plan. Grappling with these emotions, May found it difficult to stick with her decision but ultimately signed the paperwork. Her son is now 7 years old; May and her family share an open relationship with the adoptive family through visits, phone, and social media.

4.4.2 May: Emergent Themes

Two themes are prominent in May's story: Ripple effects and unexpected complexities. Like Liz, May noted the impact adoption presents beyond the immediate parties of birthparents, adoptive child, and adoptive parents; May expressed a need for information and support to cope with the emotions and guilt she shouldered for others. Unexpected complexities arose surrounding her pregnancy and the health of the baby, which impacted her search for adoptive parents. She was also not prepared for the complex nature of developing a lasting and satisfying relationship with the adoptive parents; open adoption relies on meaningful communication so birthmothers and adoptive parents would benefit from sustained guidance and support on this front.

4.4.2.1 Ripple effects

May used an interesting phrase to describe parts of her experience with adoption: She noted the "ripple effects" that the situation had across the board. For example, in talking about the communication challenges with the birthfather and his family, she described this ripple effect. During the majority of her pregnancy, May was focused on herself and the baby, but toward the end, when she felt forced to identify and confront the birthfather, she witnessed the emotional and vocal reactions of his parents. Much of their anger and emotion was directed toward her with the idea that she had manipulated their son into signing the relinquishment papers. They felt powerless in not having a say about the adoption decision. May remembers

running into the birthfather around town a few years later and his tearful reaction. She expressed feelings of guilt and sorrow at the negative impact the situation has had on that family, i.e., the resulting strained relationship between the birthfather and his parents.

The effects of adoption are visible far beyond the birthparents, adopted child and adoptive parents. Birthmothers experience multiple and complex layers of guilt associated with adoption: the impact on their own parents and extended family; impact on the birthfather and his extended family; impact on existing and future relationships. There is little to no research into the effects of adoption beyond the traditional triad (birth parents, adoptee, adoptive family); as in May's case, birthmothers may end up shouldering the grief of others without guidance or supporting information.

4.4.2.2 Unanticipated complexities

May experienced several unanticipated complexities surrounding her pregnancy and the adoption placement of her son, that contributed to her stress. Early in the pregnancy, the OB/GYN determined she had a genetic condition that required additional prenatal care and raised the possibility of health issues for her baby. In addition to information on pregnancy and childbirth, May needed to pursue and absorb information on complications related to a high-risk pregnancy. Adding insult to injury, this information impacted the pool of prospective adoptive families from which to choose; the list of possibilities dwindled to those willing to accept an infant with possible physical and/or learning disabilities.

Because my pregnancy was high risk, not a lot of people were interested in adopting my child. It makes a lot of people nervous, which was also weird for me because I felt like, okay, I'm in this crappy situation and people don't even want to adopt my child if I move forward with adoption.

Although her son was born perfectly healthy, there were other complexities associated with selecting and developing a relationship with the adoptive couple before the birth. May

learned that they had been close to adopting infants three different times previously but the birthmothers had changed their minds ultimately, and those adoptions fell through. These experiences left the prospective adoptive couple feeling wounded and vulnerable. May felt intense pressure after receiving this information, “I will literally break these people’s hearts if I decide when I have the child that I don’t want to go through with the adoption.” The open adoption May anticipated involved a delicate process of building trust and ongoing communication, but the opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship with the adoptive couple was compromised by time constraints. The complexities and uncertainties of building a relationship to last a lifetime are challenging enough all by themselves, and time became a pivotal factor in getting it right.

I just wish that I had been able to build a relationship or gone about the process sooner, that I could have picked someone that I felt more comfortable with or that was more like me. Maybe if we had similar interests that we could connect with. Because now I have this couple that I really have nothing in common with, and I’m trying to build a relationship with, other than the fact that they are raising the child that I gave up for adoption.

Information support resources for women who are considering placing a child for adoption often focus on the imminent decision and the wellbeing of the mother and the child. While this is critical, each birthmother will face unique complexities and there is no standard response sheet to address all situations and relationships. These complications arise during the pregnancy and continue to crop up even years down the road.

4.4.3 May: Information Sources

May actively engaged with numerous information sources as she struggled to come to terms with the unintended pregnancy. Both the Planned Parenthood facility and the crisis pregnancy center she visited were emotional encounters; she recalls the conflicting information she received from each, which churned her emotions even more. She then invested effort and

time into searching for information about adoption and the birthmother experience online. While this informational coping exercise was helpful to her in processing and thinking about a decision regarding child relinquishment, she was disappointed in the lack of relevant and extensive information about the birthmother experience written by birthmothers.

4.4.4 May: Information Experience

Searching for and engaging with information on adoption was an emotional experience for May, but she used those efforts to help process her thoughts and cope with stress surrounding the unexpected pregnancy. She explored adoption forums online in her own space and at her own pace. She recalls the emotions that stemmed from reading the conversations of other birthmothers and people touched by adoption. Processing this information was slow and at times overwhelming but ultimately deepened her understanding of the possibilities and potential consequences of making an adoption plan.

Birth mother, adoptee, all these different conversations that are really common within that experience. I was just starting to familiarize myself, so that was a large part of what the internet played. There are forums, so I would browse through those but again, I think I was having a hard time with acceptance. I would start to read, and I would get upset so then I would go back the next day. It was just a slow process of coming to terms...

While perusing online adoption forums was helpful, May was disappointed in the sparse and shallow nature of the available information.

I didn't feel there was a lot that I identified with in terms of information. Maybe it was because the websites were really bare-boned. They didn't seem like places that people were actually using. Sometimes you go to a forum and there's a little flurry of conversation but then that was two years ago, it didn't feel like it was continued interaction...I couldn't go on and start talking to people. There probably was something like that out there, I just didn't find it, but that means it was hard to find.

This desire for relevant, accessible, and current information on the birthmother experience is echoed in other participants' reflections. Women considering placing a child for

adoption want opportunities to interact with and learn from other birthmothers. While information from adoption agencies and professionals is helpful, women want to hear the voices of other birthmothers directly. The perennial New York Times bestseller, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (Murkoff & Mazel, 2008), has been read by millions of pregnant women seeking information on the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Women considering child relinquishment are asking for a similar guidebook, *What to Expect When You're Expecting to Place a Child for Adoption*.

4.5 Birthmother Participant: Robin

4.5.1 Robin: Case Summary

In 2011 Robin was 30 years old and had just entered a mental health facility for treatment of depression when she found out she was pregnant. Overwhelmed with this unexpected pregnancy news, she turned to friends and family to help process the information and begin to think about what to do. She felt divided between the emotional pull of her mother to parent and the more practical prods from her father. Having recently lost her job on top of the mental health crisis, she didn't feel equipped financially to raise a child; without a supportive co-parent in the picture, she didn't think she could provide the type of life she wanted for a child. News that she would have twins compounded the dilemma; she knew from her experience as a nanny to twins how much support two babies would require. Following a personal recommendation from a colleague she contacted an adoption agency; the social worker came to Robin's home to meet with her and her family and discuss the process and options. Robin had some personal experience with adoption as her father and stepmother had adopted an infant a few years before through a semi-open adoption. She felt this had been a positive outcome for the child as well as for her extended family. Robin's faith also played a substantial role in helping her cope with the

situation; she felt this “crisis” could ultimately lead to a turning point in her own life. Robin placed her twin boys with a couple she selected who also wanted an open adoption. They drafted a contact agreement, although it is not legally enforceable in her state of North Carolina, and Robin continues to have regular visitation with the twins and ongoing information exchanges.

4.5.2 Robin: Emergent Themes

Co-crises and misinformation / broken promises were the primary themes emerging from Robin’s narrative of her experience in relinquishing her twin sons for adoption. Similar to several other participants, Robin was struggling with mental health issues when she learned she was pregnant; coupled with financial issues, these co-crises sent her further into a full-blown personal crisis situation. While Robin ultimately felt she made the right decision in relinquishing her children for adoption, the misinformation and broken promises of counseling and support surrounding her adoption decision-making left her feeling abandoned after the process.

4.5.2.1 Co-crises

Robin was at a very low point in her life when she became pregnant; she tied the situation directly to her on-going struggle with depression. With the unraveling of her financial stability, loss of job, break-up with a boyfriend, and losing her home, Robin felt she was in an extremely stressful life crisis. The culmination of events coincided with an acute mental health crisis, and she found herself in a mental health facility where she learned about the pregnancy. Robin linked the underlying issue of depression to a domino effect of things falling apart for her, the unintended pregnancy, and ultimately the decision to relinquish her twins to adoption.

As noted earlier, the relationship between pre-existing depressive symptoms and *subsequent* unintended pregnancy is not widely studied. However, depression and stress are linked to poor contraceptive use (Hall, Moreau, Trussell, & Barber, 2013; Hall, Kusunoki, Gatny

& Barber, 2014). A recent longitudinal study found that “higher levels of depressive symptoms in adolescence prior to childbearing were associated with a higher likelihood of unintended first birth between the ages of 18 and 24” (James-Hawkins, Denardo, Blalock & Mollborn, 2014, p. 2121).

Amongst participants in this study, four birthmothers spoke specifically about mental health and depression as likely contributing factors in their experience with unintended pregnancy and child relinquishment. Both Robin and May were actually receiving in-patient mental health treatment at the time of their pregnancy news; Liz received a diagnosis of major depression several years following the birth and relinquishment of her daughter but believes she had been living with depression for many years; Jenny noted she had been seeing a counselor for years prior to her pregnancy for issues related to depression; and while Becky did not overtly tie her experience to issues related to mental health, she reflected on her poor self-esteem and feelings of low self-worth around the time she became pregnant.

Recognition and treatment of depression at an earlier point in life may have helped these women in averting an unintended pregnancy. Likewise, accessible and relevant information about depression and depressive symptoms could empower young women to be proactive in seeking treatment sooner rather than later. Additional research into this link between mental health, depression, poor contraceptive use, and unintended pregnancy could help inform practice and policy in the public health domain.

4.5.2.2 Misinformation and broken promises

As Robin explored and gathered information on adoption, she carefully read the brochures from local adoption agencies. These information pamphlets described the mission of the agency, their role in connecting prospective birthparents with families waiting to adopt, and

the specific services they offer to birthparents. Robin was drawn to a particular agency based upon the information provided about their services and on-going support they offer to women planning to place a child for adoption.

In choosing this adoption agency, what made a difference was the fact that they offered post-adoption counseling, and they told me in writing, in the brochure, they told me verbally about birthparent counseling. But that never happened. And I'm very—to this day, I'm very mad about that. The director said that she was sorry but they had some staffing changes, which I get that. I do. It happens, but they should still make some way. No birthmother should ever go through this without counseling, ever, but she did tell me she was truly sorry and that she gave me other leads, but they all—I can't afford counseling out-of-pocket. I couldn't then. I can't now, and so, anyway, the counseling part fell through.

Robin put a great deal of trust in the information provided by the agency and communicated through the social worker as she made her decision to place her twins for adoption. She relied on those details and promises as she navigated through the decision-making process of selecting an adoption agency. When those services and support measures failed to materialize, Robin experienced additional stress and even feelings of abandonment. She knew she needed professional counseling to help cope with her situation; she also needed transportation assistance to meet regularly with the adoptive couple she had selected. The agency fell through on those promises and Robin was left feeling like a burden and a nuisance.

4.5.3 Robin: Information Sources

Starting early in her pregnancy, Robin talked with family and friends as she worked through her reactions, thoughts and emotions about the situation. Through this external processing, gathering of information, and soliciting other people's thoughts, she began to separate information from emotions to a certain extent. Robin's father encouraged her to consider and confront information of a practical nature in order to make her decision.

Dad would just say, "Think about not only your heart choices but think about the practical choices of every day. How are you going to provide for them? Have you

literally sat down and written down what your life would be like on this amount of money that you'd make, this amount of support, living probably in the system indefinitely?" I mean things like that. He helped me really see the practical side, and I'm grateful for that.

But Robin encountered information and reactions of a different, more emotional nature as well. She tried to balance her mother's desire for her to parent the first grandchildren in the family with her current life situation and what she envisioned for the twins' future. Part of the practical information came from Robin's own experience in caring for twins.

Had it been one baby, my decision might have been different. I think there's a huge chance it would have been different, but twins. I was a nanny for twin girls several years ago, and I know the level of stress as a caregiver, so I can't imagine being a parent, a single parent to twins. I just—yeah, so that had a lot to do with my decision.

Robin intentionally immersed herself in information about adoption to get a better grounding in the vocabulary, process, and options. She already knew something about adoption because of her father and stepmother adopting a child. She had a sense of the potential for a positive outcome but needed information on the details and options within the process specific to her own situation.

I didn't know the terms [surrounding adoption]. I just started reading books and books, and I love to read, so I absorbed all that and reading things like the birth parents services brochures at the agency. Those tell you about open versus closed adoption, so I got a lot of my information there and from Sharon, the social worker. I would just browse online websites and different academic articles and just read about the positives and negatives of open adoption, many more positives, I think.

The brochures provided by the social worker showcasing various prospective adoptive parents offered Robin an opportunity to consider what she wanted for her twins. The profiles describe each couple, occupations, faith and values, and overall pitch of what they could offer a child. The particular couple she selected met two of her criteria; they lived in North Carolina where she resides, and they expressed interest in an open adoption arrangement with regular

visitation. As expressed by other birthmother participants, these parent profiles with color photos of the couple, their home, and messages written directly to a woman contemplating placement are a vivid source of information that enables each woman to envision a possible future for their child(ren) in a very visceral manner.

4.5.4 Robin: Information Experience

Robin sought out and used many sources of information to support her decision-making and coping efforts. She consulted with people she loved and trusted throughout the early processing phase; her family was actively involved in the process, supporting Robin through meetings with the social worker and, later, the prospective adoptive couple. Textual information from books, websites, and adoption agencies coupled with information provided through the social worker helped her understand details about the adoption process, her options and some idea of what she could expect in terms of grief and recovery. But the failure of the adoption agency to follow through on their support services for birthmothers had a significant and emotional impact on Robin's journey through adoption.

I just think if you advertise or you say that you provide these services, then do it in the correct way and be sensitive to everybody involved in the triad of adoption. The agency should just be honest, and the timing was everything. If you say you're going to deliver or possibly deliver these services, then give deadlines, give emails, have a paper trail so that there's not crosstalk and just questions.

This negative experience with conflicting and/or misinformation from the adoption agency prompted an activist response in Robin in the intervening years; she wants to prevent this type of misinformation from affecting other prospective birthmothers the way it did her. Pursuing a graduate program of study in social work with a possible focus on adoption will allow her to become an agent of change in the realm of adoption.

I personally identify to some extent with Robin's reaction to a negative event involving information and the birthmother experience; I too felt a rug pulled out from underneath when the adoption agency notified me that I would not be receiving photos or any further information about the daughter I relinquished to adoption. The adoption agency revealed that the contact agreement discussed at our adoption event was not legally enforceable, and I had no possible recourse. This was in direct contradiction with the information provided by the agency and social worker that coordinated my case when I signed the papers. Unlike Robin, my "activist response" did not emerge for many years, probably related to overwhelming grief and feelings of powerlessness. This type of "activist response" to misinformation may not be unusual; several participants in this study exhibit parallel responses in varying degrees, whether engaging with adoption support groups (online and/or in-person) to offer insight (Laurel and Becky) or becoming involved in the adoption industry directly through education and professional pursuits (Robin and Bronwyn). The negative incidents involving missing or misinformation did not color participants' overall positive attitude toward adoption; instead, several are making efforts to become more involved in processes and policies in order to improve the experience of other, future birthmothers. These "activist response" efforts are part of the on-going coping strategies that some birthmothers employ.

4.6 Birthmother Participant: Stella

4.6.1 Stella: Case Summary

Stella was a 16-year-old high school student living at home in Alaska in 2011. She had been dating her boyfriend for several months when she discovered she was pregnant. After confiding in him, they considered their options. Abortion did not fit with her value system, and

because of their young age and lack of financial stability, Stella felt it was not the right time for them to parent a child. Raised in a conservative Mormon family, Stella was reticent to tell her mother, but the secret leaked out. At that point Stella's mother made contact with the adoption agency affiliated with her church. The agency educated Stella and her mother on the process and options involved in adoption and facilitated all of the paperwork and legal aspects. They provided access to a website where Stella and her boyfriend could read about couples wanting to adopt a child; they spent hours exploring and considering different families, ultimately selecting a couple that had interests similar to their own. Stella began communicating directly with the couple about 6 months into her pregnancy; because the couple was already parenting a child through an open adoption, Stella developed a level of trust with them and learned a great deal about what an open relationship could look like. Stella is comfortable and confident in the adoption decision she and the birthfather (now Stella's husband) made for their daughter; they are in regular contact with the adoptive family and have visited their home in another state. She and the birthfather married a few years later and she reflects that they grew up quickly because of the experience. Stella monitors a few online adoption support forums and finds them helpful in providing relevant resources.

4.6.2 Stella: Emergent Themes

As with other participants, Stella experienced the impact of secrecy and shame surrounding her pregnancy; the religious convictions of her mother prompted a shroud of concealment surrounding Stella's premarital pregnancy. This shame coupled with Stella's young age led her to relinquish much of the control over information seeking to her mother and the adoption agency. However, in the intervening years, Stella regained control over the flow of information surrounding the pregnancy and subsequent adoption of the child; this journey

through relinquishing and then reclaiming control of information materializes as a significant theme.

4.6.2.1 Relinquishing and reclaiming control of information

Immediately upon disclosing her pregnancy situation to her family, Stella's mother suggested adoption as the most viable option. Stella's mother initiated contact with an adoption agency through her church connections. The influence of parents, especially a mother, on an expectant woman is well documented; the Donaldson Adoption Institute's recent report (Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016) found that more than half of birthmothers (54.8%) identified their own parents as having either "some" or "a lot" of influence on their decision to place their child for adoption. The same study found that immediate family members were identified as sources of pressure for women to place the child for adoption in over 63% of cases.

While Stella was firm in her narrative that she concurred fully and voluntarily with her mother's belief that adoption was the best option for the situation, it was evident that Stella relinquished much of the information-gathering responsibility to her mother. Stella agreed in principle to move forward with an adoption decision but felt comfortable leaving many of the process tasks to her mother and the adoption agency.

Through my mom's church, they have like an adoption agency and so we went through them and honestly I didn't really talk to anyone. They kind of did like the legal stuff and that was about it. My mom, she was the one who found out about that and kind of got all the information ready and then I had to go in there and do like paperwork or something. Even to this day, I still don't know all that goes into it just because, I mean, I was sixteen, so my mom pretty much did all that stuff. I mean she was mine so I had to sign the papers, but I didn't know what any of it really meant. I've never really asked how all the legal stuff worked.

While her mother was the active information seeker, there were several examples where Stella took back the reins of control over information surrounding the adoption. In particular, she and her boyfriend (the birthfather) took responsibility for examining and evaluating the profiles

of prospective adoptive families in order to select the couple they felt was right. Stella was also the one to initiate the choice for an open adoption, not her mother. In the years since the adoption, it was Stella who pursued the frequent exchange of information and communication with the adoptive family. Once the decision to relinquish her daughter had been made, Stella felt confident and comfortable in regaining control over the navigation, evaluation, and sharing of information.

Although her mother's need for secrecy surrounding both the pregnancy and the adoption continued after the birth of Stella's daughter, Stella was ready to uncover the secret and felt the need to disclose the existence of her daughter to others. This tension between Stella's desire for freedom in information sharing and her mother's preference for discretion and secrecy was the impetus for conflict within the family:

It's always kind of that secretive thing because even with my family; my mom kept it a secret from like everyone and we ended up getting in a few fights about it. I was like okay, it happened. You can't just ignore it. I posted pictures of her on Facebook that everyone was like, "Wow, you were pregnant?" and I was like, "Yup." But my mom just didn't talk about it and she made it kind of like the big elephant in the room to where even just being at home was awkward sometimes.

In the years since she relinquished her daughter to adoption, Stella became more comfortable in sharing information about her experience with adoption and about her daughter. She found the frequent communication and ongoing exchange of information with the adoptive family to be helpful in her healing and coping process. But she also allowed herself the freedom to talk about her own story with adoption in her everyday life with a sense of empowerment, "I feel like I'm at a good point to where I actually really love talking about it [the adoption and her daughter] and it helps me more and more when I do talk about it."

4.6.3 Stella: Information Sources

Stella's primary source of information surrounding the adoption planning was the social worker through the adoption agency. As noted in the discussion of themes above, Stella turned over most of the initial information gathering responsibility and decision-making to her mother. Through the social worker, Stella learned about the process, details, and options involved in the relinquishment and adoption processes. But she also highlighted the support she received from the alternative high school she attended. During her pregnancy she transferred to a school specifically designed for the unique needs of pregnant students and young women already parenting children. Although she was alone in her plans to relinquish her child instead of parent, she took the child development classes they offered and the school staff took action to meet some of her information needs regarding the adoption.

Actually I was the first one [student] that ever did adoption that went to that school, so it was still kind of new. But they didn't not talk about it [adoption]. You did your normal schooling and then pretty much everyone took like a parenting class or child development or something like that. But it was really informative. They actually went and got different stuff ... like pamphlets or different things, so that if someone was wanting to choose adoption, you could talk about it, so that was cool.

Stella made a substantial connection with the midwife who provided primary care during her pregnancy and delivery. The adoption circumstance was completely new for this midwife and she made special efforts to support Stella. "She made sure to schedule my appointments with her; even to this day, me and her talk. We just got really close just because she had never had anything like that [patient who was placing the child for adoption]."

Her boyfriend, the father of the baby, was supportive of Stella, but let her take the lead on most of the decision-making.

I don't think he went to any of the doctor's appointments; but like if I had to talk to him about anything, he would talk to me. I just don't think that he wanted to

get too attached [to the baby]. I mean he was there for the delivery, but all the other stuff he wasn't really there for.

Birthfather support from the sideline was common behavior amongst participants in this study for whom the biological father was present in any sense. For Stella, unlike other participants, the birth and relinquishment of their child served to bring the two closer; she and her boyfriend married shortly after the birth of their daughter and share in the communication and visitation with the adoptive family.

Another significant source of information for Stella was the adoptive mother she selected to raise her daughter. Having already adopted one other child, the adoptive mother provided Stella a preview of the experience based upon their interactions with the other birthmother. The adoptive couple also supported the open adoption plan and encouraged Stella and the birthfather to be involved exchanging information, communicating, and visiting as much as they would like.

Since the adoption, Stella regularly monitors different online adoption support groups and finds value in reading the conversations of others affected by adoption.

I have a bunch of them [adoption support groups] on Facebook. I'm not one of those people that like goes and posts things, but I would sit there and read other people's stories. If they post questions, I'll go through and be like oh, I was wondering that too. So I'll go through and look through all the answers and all that type of stuff.

4.6.4 Stella: Information Experience

Stella told her story very quickly and concisely during our interview; she got right to the sequence of events and did not offer much in the way of elaboration or reflection on her experience. She did not seem to question or leave much room to probe her feelings or her thoughts regarding the decision-making process. For example, she was quick to point out her young age at the time at the time of her pregnancy and the seemingly natural inclination to follow her mother's lead in making an adoption decision. I was challenged in trying to explore

her information seeking behavior as she did not recall much in the way of purposeful information gathering or collecting leading up to the adoption event. In thinking about her story and the way she told it, I found myself trying hard to hold back my own judgment and desire for her to want more information and to more fully understand the details of the process she was committing to. I wanted her to have a sense of *urgency* in terms of seeking and gathering information. But this was *my* desire; Stella's experience documents the diversity of human responses in terms of information behavior within a personal crisis. Stella's processing was largely internal, "I really didn't talk to a lot of people about it; I guess I'm kind of like that about anything. I just kind of keep to myself especially if it's something that's, like, stressful."

Indeed her restricted story line reflects a coping strategy found in other participants' experiences; once a decision to choose adoption has been reached (at least tentatively), it is not uncommon to insulate one's self from conflicting information. Stella recalled, "The whole pregnancy, I put up a wall. I was like, 'This is what we're doing. No one is changing my mind' ... I knew that this was what was right." But behind that wall Stella did engage with and nurture information supporting the adoption plan. She and her boyfriend (the birthfather) pored over the profiles of prospective adoptive parents to select the right family, "We picked them just because they looked the nicest and their stories were kind of like...we were into the same stuff that they were into." The relationship with the couple they selected began to grow through frequent communication and discussion about what each party wanted in terms of an open adoption.

Although Stella's narrative about her pregnancy and relinquishment experience was based primarily on the facts and sequence of events with little room for emotions, she was much more comfortable in exploring her engagement with information in the present tense. In the years

since the adoption, she has abandoned the shroud of secrecy that surrounded the pregnancy and adoption and has begun to reveal and share information about her daughter. “I posted pictures of her on Facebook...everyone was like, ‘Wow, you were pregnant?’ And I was like, ‘Yup.’” Disclosing information about the adoption with others has been therapeutic, “I feel like I’m at a good point to where I actually really love talking about it and it helps me more and more when I do talk about it.”

4.7 Birthmother Participant: Jenny

4.7.1 Jenny: Case Summary

In her early 30’s, Jenny was a stay-at-home mom to four kids in rural Michigan in 2013 when she separated from her husband and had a brief affair. The resulting pregnancy added to the stress she was already experiencing in her life. She felt abandoned and conflicted; the biological father made it clear he wanted nothing to do with the situation and her husband was angry about the affair. On her own, suddenly Jenny found herself working full-time to support her children and struggling to envision how she could manage with two more babies (she was pregnant with twins). Abortion was not an option for her, so she explored the idea of adoption with a local pregnancy support agency. Jenny credits the social worker there with educating her on all the options relating to adoption, including the potential pitfalls, and thoughtfully exploring what would work for her. Jenny loved being a mother but felt that at this point in her life, all of her children would ultimately suffer if she tried to manage six kids. She preferred to take on the emotional impact of relinquishment if it meant the twins and her other children would be better taken care of in the long run. Jenny selected an adoptive couple that met her requirements; they lived locally, wanted an open adoption, and already had children. She felt that because the

adoptive mother already had kids of her own, she would be more empathetic to what Jenny would go through emotionally.

Indeed, Jenny remains very close to and emotionally supported by the adoptive mother. Jenny knows her adoption situation is somewhat unusual in how open everything is; she views the situation as an extended family relationship. She visits the twins frequently and is in constant communication with the adoptive family; her other children are included in this relationship. But this level of openness and ongoing contact is not without emotional challenges. Jenny relives the grief and emotions of relinquishment on a regular basis. She is also highly sensitive to the precarious nature of the open adoption. Post adoption contact agreements are not legally binding in Michigan, so Jenny experiences an undercurrent of fear that the adoptive parents could close the adoption at any time and cut off her contact with the twins.

4.7.2 Jenny: Emergent Themes

Jenny's narrative shares many themes and parallels with other participants; they will be included in Chapter 5. The theme of an emotional savings account, however, is uniquely articulated and substantive in Jenny's account. She knew how difficult and deep the emotional toll on her was likely to be following the adoption, so she invested heavily in the relationship she developed with the adoptive family. Her intent being was to be able to draw on their joy at adopting the twins when she was grieving.

4.7.2.1 Emotional savings account

As an older participant already raising several children, Jenny drew upon her life experiences and her own self-awareness in making the decision to place her twins for adoption. This was not a decision made in haste or without deep contemplation. She knew she wanted an

extremely open and ongoing relationship with an adoptive family and pursued information and plans accordingly.

I wanted it to be a really open adoption, something that hopefully would one day turn into more like family. Because I do have the other kids. I couldn't take them away from them. It's important to keep a good relationship [with adoptive parents]. So we talked a lot about it in the hospital, just that we needed to be open and honest with each other. Keeping the conversation open so if I was overstepping my bounds or she was overstepping hers—for us to let each other know. And not just be hiding stuff or talking about each other behind our backs.

Jenny invested a great deal of time, effort, and trust into building the type of dynamic she wanted to co-create with the adoptive family. First, she considered only the profiles of prospective parents that indicated a similar desire for openness and who lived within close proximity to her home. Second, she communicated her desire for such an open relationship during the first meeting with the couple mediated by the social worker. When she received a positive and amenable response from them, she moved forward with her decision. She planned a very personal and memorable way to let the couple know that she had picked them to adopt her twins. Typically this type of communication between parties (the birthparents and the adoptive family) is facilitated or mediated through the social worker. But Jenny was adamant about exchanging this information face-to-face, directly with the couple.

So we met at the adoption agency office ... they looked so nervous. And I just told them, I have one more question for you—and the mom is like “What’s that?” And I was like, “How would you like to take the babies home?” And she was like...she just started bawling. It was the sweetest thing in the world; she just started bawling. And she looks at her husband and she’s like, “Well, I guess you don’t have to get me a birthday present now.” Her birthday was the very next day. I didn’t even know that. So that was even cooler. Because I just made her birthday for the rest of her life.

This personal approach was very important to Jenny; it was her way of investing in a sort of emotional savings account. Storing up positive memories with the intent to draw from the collection at a later date was her way of coping with anticipated negative emotions and grief.

I knew part of what was going to bring me around and keep me on a good side of this instead of going very negative. I knew that I needed to see their joy. That was what was going to help me through the hard times, was remembering how happy I made them.

Other participants mentioned a similarly positive aspect to their adoption story, the sense that they were contributing to the happiness of a family wanting to adopt. Indeed, this foreshadows the theme of “framing” addressed in Chapter 5. But in this case, Jenny’s intentional immersion into the narrative of the adoptive family may be viewed as more than framing the situation in a positive light. By actively creating (even demanding) an opportunity to share and exchange personal information, Jenny was, in a sense, making an affective investment in her toolkit of coping strategies.

4.7.3 Jenny: Information Sources

The primary sources of information Jenny consulted as she made the decision to relinquish the twins to adoption were the adoption agency social worker, another birthmother, and her own inquiries via the Internet. The social worker helped Jenny explore all the options along the adoption process; she provided concrete legal and process details as well as information on the emotional fallout and coping strategies. Because the social worker was in frequent contact with Jenny, she could reiterate and address questions and concerns to make sure Jenny was actually absorbing the information. More than simply providing information, the social worker served as a counselor, encouraging Jenny to fully engage with the process and her emotions. The social worker suggested Jenny talk with a birthmother who had already been through the adoption event. Jenny had a brief telephone conversation with the suggested birthmother; similar to other participants, she found the first-hand information helpful in general but it prompted Jenny to realize that she wanted much more in the way of openness than the other birthmother was experiencing at the time. Jenny felt strongly that the overall educational

approach by the social worker empowered her and bolstered her confidence in the ability to make a decision.

Jenny did search for specific information online, verifying the rights of birthparents in the relinquishment process. But once she felt confident in her understanding of the legal aspects of adoption, she shifted from information seeking behaviors into self-reflection and internal processing.

I kind of stayed off-line for quite some time because I wanted to make this decision on my own. I didn't want to be forced or coerced or anyone telling me what to do and what not to do. So I stayed off-line for a while.

Since the adoption event, Jenny has monitored and engaged with information and people involved in adoption through online forums. She has participated in some adoption support groups online but was wary of the bullying behavior she witnessed, perpetrated by people with strong opinions either for or against adoption. Creating her own private space online proved more beneficial to her as an avenue to share information about the twins and as an emotional outlet for her own feelings.

After the adoption I did look for support groups online because after the adoption I did feel like I had lost some friends and family. And I didn't really feel like I had a place to go to talk about it. I did start a private Facebook page just for myself so only I can let members into it. I have complete control over it. So that's my spot where it's specifically for the twins. So I vent, I talk about it—the adoptive mom is not a part of that either. It's strictly for me, and it helps a lot to have a place sort of like an online diary. But at the same time, I do get to share with family and friends that do want to know, that want updates and photos and stuff.

4.7.4 Jenny: Information Experience

As Jenny explored her options and feelings surrounding the unintended pregnancy, she relied heavily on the social worker at the pregnancy support agency. Jenny credited the social worker for empowering her journey through all the information because of three characteristics

the social worker embodied. First, she consistently demonstrated a nonjudgmental attitude, following Jenny's lead as she wavered between parenting the twins and placing them for adoption. The counselor was receptive and flexible with Jenny's ideas throughout the process—she quickly moved into strategies and support efforts when Jenny decided to parent the babies; but then she easily shifted directions when Jenny wanted to explore adoption. Jenny felt strongly that the counselor was not trying to push her in one direction or another (to parent or to place). Second, the social worker had years of experience from which to draw, numerous examples to share with Jenny in terms of types of adoption, best practices, issues that could arise, and challenges for which to prepare. She arranged a conversation with another birthmother so Jenny could engage directly and unmediated with someone who had already been through the experience. Third, the social worker provided deep and broad information related to adoption, from making sure that Jenny understood the specific and nuanced legal issues relevant to state law to going over paperwork ahead of time and giving her copies of everything. She also helped Jenny prepare and educate her older children for the adoption. Jenny found the extent and deep level of the information to be reassuring and empowering throughout the decision-making process. The social worker continued to be an information conduit and source of support for Jenny even post-adoption.

4.8 Birthmother Participant: Becky

4.8.1 Becky: Case Summary

Becky was 22 in 2006, attending college and living at home with her parents. Her suspicions were confirmed when she took a pregnancy test. She and her boyfriend were pregnant, again. Seven months earlier, Becky had terminated an unintended pregnancy primarily because of her chronic health issues. But three factors prompted her to reconsider terminating

this pregnancy: She was feeling better health-wise; she was still coping with grief surrounding the abortion; and her boyfriend did not show up to the termination appointment, and she could not go through it alone. But there was no easy or obvious alternative. Becky did not feel like she could financially support a baby, her parents were dealing with significant health issues themselves and could not provide support, and her boyfriend was not coming through with either financial or emotional support to even participate in the decision-making. Secrecy was Becky's first coping strategy; she hid her pregnancy from her family and friends for as long as she could. She started looking for information to help her come to terms with her situation and explore some options in a concrete manner. She found a crisis pregnancy center helpful in listening to her story and prompting her to talk about her thoughts surrounding the decision process. Alone in her room, Becky started searching out information on adoption, immersing herself in information from adoption websites and online support groups. Soon she was reading the profiles posted by prospective adoptive families and comparing details. She wanted a very open adoption and she found a family who shared her vision. They started communicating directly, first over the phone and then flying out to visit their home and meet their extended church family. The couple had hired an adoption facilitator to help them grow their family through adoption; the facilitator worked only with families and birthparents committed to open and ongoing contact. Becky credits the facilitator with supplying extensive information and support. The facilitator helped Becky craft a *Post-Adoption Contact Agreement* with the adoptive family, delineating information exchange and ongoing contact between the parties. The Minnesota statute, Communication or Contacts Agreement (2016), recognizes a post-adoption contact agreement that is signed by both parties and filed with the adoption decree as a legally binding contract.

Becky remains in regular communication with the adoptive family and her daughter through email, social media, and cross-country visits a few times a year.

4.8.2 Becky: Emergent Themes

Information coping is a primary theme that emerged through Becky's narrative. Reactions to shame were evident in how Becky responded to her pregnancy confirmation; she hid the pregnancy for as long as possible from her family and she experienced feelings of vulnerability when designing her adoption plan. This sense of isolation led her to compensate by immersing herself in information about adoption in online forums and resources. She was keenly aware of this delicate and potentially dangerous balance between being consumed by information and setting it aside to focus on her own needs.

4.8.2.1 Informational coping

Becky closed herself off during the pregnancy, as she did not feel she had much in the way of positive or local support. Information immersion became her primary coping activity and the internet a tool to deal with the stress of the situation. She spent a great deal of time alone searching online for information and other people talking about adoption.

My Type A personality kicking in, I immersed myself online probably way too much. I spent a ton of time online because I had a laptop in my bedroom and I was digging and digging and digging. Anything that was posted online about adoption scams, open adoption, I connected.

This immersion in information satisfied some of Becky's efforts to cope with the situation and allowed her, at least virtually, to get out of her room and to feel a sense of connection with other people who were dealing with similar emotions and situations. She used the adoption reading material and the online forums as a distraction to an extent, to keep her mind off her personal concerns: first regarding the upcoming birth and painful emotions swirling

around her, and later, the new life her daughter was experiencing with the adoptive family. But she found at points that she needed to turn off this connection, to face things in her own world.

There was a point, when I was approaching the due date, that I had to put the books away. I was like, I am so emotional right now that I can't possibly absorb any more. So I had to put away the adoption stuff, the grief stuff, I mean if I don't know it by now, and if I continue to read this stuff, it's going to be hard for me to give birth... and put this away, I can't read any more.

This information immersion coping behavior continued after the adoption event. Because Becky is “friends” with the adoptive mother on Facebook, she has the opportunity to see new pictures and updates from the family on an almost daily basis. At the suggestion of her counselor, Becky is learning to step back occasionally from the stream of information and avoid episodes of “information binging and gorging.”

4.8.3 Becky: Information Sources

Once Becky connected with the prospective adoptive couple she found online, she began talking with the adoption facilitator they employed. This is a different arrangement from other birthmothers in this study; all other participants worked with a more traditional adoption agency. This facilitator had years of experience working in adoption and adoption education; she advised both the couple and Becky on some of the issues and challenges they would face. The facilitator provided more than just information to Becky; she became a close confidante and support person for her. She connected Becky with a psychologist for weekly counseling sessions, for which the adoptive couple paid during her pregnancy and for 6 weeks after the birth. The facilitator sent Becky loads of informational material and books on the birthmother experience, grief, and planning for the future. She also met with Becky in person and talked at length on the phone.

Throughout her pregnancy Becky was consuming a great deal of information about adoption—material from the facilitator, material she found through online searches, as well as

conversations she monitored in online adoption forums. A particular information need Becky explored related to open adoption. The idea of openness resonated with Becky, but she wanted to know what research had to say on the benefits and challenges of open adoption, particularly for the child.

It's not that I'm not familiar with adoption, it's just that the adoptions in my family have been closed or mostly closed and I was looking to be more open. Because when I was Googling I would see research studies that would say it's better for the children, that they don't wonder who their parents are...that they can answer questions like, where do my features come from or where does my athletic ability come from. That it was just healthier for everyone involved—to be open about everything.

Like other participants, Becky was disappointed in the lack of current information on adoption. “Libraries don't always have the best resources—they have books on adoption that are, like, 30 years old. So unless you can get online and research a lot, you don't even know what's available.” She cautions women considering adoption to employ substantial skepticism and take their time in navigating the shadowed information landscape of adoption and choices surrounding the act of child relinquishment.

I think it is definitely a buyer-beware situation for potential birthparents. They need to do lots of their own research because there are definitely a lot of adoption agencies that will get pushy with you to make you fit whatever they want. And they will trample on your rights if they can, if it makes their job easier. There are a lot of social workers out there that are not, shouldn't be in it. There are a lot of potential adoptive parents that are very unethical that will say whatever they think you want to hear so they can get the baby. You need to have time with them to work through that and be able to dig in enough to know that they're not...not lying about it and just telling you whatever you want to hear.

This skepticism and feeling of vulnerability that we hear in Becky's voice about what information to trust will resurface in Chapter 5 with the theme, *trading of trust and power*.

4.8.4 Becky: Information Experience

Throughout her pregnancy and in the years since, Becky has invested significant time online looking through adoption-related blogs and websites, reading about the experiences and comments/questions posed by birthparents and all members of the adoption triad. Although some of the stories are painful and bring up strong emotions for her, she feels a sense of connection to this community. The forums also give her insight into the thoughts and emotions of adoptive parents, including the couple that adopted her daughter. Information from adoptive parents' perspectives is helpful as she navigates the ongoing open adoption relationship with her daughter's family.

Becky has become extremely knowledgeable about all facets of adoption, from legal issues related to open adoption and contact agreements (which vary state by state) to grief and coping processes unique to adoption. She has studied current research on open adoption and feels strongly that the shame and stigma traditionally surrounding adoption has a negative impact on all members of the adoption triad. This knowledge has empowered Becky's confidence in herself and the decision she made to relinquish her daughter to adoption. So while at times she struggles to control episodes of information over-consumption or binging, part of her identity is tied to a mastery of adoption information.

4.9 Birthmother Participant: Bronwyn

4.9.1 Bronwyn: Case Summary

The day before her senior year in high school was to begin in 2003, Bronwyn worked up the nerve to take a pregnancy test. The motivation for an immediate answer was the start of the school year; she knew she would not be able to return to her private Christian school if she was pregnant. So she picked up a test and met her boyfriend, a recent graduate of the same school, at

a local park. The public restroom is where her fears became reality: she was pregnant at 16. As soon as she came home, her mother saw the tears and emotion on her face, confronting her with, “You think you’re pregnant.” Her family was devastated and had difficulty coming to terms with this reality, including Bronwyn herself; “this was not Bronwyn.” Her mother’s response was swift in arranging for prenatal care; she also voiced her thoughts, “You are going to place this baby for adoption.” Bronwyn felt this was probably the best option for everyone, especially the baby. The adoption agency Bronwyn and her folks selected facilitated a placement for her in a church-supported maternity home in a town about two hours away for the remainder of the pregnancy. Although her family is quite open about the adoption now, at the time they wanted to keep the pregnancy secret from extended family and community. Bronwyn found the maternity home experience helpful, as it allowed her some anonymity and space away from the emotional situation at home. Bronwyn felt comfortable with a semi-open adoption for her daughter, information exchange and updates being made through the agency. Communication increased about 6 years, ago when the adoptive mother “friended” Bronwyn on Facebook. Bronwyn reflects that the experience shaped her life significantly; she is now pursuing an education and career in social work with a possible focus on adoption.

4.9.2 Bronwyn: Emergent Themes

The idea of “safe space” emerges as a prominent theme in Bronwyn’s narrative. The support she experienced at a maternity home allowed her to shelter her adoption decision from conflicting information and opinions; this freedom allowed her to focus on the information details of her adoption plan and cope with her emotions.

4.9.2.1 Safe space

Bronwyn's early reaction to her pregnancy was full of emotion and shame. Overwhelmed by the unexpected news, she felt numb, devastated and uncertain how to move forward.

I didn't really think much about it, because I didn't think much about anything. I just thought my life was over. And I really didn't care what happened. I didn't care if I placed the baby for adoption, I didn't care about an abortion—I just didn't want this to be happening.

She relied heavily on her mother to gather information on options to consider and begin making arrangements. Those options quickly narrowed. Bronwyn was too far along in the pregnancy to consider abortion and she felt parenting at 16 years old was not a viable option for her. "This is not going to be what I imagined one day for my daughter; I should not be a parent. This wasn't what I'd pictured for my family life, so I was okay with adoption—it was fine."

This narrowing of options was a relief for Bronwyn, and she was able to focus on adoption and start to build some confidence in the decision. With the support of her family, Bronwyn moved into a maternity home away from her home for the duration of her pregnancy. While she was sad to leave her family, she soon felt embraced and supported at the maternity home. Reflecting on the situation, Bronwyn found the experience meaningful and positive at that point in her life. In particular, she appreciated the camaraderie she developed with the other pregnant women staying there, as well as the house parents and social worker with whom she regularly interacted.

Living in the maternity home was so good. I didn't have outside influences from other people to make me second-guess the choice that I was going to make. A lot of people don't necessarily think adoption is the greatest thing. They would have said, "Oh, no, no, don't give your baby to somebody else...we will help you, we'll have baby showers for you...blah-blah-blah." And that probably would have been the case had I stayed, and people would have known I was pregnant. So that was good.

Bronwyn found the maternity home to be a safe space, without conflicting information or opposing attitudes related to her decision to relinquish to adoption. She had already made that decision and wanted support to help her continue on that path. Meeting regularly with both a counselor and social worker, Bronwyn learned more details about the adoption process and surrounding options. The adoption social worker also facilitated meetings with women who had already relinquished a child for adoption, so that Bronwyn could learn first-hand about some of the positive and negative realities she would face. She credits those interactions as extremely helpful; not every story was positive, but she picked up on information details that she incorporated into her planning and decision-making. For example one birthmother described a tradition of sending her child a Christmas ornament every year. That resonated with Bronwyn and she continues this tradition with her daughter; it has become very meaningful for both of them.

Even while Bronwyn was in a safe space, she felt a need to shelter herself and her decision from dissenting voices. Shielding her plan became important to Bronwyn; she was sensitive to her own internal emotions and grief as well as outside reactions and stigma surrounding an adoption decision. For example, she found conversations at her temporary high school awkward on occasion; several of her classmates were also pregnant, but each of them planned to parent their child, so adoption would never be a consideration for them.

At school I was always hesitant to mention that I was placing her for adoption. I was a minority at that school. It seems like...I don't know how to word this...but it seems like for Hispanics or African-Americans, adoption isn't socially acceptable. You don't give your family away. Adoption was not normal for them. They did not understand why I could possibly do that. Or how my mom would let me do that.

Purposefully avoiding or putting herself out of range of conflicting information and attitudes in a safe space was a strategy Bronwyn used to cope with and build confidence in her decision.

4.9.2 Bronwyn: Information Sources

Throughout the decision-making process, Bronwyn relied heavily on others to seek, gather, and offer her information. This may be attributed to her young age and need for substantial support, both physically and emotionally. Initially her mother served as her primary source of information in directing her toward a path of adoption, guiding her to medical care, and selecting an adoption agency to facilitate the process. Through the maternity home, Bronwyn received substantial and detailed information, meeting regularly with an adoption professional and counselor. Information from other birthmothers also helped inform some of her decisions. In the intervening years, Bronwyn has become much more proactive in seeking out information both about adoption and about the grief experience of birthmothers. She is active in adoption support groups and participates in retreats aimed at birthmothers. The exchange of information through these groups is helpful to her, as she is able to continue a dialog about her own experience and gain insight through the stories of others. She credits these gatherings with helping her continue the healing process. Social media has become a welcome source of information and communication with the adoptive family, and she is able to learn more about her daughter. Exchanges via social media help Bronwyn cope with loss, as she is privy to frequent and consistent glimpses into her daughter's life.

4.9.3 Bronwyn: Information Experience

Drawing upon her own experience as a birthmother as well as her social work training, Bronwyn is now actively involved in educating others about adoption, aiming to reduce some of the surrounding secrecy and misinformation.

I meet many people who are adopted, and I say I love adoption and I'm a birthmom. They're like, "Oh my gosh, I'm meeting a birthmom. I've never met a birthmom. My mom's a birthmom. This is so weird." And then when I talk about my views as a birthmom and why I placed for adoption, sometimes it really gets them thinking. I remember one adoptee in particular who doesn't talk to her birthmom. I told her, "You birthmom thinks about you every year on your birthday." And she said, "I never thought about her thinking about me on my birthday." And I said, "I promise you she does."

Bronwyn's life experience has directed her career path; she is finishing a graduate program that will allow her to counsel birthmothers and adoptive families. The importance of complete and trustworthy information is a key thrust of her motivation and efforts to support women who consider relinquishing a child for adoption. Similar to some other participants, Bronwyn's experience has launched a sort of activist role; sharing her personal information and helping others engage with information about adoption has become part of her identity and life's work.

4.10 Chapter summary

Emergent themes and findings within each case presented in this chapter are as varied as the participating birthmothers in this study. Table 5 delineates the key themes emerging from each case, key information sources used by each participant, and key aspects of the unique information experience as evident in each interview. Not surprisingly, almost all participants engaged in Internet searching to explore information about adoption, details and options surrounding the adoption process, legal aspects, evidence or criteria to use in evaluating the

adoption agency for legitimacy, and to find the voices of women who had already relinquished a child for adoption. Participants characterized the information landscape through which expectant mothers considering adoption traverse as sparse, lacking in relevance and depth, and vulnerable to false promises. In the years since their adoption event, all participants use the Internet to monitor and occasionally engage with adoption and birthmother communities. These groups or forums provide specific information; for example Stella turns to online forums for answers or ideas, “I would sit there and read other people’s stories or like if they have questions, I’ll go through and like, ‘Oh, I was wondering that too.’ So I’ll go through and look through all the answers.” The Internet, especially social media, plays a vital role in how birthmothers stay connected to their child(ren) and the adoptive family. Social media is frequently the medium through which information, including photos and other updates, is exchanged between parties.

Table 5 Information needs and information sources, pre-adoption

Participant	Key themes	Key information sources	Key aspects of information experience
Laurel	Informational coping Information scarcity	Internet searching Adoption agency social worker Another birthmother	Active informational coping and planning facilitated a sense of control
Liz	Co-crises Intuition Ripple effects	Internet searching Adoption counselor Friends	Gut reaction supported adoption choice and selection of adoptive parents
May	Ripple effects Unanticipated complexities	Planned Parenthood Crisis pregnancy center Internet searching Adoption professional	Frustration with lack of relevant and current online adoption forums
Robin	Co-crises Misinformation / broken promises	Family and friends Personal experience with adoption Adoption social worker	Breakdown of agency post-adoption support had significant impact Activist response to misinformation
Stella	Relinquishing and reclaiming control of information	Adoption agency social worker Mother Internet searching Alternative high school Adoptive mother	Protective of decision from conflicting information or attitudes Passive informational coping pre-adoption Active information exchange post-adoption
Jenny	Emotional savings account	Adoption agency social worker Another birthmother Internet searching Online adoption forums	Active informational coping and planning Proactive investment in relationship with adoptive family
Becky	Informational coping	Internet searching Adoption facilitator Online adoption forums	Active informational coping and planning Identity tied to mastery of adoption information
Bronwyn	Safe space	Mother Adoption professional Other birthmothers	Passive informational coping pre-adoption Activist response post-adoption

In addition to the common threads across information sources, we see an array of experiences and relationships with information. Informational coping styles across the

monitoring-blunting spectrum vary across cases and even within cases at different points in time. In the pre-adoption period, Laurel and Becky engaged in active information seeking to achieve some sense of control over their situation, while Bronwyn and Stella relinquished information efforts to others as a natural coping response. In the years since the adoption however, Bronwyn and Stella have become active monitors of information related to adoption. The impact of misinformation is particularly evident in Robin's experience; the breakdown in post-adoption counseling services was so detrimental that it launched an activist response in her to the extent that she intends to become an adoption professional and agent of change in the field. The lived experience of these eight birthmothers offers a glimpse into the unique and varied needs of women while considering adoption and then living with that decision.

CHAPTER 5: CONVERGING FINDINGS ACROSS CASES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents analysis and discussion of findings across participant cases. The intent here is to identify and explore patterns of convergence in terms of themes that arise from all of the participating birthmothers' reflections on their experiences with adoption. To be clear, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) focuses on the lived experience of particular individuals and the meaning they make regarding the phenomenon of interest. However, "IPA studies are also concerned with the balance of convergence and divergence within the sample" (Smith, 2011, p. 10). While the previous chapter focused on divergent themes represented uniquely in each case, this chapter explores themes echoed with some harmony across participant experiences. This dual approach is advantageous in revealing both the idiographic themes expressed within individual cases as well as common experiences across cases to produce a deep and broad understanding of the data.

Four primary themes emerge across all participant experiences: 1) envisioning a future self (or envisioning future possible selves); 2) positive reframing; 3) trading of trust and power; and 4) filtering information through shame and stigma. Information behavior is evident through each of these processes. These themes help us better understand the birthmothers' relationships with information during their decision-making and coping journeys, but they are also iterative and non-linear as evidenced by the meaning birthmothers continue to make of the experience. Below, excerpts from the data are presented first to demonstrate the derivation and evidence of each theme, allowing the reader to trace the analysis process; discussion follows each theme

presentation along with links to existing research in order to add depth to the interpretation. To be clear, as each theme is presented I include quotes from some but not necessarily all participants to illustrate the concept. Variations on each theme are evident across all cases, but I selected quotations that most clearly depict the common thread.

5.2 Envisioning Future Possible Selves

Acts of self-reflection and envisioning alternative futures were evident in all participants' experiences, both in their immediate response to the unintended pregnancy and during subsequent years post-adoption.

I started to ask...what's my five-year plan—what do I see myself, like, where do I see myself? What do I think I'll miss out on if I have this child or what will I gain if I give it up for adoption, those kind of things, but really thinking about in the future. It's hard to think in the future in that situation, but if you can at all, it's helpful. (May)

I was mad at the situation, thinking different things, thinking abortion, thinking adoption, thinking maybe I can do this on my own, but all at once. I wanted someone else's opinion, so I talked to family and also friends about opinion-based. What do you think I should do, and how do you think I should even start thinking about this stuff? My dad would just say, "Think about not only your heart choices but think about the practical choices of every day. How are you going to provide for them? Have you literally sat down and written down what your life would be like on this amount of money that you'd make, this amount of support, living probably in the system for indefinitely?" I mean things like that. He helped me really see the practical side, and I'm grateful for that. (Robin)

The theory of *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) describes this phenomenon as conceptions of ourselves in future states, imagined visions of one's self in the future. An individual contemplates representations of who she might become in the future; these may be positive (hoped-for selves) or negative (feared selves). These possible selves provide a context for evaluating the current self and situation and may provide direction for motivation, decision-making, and behavior. Information utilized in generating possible selves is internal (attitudes, beliefs, biases, and self-concept) as well as external (cultural and social contexts). We understand

experiences and interactions as being shared with other people (Bruner, 1995); thus possible selves derive their meaning from social context and inter-subjectivity (Erikson, 2007).

5.2.1 Envisioning Future Possible Selves, Pre-Adoption

Across the board, participants were initially overcome with emotion and disbelief upon learning of the pregnancy. Robin recalls full-fledged denial at the news, demanding additional tests for confirmation. May felt embarrassment and shame, "...wanting everything to just go away." Bronwyn avoided confronting the possibility of pregnancy until more than halfway through the term; when it was confirmed, she admits feeling as though her life was over. But after a period of processing and living with the news, each woman began to assess the situation in light of her current circumstance. Participants recalled difficulty in pulling themselves out of denial and into a frame of mind where they could consider the future. This difficulty corresponds to the assessment of the severity of the negative event (i.e., unintended pregnancy) stage of crisis decision theory (Sweeny, 2008); participants in this study perceived the unintended pregnancy news as overwhelming, a negative life event of significant magnitude. Various prompts in their lives motivated participants to shift into conscious consideration of possible outcomes or *possible selves*. Time itself was the most obvious prompt; the nature of pregnancy is bounded by a specific time frame with an equally imminent decision-making time frame. Participants were also prompted to think about their future by those in whom they confided, often by friends and family, and sometimes by the information resources they consulted such as an adoption professional or even information found through Internet searches.

Taking stock and assessing where she was in life, each participant identified a veritable list of qualifiers by which to judge whether or not she could see herself successfully parenting the child(ren). Each participant envisioned a future as a mother to her unborn child(ren) and

judged the probability of a positive outcome based on her current self. “Possible selves furnish criteria against which outcomes are evaluated” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 956). The list of qualifiers was virtually the same for all cases: financial status and prospects for near-future stability; social support including biological father, immediate family, and friends; emotional and mental stability; comparison between her own childhood and prospective upbringing of this child; co-crisis and extenuating circumstances that complicated the situation.

As each participant began to try on different responses and outcomes relating to the pregnancy, she engaged in some form of information seeking behavior. May visited a Planned Pregnancy facility to collect information on abortion options and then a crisis pregnancy agency to explore parenting and adoption possibilities. Jenny sought out a pregnancy counselor for information on options to support both a parenting decision and an adoption decision. She credits the nonjudgmental support of the social worker as she explored these two very different possible selves. She found the extensive and detailed information to be helpful as she crafted mental depictions of her choices; the resulting vivid portrayals of the possible future selves helped her make an informed decision.

Laurel started with her current vantage point in order to inform her decision to consider adoption, “I could see how this was going to go, and I felt like we were just going to end up on welfare for the rest of our lives.” Bronwyn focused on her vision for the future of her child, “This is not what I’d pictured for my family life, not going to be what I imagined one day for my daughter...I should not be a parent right now.” Liz considered the pregnancy in light of the biological father’s attitude and her current struggle to support her toddler daughter:

At that point it clicked. He’s not going to be there for us physically, financially, any type of support you need to have a child. I told him I’m considering adoption because I feel like it’s going to be all on me and I know, I have enough self-awareness to know, that I can’t give her what she needs.

After this internal accounting of her current support resources (or lack of), Liz searched for information about adoption online to explore a possible self as birthmother. As with most participants, she initiated contact with an adoption agency to obtain more information specific to her situation. The Internet played a significant role for all participants as they began to explore adoption and consider “birthmother” as a future self. May recalls:

Birthmother, adoptee, all these different conversations that are really common within that experience. I was just starting to familiarize myself, so that was a large part of what the Internet played. There are forums, so I would browse through those, but again, I think I was having a hard time with acceptance. It was just a slow process of coming to terms.

Two participants, Stella and Bronwyn, relied on a close family member (the mother in both cases) to begin the search for an adoption agency and more detailed process information; both Stella and Bronwyn were 16 at the time and living at home, so the close involvement of a mother is not surprising.

In addition to information provided directly by the adoption professionals (usually social workers), participants consulted with other birthmothers (women who had previously relinquished a child to adoption) in the search for information with which to construct a birthmother version of a future self. Direct and unmediated access to women who had already placed a child for adoption was noted in all cases as beneficial and important in learning about what the future *could* look like (for better or worse). These opportunities provided information with a degree of authenticity and rawness unavailable anywhere else. Laurel recalls gleaning specific insights from another birthmother, but most importantly she heard the possibility of a return to some semblance of “normal” at some point in the future.

For me I guess I just needed to know that there was going to be some sort of normal somewhere down the line. And it was funny because she [the other birthmother] told me that it took her two years before she felt back to normal, and that’s about how long it took me as well.

Other birthmothers were a vital source of information for participants as they considered an adoption decision. They were able to provide authentic answers to the question, *What is the experience going to be like?* While each situation is different and surrounded with unique complexities, the voices of women who have already begun a journey through adoption can be a rich source of inspiration (both positive and cautionary) for decision-makers as they construct and consider their own possible selves.

Generating possible selves to aid in decision-making and coping with the pregnancy crisis is a theme apparent across all cases. Information behavior (search, evaluation, use, etc.) directly supports this iterative activity and involves both internal resources (self-reflection and imagining different futures) and external information sources. As participants solidified an adoption decision and began to refine the birthmother version of her future self, information gathering efforts focused exclusively on the adoption pathway. Participants purposefully restricted or stopped other information search activities and moved into a space of intentional avoidance and insulation. Restricting information engagement to sources focused solely on adoption planning allowed women to shelter their decision from conflicting information and opinions. For example, as Stella decided to move forward with an adoption plan, she put up a wall around herself, “This is what we’re doing, no one is changing my mind...I knew that this was what was right.” Bronwyn remembers the sanctuary of the maternity home, “I didn’t have outside influences to make me second guess the choice that I was going to make.” Restricting information engagement provided emotional relief in some cases; Becky recalls:

There was a point when I was approaching the due date that I had to put the books away. I was like, I am so emotional right now that I can’t possibly absorb any more. So I had to put away the adoption stuff, the grief stuff.

Efforts to narrow information searching and engagement to sources supporting an adoption decision may be interpreted as a coping strategy. Purposeful pruning of information sources to those that nurture the adoption choice follows the earlier flurry of information-gathering about any and all options. Limiting information and intentionally avoiding conflicting information serve a self-protective function and suggest Festinger's (1957) *dissonance theory*. The framework of dissonance theory characterizes participants' efforts to shield themselves from conflicting information once they have committed to a plan—in this case, an adoption plan (at least tentatively)—as a way of reducing post-decisional conflict (Fischer, Fischer, Weiswelier, & Frey, 2010). Participants welcomed a safe haven from the emotional storm of information engagement and decision-making; once the decision to move forward with relinquishment is reached, participants focus on information to aid in clarifying the adoption plan. Women seek information to nurture a future self as birthmother and shift attention to resources that will help her reach that outcome. At this point, participants begin to focus on the details of the adoption process such as level of openness they desire, selecting an adoptive family, contact agreements, birth planning, and timing. Laurel remembers how she turned most of her attention and information seeking to adoption planning and in doing so assuaged some of the negative emotions of the situation.

I wanted to be able to speak knowledgably about what I'm going to do and what decision I'm going to make. That's how I handle serious things, you gotta have a deadline. I set arbitrary deadlines for myself. So by 5 months I wanted to decide whether or not I was going to do adoption. At 6 months I wanted to be talking to an agency...at 8 months we needed to have a couple. And that was because I really didn't want to feel like I was going to be making a last minute choice, like we were just going to be throwing a *Hail Mary* and going with a couple that we weren't really comfortable with.

To be clear, efforts to prune away some information sources and focus attention on information that supports the adoption choice are different from the cognitive coping style

known as blunting. Whereas an individual engaging in blunting behavior will avoid threatening information and actively seek distraction (Miller, 1987), participants in this study took measures to nurture and actively engage with information about adoption once they had at least tentatively selected that option. The quotes above demonstrate participants' efforts to protect their decision from their own emotions and shield themselves from other people and information that were likely to undermine or criticize the adoption choice.

Moving from the initial reaction of denial and overwhelming emotions into various forms of information engagement helps us begin to characterize the basic trajectory of the process that participants experienced leading up to a decision to relinquish a child(ren) to adoption. In the early phase of cognitive appraisal, women wrestle with the threatening information and confirmation of pregnancy, often to a point of denial. Overwhelming and negative emotions may initially stymie efforts to seek out information about available options. But the pressure of time and realization that the situation won't "just go away" (Bronwyn) forced participants to begin to assess themselves and their close social support resources to help formulate potential responses to the situation. Women began to explore, seek out, and consume information; in these particular cases, the selected sources included information on adoption. Engaging with information allowed each woman to mentally construct different versions of her future self as well as her unborn child. Generating these future possible selves, participants used similar criteria to evaluate whether or not a version seemed viable and the right fit. These criteria included financial stability, social support, emotional stability, comparison between her own childhood and the prospects for this child's home environment, and co-crises complicating the situation. In these eight cases, each woman determined that an adoption plan was the right choice for her and her child. Making the decision to move forward with an adoption decision (even with lingering

uncertainty), participants focused information seeking efforts solely on resources to support that option. Many participants felt the need to insulate themselves and shield their decision from conflicting information and judgmental sources while awaiting the birth and adoption event.

It is important to note that although I have described this possible selves decision journey as sequential through cognitive appraisal, information-gathering to generate possible selves, and upon committing, at least tentatively, to a decision, nurturing adoption information and pruning away non-adoption information, there is overlap and movement back and forth between these behaviors. For example, several participants felt they continued in a state of denial to some degree throughout their entire pregnancy; although they moved forward through cognitive appraisal, generating possible selves, and ultimately made an adoption decision, a flicker of fantasy remained in their mind, that perhaps the pregnancy was not really true.

5.2.2 Envisioning Future Possible Selves, Post-Adoption

I was trying to find information about what it was like to be a birthmom. And there was, like, nothing. There are so many blogs and stories of what adoptive couples experience, but really not much about what birthmoms experience. There's no real kind of playbook out there for how to go about any of it. So that's what makes it really kind of challenging. (Laurel)

In the years since Laurel placed her son in an open adoption, she continues to re-envision and redesign her future self in the role of “birthmother in an open adoption”; she actively seeks information to help construct and figure out what that can/should look like. In the quote above she describes her disappointment with the scarcity of information, role models, and research that might help her further develop the open and ongoing relationship she has with the adoptive family and her son.

While the decision-making process toward relinquishment is steeped in intense emotions, the post-adoption years are also laden with uncertainty and emotional decisions. All birthmothers

in this study participate in some kind of open adoption that includes varying degrees of communication and information exchange with the child(ren) and adoptive families. The nature of open adoption involves more choices and decisions for a birthmother in subsequent years as she navigates the relationship with the child, the adoptive family, and her own identity as a birthmother. Thus the crafting and refining of the self as a birthmother remains a work in progress; as time passes and the open adoption relationship progresses, women continue to envision future possible selves and seek information for support. Engagement with information in this context is prompted by different life situations that arise, a desire for guidance or insight, and often a need for community with other people involved in adoption.

Life circumstances play a role in how birthmothers must rethink and continually revamp their future. The need for information surfaces again and again, often with the same disappointingly scarce offerings in terms of evidence on which to base decisions. For example, Liz is eager to find information and guidance to help her talk with the children she is raising about their sister who is being raised by an adoptive family.

I am at that point where I feel like I have to talk to my older daughter [whom Liz is parenting] about it and of course I Googled and tried to figure out what things are age-appropriate. But there is really nothing out there. (Liz)

Boundaries within the open adoption dynamic become a frequent cause of concern for birthmothers in terms of what their role/identity should look like, and what is appropriate and comfortable for everyone. The lack of information and exemplars on this front leaves women to figure things out without benefit of significant and evidence-based resources. Bronwyn describes the challenges of navigating such boundaries with the adoptive family and her now 12-year-old daughter. She recently found her daughter's Instagram account online and struggled to determine an appropriate response.

So I searched for her and her Instagram profile wasn't private. And then I thought, well, I could really follow her on Instagram. But I thought, you know what? I'm not going to. Because while I could message her mom and ask if it's okay, I don't want to—I feel like that's kind of disrespectful if I did that. So I didn't. But I looked at her pictures. (Bronwyn)

This desire for information and best practices for maintaining and building a strong and positive open adoption relationship is heard clearly across the sample. Birthmothers are left to imagine and cautiously reconstruct models of their possible future selves in a vacuum, relying on the trust they place in the adoptive family's information and intentions.

May notes disappointment that her vision for the open adoption, the possible self she crafted during the decision-making process and even in the early days of the adoption, is not coming to fruition. Now, seven years later, she must recreate that image from a position of powerlessness and with almost no guidance to inform her hopes for the future.

I just think that it's not going to be what I envisioned as an open adoption because of the couple that I chose. That came to light afterwards. I just wish that I had been able to build a relationship or gone about the process sooner, that I could have picked someone that I felt more comfortable with or that was just more like me. Maybe if we had similar interests that we could connect with. Because now I have this couple that I really have nothing in common with, and I'm trying to build a relationship with, other than the fact that they are raising the child that I gave up for adoption. (May)

5.2.3 Envisioning Future Possible Selves, Summary

The journey through cognitive appraisal, generating possible selves, and committing to a decision was similar across cases in the pre-adoption period. Discovering the pregnancy launched extreme negative emotions and shock in all participants; denial was the most common response initially. As each woman began to appraise the situation, she assessed both her internal and local external support resources to weigh whether or not she could envision her future self as a viable parent at this point in her life. The criteria were virtually identical across cases and included financial stability, immediate social support, emotional and mental stability, perceived

quality of childrearing she could offer, and personal co-crises. In this study, each woman determined that parenting the child(ren) was unlikely to be a feasible option, so participants launched information seeking efforts to explore and gather information about adoption (although in two cases, initial information seeking was conducted by the participants' mothers). Women gleaned information from adoption agencies, adoption social workers, other birthmothers, Internet searches, and online adoption forums in order to craft a model of themselves as birthmothers.

Upon committing to an adoption plan (at least tentatively), participants moved into information pruning to nurture and fill out this version of her possible self. Participants often shielded their information seeking efforts from sources that might undermine their resolve to move forward with adoption. Instead women sought information to work out the details of the adoption, evaluated the stories and advice of other birthmothers, and consulted with adoption specialists to process the information and make choices based on their own preferences.

The open adoption context compels birthmothers to occasionally re-evaluate and even re-envision themselves as relationships and circumstances change. Participants see a need for and share a desire for more information, guidance, and support in navigating the landscape of ongoing contact.

The theory of possible selves involves representations of oneself in the future, including both hoped-for selves and feared selves (Dunkel, 2000), which are "informed by one's social context, including past and anticipated experiences" (p. 252). The possible selves that participants in this study imagined for themselves and their child(ren) in the situation of a crisis pregnancy helped inform and guide their decision-making. Whether motivated by an end to avoid (e.g., "I have enough self-awareness to know, that I can't give her what she needs," Liz) or

goal to work toward (“we deserve better than just getting by, that’s how I was raised,” Liz), participants’ consideration of future possibilities influenced their consideration of options. From an information science perspective, we may wonder if participants had sufficient and accurate information with which to generate authentic visions of their future. Was the information they encountered online or received from adoption professionals adequate in terms of evaluating internal and external support? Would more information about financial, emotional, and parenting support services (if such services exist) have altered the representations of the future that women considered? In a study involving 223 birthmothers, Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford (2016) identified exactly such a gap in the information provided to women considering child relinquishment:

The majority of first/birth mothers who participated in this study also reported limited to no access to information about parenting. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority indicated they would have liked more knowledge about resources that could help them potentially parent their child (p. 8).

5.3 Positive Reframing

This child can complete someone’s family...that’s probably why I did it. (Laurel)

Olivia’s mom and dad gave her a better chance at life than what I could have, but they also gave, in a sense, they gave me another chance at doing something that I probably couldn’t have done if I would have parented. (Bronwyn)

I thought it might be a good process and do something for me to feel positive about. (May)

What was going to help me through the hard times was remembering how happy I made them. (Jenny)

The quotes above illustrate the meaning participants express in explaining their decision to relinquish a child to adoption. Intertwined within the decision-making and coping processes, participants in this study engage in *framing* and *reframing* their situation. At varying points, women describe an internal shift from their initial attitude of devastation to a more positive

outlook, actively seeking an outcome that might offer a way for them to feel better about the situation. For each participant in this study, adoption was ultimately identified as the preferred option over parenting. Most commonly, when participants move in the direction of an adoption decision, they begin to craft a narrative that focuses on the potential for positive outcomes through adoption. For example, participants specifically noted the likelihood their child(ren) would have a better life than they could offer, the prospective joy for the adoptive couple in creating a family, and for herself in making the best of a difficult situation.

In this study we hear participants frame and reframe their perceived choices in different ways. The quotes above reflect a focus on the positive opportunities that adoption offered them, their child(ren) and an adoptive family. Participants also considered the situation from a negative vantage, focusing on the challenges and issues deterring them from a decision to parent. The following quotes depict participants' voices framing the decision problem in terms of losses.

This is not going to be what I imagined one day for my daughter ... I should not be a parent right now. (Bronwyn)

I could see how this was going to go, and I felt like we were just going to end up on welfare for the rest of our lives. (Laurel)

He's [the birthfather's] not going to be there for us physically, financially, any type of support you need to have a child ... I have enough self-awareness to know that I can't give her what she needs. (Liz)

He's [the birthfather's] definitely not going to be involved; there's no way I could co-parent with him. If I wanted to finish school so I could get a decent job, I would never see her [child] anyway. That plus my autoimmune disease would have made it really tough to single parent anyway. (Becky)

Use of the term *framing* here is related but perhaps slightly different from the well-known cognitive bias recognized as the framing effect, most commonly associated with the experimental work of Tversky and Kahneman (1981). Their work demonstrated that the same choices involving risk could be presented in either more positive terms or more negative terms;

decision-makers offered the positively framed choice set tend to select the outcome that offers the most certainty, while those presented with a negatively framed choice are more apt to select the risky option. Changes in the formulation of choice problems cause significant shifts of preference; individuals tend to avoid risk when a positive frame is presented but seek risks when a negative frame is presented. The potential difference I see between Tversky and Kahneman's use of the concept of framing and the examples evident in this study is that it is the women themselves who, at least ostensibly, reformulate the choices—not an outside force. This raises an interesting question about the availability and popularity of adoption-positive messages (often identical to the quotes above) promulgated by information sources such as crisis pregnancy centers, adoption agencies, and even popular media. It is unclear from this study the extent of the influence such messages may have on women considering adoption in the face of a crisis pregnancy; regardless, the similarity of sentiment across participants in positively reframing the choice of adoption is clear.

This idea of positive reframing is evident in all participants' narratives in slightly different forms. Several birthmothers recall a point in their pregnancy when they flipped perspective, moving from a position of overwhelmingly negative emotions to a viewpoint in which they feel empowered to do something good.

5.3.1 Internal Framing

I felt I was at a place in my life where I didn't have a lot going on, and I could go through with the pregnancy. I thought it might be a good process and do something for me to feel positive about. (May)

Early in her story May spoke of opening herself up to the potential for a positive turn in the situation; she allowed herself to consider that the pregnancy might not be the end of the world for her. The narrative that participants ultimately craft about their experience invariably

highlights the positive elements of the adoption option. In this study participants identified points during the decision and coping journey where they reframed some of the overwhelmingly negative emotions into thoughts of positive prospects. In the quote above, May describes how she repositioned her perception of the crisis situation from a devastatingly negative outlook to one of opportunity, a chance to do something positive moving forward with her life; she began to consider the adoption choice as a constructive outcome for her child, the adoptive couple, and ultimately herself.

Other manifestations of this intentional and positive reframing in the sample involve spirituality and even divine intervention. Robin was already in the midst of a life crisis when she learned she was pregnant; she chose to interpret the situation as an intercession, an opportunity to turn her life around.

I'll be honest, just to talk about my faith for just a second. I know it's not research-based or whatever but.... I'd been praying when I was going through this crisis before I found out that I was pregnant, and I said, "I need a sign, okay? Shake me up, do something to get my attention." And then I found out I was pregnant. I said, "Okay, so use this crisis for a good purpose, just let it be positive," *and it has*. It has been hard. It has been emotional, but it has been really life-changing for me and for other people.

5.3.2 Informational Framing

Framing (and reframing) of the problem and related choices is evident in the coping efforts of participants but also in relation to the information women consult and evaluate. For example, the typical brochures (also called resumes) that expectant mothers considering adoption are given by adoption agencies present prospective adoptive couples as warm, loving, and desperate for a child. A reoccurring message in this adoption consumer literature sets up an opportunity for women to reframe their situation: You can help a couple realize their dream of

becoming parents; your child deserves a stable and loving home; you have the ability to make and feel confident in this difficult choice².

In recalling their thought processing, future forecasting, and envisioning possible selves, participants revealed turning points at which they considered and intentionally pursued possibilities for positive framing, some way to turn the painful situation into a constructive one either for themselves, for others, or for both. Laurel's sentiment, "This child can complete someone's family, I think that's probably why I did it," is common to all study participants. Focusing on the positive outcomes for others (the child and/or adoptive family) allowed participants to move through the pain and anguish of relinquishing the child. The most poignant example of framing and focusing on a positive element in order to cope with grief comes from Jenny as she vividly recalls the interaction with the adoptive parents and how she told them that she had selected them to adopt the twins.

I knew part of what was going to bring me around and keep me on a good side of this instead of going very negative; I knew that I needed to see their joy. That was what was going to help me through the hard times ... remembering how happy I made them.

So we met at the adoption agency office ... they looked so nervous. And I just told them, I have one more question for you—and the mom is like "What's that?" And I was like, "How would you like to take the babies home?" And she was like...she just started bawling. It was the sweetest thing in the world; she just started bawling. And she looks at her husband and she's like, "Well, I guess you don't have to get me a birthday present now." Her birthday was the very next day. I didn't even know that. So that was even cooler. Because I just made her birthday for the rest of her life.

Robin focused on the meaning of the word, mother, as she faced the agony of relinquishment, at the hospital, "Mothers are supposed to love their children and make the best choices for them, so I am a mother, just in a different way. I had to think about the consequences

² Examples of adoption consumer literature often including prospective adoptive family brochures are easily accessible via a Google search for "adoption unplanned pregnancy".

for the kids...it's all about them.” For some this may be an internal coping strategy and for others, the positive reframing may have been suggested either directly or indirectly through external information (e.g., adoption literature, friends and family, social and cultural norms).

5.3.3 Framing, Summary

Research from psychology and decision-making recognizes how framing provides a context through which cognitive and motivational consequences are imbued with positive and/or negative perceptions (Haward & Janvier, 2015; Haward, Murphy, & Lorenz, 2008). Tversky and Kahneman (1981) define the term ‘decision frame’ to mean, “The decision-maker’s conception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice. The frame that a decision-maker adopts is controlled partly by the formulation of the problem and partly by the norms, habits, and personal characteristics of the decision-maker” (p. 453). Information about options may be positively encoded to highlight optimistic aspects and outcomes while negative encoding emphasizes adverse outcomes or aspects (Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998).

In this study participants reframed their situation and their perceived options toward the positive outcomes associated with an adoption decision. In some cases they used a frame of spiritual purpose (e.g., Robin felt this was a divinely-inspired and redemptive chance to change her life), in others there was a sense of opportunity to do something good (e.g., May expressed an opportunity to do something she could feel good about in the midst of a crisis), while others embraced the situation with the intent to help someone fulfill their desire for a child.

An examination of the specific contents of the informational material that women encountered and consulted while exploring options relating to their pregnancy is beyond the scope of this study; such material included pamphlets and websites from adoption agencies, professionally produced brochures featuring families wanting to adopt, leaflets from crisis

pregnancy and women's health centers, as well as personal interactions with social workers and adoption professionals. Because the words of participants in this study so closely resemble the positive adoption messages contained in this type of material, I am curious about the relationship and the extent to which birthmothers internalize these sentiments for framing purposes.

5.4 Trading of Trust and Power

In a lot of ways I was scared to ask for different things or come off as demanding. It's kind of like this whole *trading of trust*. You're going into it, they're just really trusting and hoping that you're going to give them a child, but then afterwards you are really just trusting and hoping that they don't cut off ties. So it was always just trying to get that balance of asking for things that you wanted but at the same time not making them feel like you are being demanding or you're asking too much. (Laurel)

The dynamics of power and trust are prevalent across all cases in this study. Laurel's quote above exemplifies the fragility and uncertainty of trust surrounding the information and intentions conveyed by others involved in the adoption. In this example, Laurel characterizes the precarious balance of power between herself as a birthmother and the adoptive couple; she recognizes the trust that the prospective parents are investing in her before the adoption event, while in the same breath she expresses her fear and the level of trust she must commit related to ongoing contact, post adoption. (Laurel's home state of Missouri offers no legal protection to birthparents in terms of enforceable contact agreement). This theme of *trading of trust* manifests in many forms across cases in this study and at varying points both pre- and post-adoption. There are both positive and negative experiences surrounding trust as participants engage with information and information providers such as adoption agencies, social workers, and prospective adoptive couples before and following the adoption event. Trust becomes an even more pronounced theme in the context of open adoption, specifically the ongoing relationship between birthmother and adoptive family. Examples from the data are offered here to highlight

the vulnerability participants experience when making a determination to trust information and other people; also presented are examples of reassurance and empowerment that participants recall when an information source lives up to the outlay of trust.

5.4.1 Developing Trust in Information Providers

In making decisions about adoption, Robin relied on the information provided by the adoption agency she selected; she placed her trust in the authenticity and accuracy of this information.

In choosing this adoption agency, what made a difference was the fact that they offered post-adoption counseling, and they told me in writing, in the brochure, they told me verbally about birthparent counseling. But that never happened. And I'm very—to this day, I'm very mad about that. The director said that she was sorry but they had some staffing changes. No birthmother should ever go through this without counseling, ever. (Robin)

In the end, Robin's trust in the information supplied by the adoption agency and social worker was misplaced, and the breakdown in services promised by the agency had a significant (and negative) impact on Robin's experience. Although she does not regret the adoption decision, she recalls her vulnerability and distress at learning the information was ultimately untrustworthy. Because of her financial situation and emotional fragility, Robin felt she had no recourse in securing professional help to cope with the grief she was experiencing. She urges other women contemplating an adoption plan to carefully scrutinize and hold agencies accountable for the services they advertise, "Nail down deadlines, write emails, have a paper trail." May describes similar feelings of abandonment following the adoption event, "I felt obsolete after my pregnancy." The attentiveness and promises of emotional support from adoption professionals and adoptive parents that expectant mothers experience often disappear with the legal relinquishment of the child; the shift in power is complete.

Bronwyn points to the trust a woman relinquishes to an adoption agency in its role as initial gatekeeper of information about prospective adoptive families. “With an agency, there are screenings and home studies and you would hope that everybody they choose, that they let through to adopt, that they’re great people.” Expectant mothers rely on adoption professionals to vet prospective adoptive families and the information they provide about themselves and their desires surrounding an adoption plan. But ultimately, in the midst of overwhelming emotions and uncertainty, women must use their own judgment in determining the trustworthiness of the information and intentions of prospective adoptive families. This information is particularly vital when women pursue an open adoption and make decisions based upon shared visions for the future. Depending upon state law, birthparents may or may not have any legal recourse when open adoption agreements and expectations fall through.

Amidst examples of misplaced trust, participants also expressed occasions and layers of trust that have fulfilled and empowered their experience with adoption. Jenny recalls the breadth and depth of information she received through the adoption agency.

The pregnancy counselor, she went over everything with me, explained every little detail about how it works and how it doesn’t work. Even when it came time to go to court to sign papers, she went over everything with me beforehand, even showed me samples of the papers I was going to have to sign. It was everything, down to the last detail, to make sure I completely 100% understood what I was doing.

Jenny speaks with confidence about the preparation and information the social worker provided as she began considering adoption for her twin boys. In her case, the adoption professional made extensive efforts to educate Jenny about the process, options, and legal aspects of adoption, far beyond merely providing information. This knowledge empowered Jenny in her decision-making; the trust she placed in the information and the expertise of the social worker has been fulfilled.

5.4.2 Negotiating Trust with the Adoptive Parents

Liz developed a close relationship with the adoptive parents leading up to the birth of her daughter and in the subsequent years. She describes the confidence and trust she continues to place in them.

We didn't have anything in writing about the open adoption, which is really trusting I guess. There was no "I get to see her at this age" or "I get pictures on this date" or whatever, because the adoptive mother and I had talked so much. We were able to kind of connect and relate to each other, she even called me her friend one time.

In her story, Liz reveals how supported she continues to feel in her relationship with the adoptive family; they have welcomed Liz and her husband and other daughters into their extended family. The vision of openness that Liz wanted for the adoption continues to be shared with the family. Her trust has been reciprocated with respect.

Navigating and negotiating decisions within an open adoption is complicated at best for everyone involved. Participants in this study are extremely sensitive to the trust they are investing in the adoptive family, the information they provide, and the authenticity of their expressed intentions for a shared future. Both May and Becky experienced an undermining of such trust early-on when adoptive parents renamed the child. May recalls:

One other thing is, I named him. I named him, and I wished I would have nailed that down more because they immediately changed his name. That hurt my feelings, because I was thinking of this child. They knew, but they were like, "This is our family name. We want to name him this." I always wonder how he'll feel about that later. [May]

In Minnesota, Becky and the adoptive parents filed a formal and legally binding post-adoption contact agreement detailing arrangements and decisions about the daughter. But Becky recalls, "They decided to change the spelling of her shortened name without telling me—and I

got a little freaked out that they were already reneging on their agreement.” She decided against pursuing the issue, but the sting of misplaced trust is not lost on her.

As a theme, trading of trust and power is most pronounced as participants navigate their on-going relationship with the adoptive family, in these cases most directly with the adoptive mother. Jenny characterizes the emotions and dynamics she experiences surrounding her frequent and regular visits with her twin boys.

That’s the hard thing I guess, saying goodbye over and over and over again because you never know if it’s the last time. I never know. I could say goodbye, and she could call me 10 minutes later and say, “Well, you know, you said this at the visit, and I didn’t like it ... so you’re not seeing them again.” It’s really hard to have that hanging over your head, that anytime I go see them, anytime I talk to them or any picture I get could be the last ... you just don’t know. That’s rough, that’s really rough. There’s nothing that compares to that feeling. ...I feel like if I do one thing wrong, she’s going to close the adoption because she can. It’s hard, it’s kind of like you’re walking around on eggshells all the time.

The open and on-going relationship with her twin boys and the adoptive parents is extremely important to Jenny; open adoption was a significant factor in her decision to choose adoption. She describes the close ties and support she continues to experience with the adoptive couple; however the undercurrent of uncertainty is a constant reminder of her position of vulnerability. Jenny experiences her situation as one of perpetual dependence on trust; as Michigan does not recognize post-adoption contact agreements, power in terms of the open adoption relationship resides completely with the adoptive parents. Becky uses the same analogy to describe the precarious nature of ongoing contact with her daughter’s adoptive family: “Since the adoptive parents control everything now, I feel like I’m walking on eggshells.” Even though Becky’s post-adoption contact agreement is legally binding (Minnesota), she still experiences a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness in the relationship.

5.4.3 Developing and Negotiating Trust, Summary

Evaluating information and determining trustworthiness are fundamental tenants of the decision-making process in any circumstance. In the emotional and high stakes context of an adoption decision, women often feel themselves in a position of vulnerability, with few guarantees about the trustworthiness of information and other people. Participants in this study experience a perpetual dependence on trust—certainly during the information-gathering and decision-making phase, but especially in terms of the open adoption arrangements. Becky suggests that this overall sense of powerlessness is propagated by a culture of shame and stigma.

The shame of getting pregnant foreshadows this whole thing, and women feel like they don't have any rights to make decisions for themselves. The shame of getting pregnant, the shame of not having the support, of having bad circumstances, you have this horrible self-esteem. That's the hardest thing, I think, not feeling like you're worth enough to demand what you need to make it work and to put yourself back together afterwards. You don't feel worthy of this child.

Across the experiences of participants in this study, we see the immense levels of trust that women place in the providers of information. Trust extends from the legitimacy and fullness of information a woman encounters relating to her options (including information encountered online or through other sources) and to the reliability of the adoption professionals with whom birthmothers engage. The theme of trust and trading of trust is clear regarding the authenticity of the information prospective adoptive parents provide; with an open adoption plan, birthmothers must continue to trust the adoptive family to adhere to the agreed-upon arrangements for ongoing contact.

5.5 Filtering Information Through Shame and Stigma

I didn't want to tell anybody because my family gets pretty judgy. Being the Catholic family, you're not supposed to do those things, you know. (Becky)

We just didn't want anybody to know, so we were going to keep it a secret. It meant that we were all ashamed of me, and how this would bring shame to our family. (Bronwyn)

As a self-conscious and negative emotion, shame may be defined as, “The feeling we have when we evaluate our actions, feelings, or behavior, and conclude that we have done wrong. It encompasses the whole of ourselves; it generates a wish to hide, to disappear, or even to die” (Lewis, 1995, p. 2). Beginning the very moment that women learned they were pregnant, emotions of fear, devastation, and shame overwhelmed each participant, often to the point of denial. In each case, the confirmation launched feelings of shame and disappointment at becoming pregnant at that particular point in life. Even as participants moved forward in efforts to confront the situation and consider options, shame was an ever-present partner. Women described their shame at becoming pregnant without a viable husband or partner, shame of emotional instability, shame of financial insecurity, shame at overall fragility in terms of support and place in life, and shame at what other people might think. These sources of shame are identical to the tangible reasons women offered as to why they chose adoption for their child(ren).

Stella was highly sensitive as she anticipated her mother’s reaction to her pregnancy; she felt her situation, as a pregnant, out-of-wedlock, very young woman was incongruent with the strict moral code of her mother’s Mormon faith. “I, we found out that I was pregnant and I grew up in a Mormon family so it was not okay; I was kind of scared to tell my mom.” Stella did not share the same religious convictions but because she still lived at home, under her parents’ roof, she felt the disappointment of her mother on a daily basis. Religiosity can play an important role in shaping attitudes and behaviors surrounding human sexuality. Traditional Judeo-Christian teachings view the purpose of sex as reproduction (DeLameter, 1981). “For highly proscriptive

religious affiliations, nonmarital sexual relations are inherently wrong, and those who engage in such behaviors are seen as sinners who can now only attain salvation through repentance and abstinence” (McMillen, Helm, & McBride, 2011, p. 195). Stella heard this message from her mother both directly and indirectly, “My mom is very, very religious and all that; she had said a comment to my sister-in-law that adoption was my punishment for getting pregnant.” Stella was adamant that she did not internalize or agree with this sentiment and judgment, but the context of shame and secrecy initiated by her mother seems an indelible tint on the way she perceived her situation as well as the information she used in moving forward.

Shame played a vivid and tangible role in how Becky perceived herself in light of the unintended pregnancy. Similar to Stella’s encounter with the shame overtly imposed by her mother, Becky preemptively took to heart and internalized the shame that she anticipated experiencing from her family’s reaction to her pregnancy. As an emotion evoked by self-reflection and self-evaluation, shame involves painful scrutiny of one’s inner self; people experiencing shame often focus on how others judge them. “Shame stems from evaluations of internal and external events and from cultural standards that are internalized by the individual” (Van Vliet, 2009, p. 138). Participants’ feelings of shame stemmed from several sources, including family and encounters in everyday life. Raised in a religious home, Becky was taught that sexual relations and pregnancy are appropriate only within the bounds of marriage; fear of her parents’ reactions prompted Becky to hide the pregnancy as long as possible. Becky also encountered overt comments of judgment from virtual strangers. Mundane situations such as shopping for maternity clothing or going to medical appointments became intimidating and shaming as others felt free to express opinions on unwed mothers.

Shame and stigma resonate among all voices of participants throughout the information-gathering and decision-making processes. These emotions stem from a variety of socio-cultural factors including norms and values, moral and religious beliefs, and family traditions. The responses of others, including family, friends, and even strangers, influence the way women perceive and come to understand their situation. The attitudes and comments of others seem to rise to the level of “information” itself as women hear and internalize sentiments of shame and stigma. Excerpts below illustrate how shame and stigma are communicated to women who find themselves facing an unintended pregnancy and decide to explore an adoption plan.

I did tell one close girlfriend about both pregnancies and she got really judgy. She couldn't understand why you would end a pregnancy or contemplate placing—like it was my job to raise this child that I created—like it was my fault that she's there so I should pay the price by raising her myself. (Becky)

My mom is also still very, very religious and all that, and she had made a comment to my sister-in-law saying that adoption was my punishment for getting pregnant. (Stella)

Of course women may attempt to disregard such sentiments as irrelevant or false, but the vivid and verbatim recollection of these conversations by participants indicates that they cannot be “unheard.” Messages of shame and stigma surrounding pregnancy outside of wedlock can be construed as *information*. In the sense that a woman internalizes the attitudes and judgments of others around her, she assesses her situation and makes decisions based upon that information.

Becky recognized the influence of shame within herself and other birthmothers:

The shame of getting pregnant foreshadows this whole thing, and women feel like they don't have any right to make decisions for themselves. The shame of getting pregnant, the shame of not having the support, of having bad circumstances, you get this horrible self-esteem. That's the hardest thing I think, not feeling like you're worth enough to demand what you need to make it work and put yourself back together afterwards. That was the hardest thing for me, because you don't feel worthy of this child. It definitely affects your self-esteem during the process and affects the rest of your life.

The quote above demonstrates the impact shame can have on feelings of self-worth; in the context of an unintended pregnancy, women experiencing shame may feel unworthy of taking on the title and role of becoming a mother. Women may not feel worthy of asking for support or a place at the table of adoption. Power is not for them. In the context of a personal crisis such as an unintended pregnancy, women hear and use information encountered and encoded within cultural and social mores to make meaning of the experience and frame a response. An undercurrent of shame has the potential to influence the information behavior and decision-making of women. Individuals feeling shame are inclined to “adopt a *shrinking* posture, as if they wish they could just disappear” (Tangney & Heigel, 2009, p. 2).

Savolainen (2016) charts the impact socio-cultural barriers can have on the individual’s information behavior by hindering, restricting, and/or delaying information seeking. Such socio-cultural barriers also involve fears of being judged, either because of taboo subjects or non-conformity to social norms. Adoption continues to carry a legacy of stigma and shame (Galileo Research and Strategy Consultancy, 2016) and fits easily into this category as a potential barrier to information seeking. As Jenny recalled,

One of my biggest surprises was not realizing how many other women do it [place a child for adoption] besides just young teenage moms, I had no idea. It’s not just teenage moms that do that. Because at first I kind of felt out of place really, you know I’m 32 years old and I’ve got 4 kids and I’m giving up children for adoption. You don’t really think about that. You think it’s all younger girls. And a lot of stigma attached to adoption and you’re a horrible person.

Although the social- and often family-fueled shame surrounding adoption is lessening (Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016), the impact of socio-cultural messages tinges a woman’s engagement with information throughout the evaluation of options and decision-making processes. Information that expectant mothers encounter and seek out is filtered through a lens of self-disappointment, shame, and stigma. As Becky notes, “The shame of getting

pregnant foreshadows this whole thing, and women feel like they don't have any rights to make decisions for themselves.”

Savolainen (2016) groups barriers to information seeking as either physical (external to the individual) or internal (arising from inside the individual). He further delineates internal barriers as either affective or cognitive, external barriers to information as spatial, temporal, or socio-cultural in nature. The shame and stigma surrounding both an unintended pregnancy and adoption are easily placed into the socio-cultural category of external barriers. But I posit that the shame also fits within the affective and internal grouping of barriers to effective information seeking. The lingering effects of shame are captured in Laurel's words, “I had to forgive myself for being irresponsible enough to get pregnant when I wasn't ready to have a baby. So I had a lot of guilt associated with that.”

CHAPTER 6: SYNTHESIS OF THE FINDINGS, AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

By starting with the in-depth examination of the individual experience, IPA studies contribute to the *theoretical dialog* (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005) with insight transferable to the understanding of the phenomenon. The underlying research question of this study remains: *How do women who have placed a child(ren) for adoption (birthmothers) seek and use information to make a relinquishment decision and cope with that decision and their life situation more generally?* The question requires an interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenological approach in order to address what it is like to be **in** a certain state of being (Vagle, 2014). This study explores what it is like to be **in** the situation of an unanticipated pregnancy that rises to the level of a personal crisis in relation to a woman's experience with information. Voices of participants also tell us what it is like to be **in** the situation of a birthmother following the relinquishment of a child(ren) to adoption, as regards their ongoing relationship with information. Although my professional interest lies in human information behavior relating to decision-making and coping in the context of a personal crisis, the richness of the data in this study affords us the opportunity to explore the birthmother experience in a more holistic manner. Many emergent themes tie unequivocally to participants' relationship and engagement with information, but some themes provide insight into the vulnerabilities and challenges evident in the birthmother experience overall.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the information behavior chronicled by participants leading up to their decision to relinquish a child(ren) to adoption as revealed through

the themes emanating across (Chapter 5) and within (Chapter 4) cases. These themes help to characterize the relationship with information that a woman may expect to experience regarding an adoption decision. I suggest a common trajectory or pathway of information behavior as evidenced by the voices of these birthmothers leading up to the adoption event. This is followed by a discussion of participants' information behaviors in the years subsequent to the adoption event. Next, I examine the "information pathways" that birthmothers in this study navigated by focusing on their expressed information needs, the resources they used in trying to meet those needs, as well as their unresolved information needs. These findings are then considered in light of existing theoretical models of information behavior in order to place the study in a wider context. Implications for information behavior research are presented, followed by implications for adoption research and practice. Finally, I delineate limitations specific to this project and offer suggestions for further investigation.

6.2 Characterizing The Information Behavior of Birthmothers

6.2.1 Information Behavior, Pre-Adoption

Using the major themes addressed across cases (Chapter 5) in combination with the idiographic nuggets unique to specific cases (Chapter 4), we may begin to characterize the information behavior of participating women during their decision-making processes culminating in the relinquishment of a child(ren) to adoption. Participants followed a similar trajectory on their decision-making journey: 1) cognitive appraisal, 2) information engagement, and 3) information transformation for use. All participants in this study appraised the confirmation of an unintended pregnancy as a personal crisis situation; denial and crippling emotions were consistently the first responses. Initial self-assessment (e.g., emotional and financial instability), support assessment (e.g., absence of a viable co-parent), and simultaneous

co-crises (e.g., mental health crisis) contributed to the negative reaction. Within this cloud of uncertainty and even fear, these women started thinking about options and began searching for concrete information to help clarify their potential choices and outcomes, sometimes on their own and in secret, but often with help from others after disclosing the situation to family and/or friends.

Engaging with information allowed each woman to begin constructing mental versions of her future possible self; participants used information from a variety of sources (discussed in the following section) to put together a picture of what an adoption decision might look like both for herself and her unborn child(ren).

Participants were dissimilar in their approaches and relationships with information along the monitoring-blunting continuum. For example, Laurel's proactive engagement with information and planning (monitoring behavior) allowed her to feel a sense of control over the process and helped her cope with the whirlwind of emotions. Likewise, Becky immersed herself in information and online adoption forums to manage her stress, and, to an extent, mitigate some of her uncertainty. However, Stella's and Bronwyn's informational coping behaviors were situated closer to the blunting end of the spectrum as they relied on their mothers to initiate the search for information.

My mom, she was the one who found out about that [adoption] and kind of got all the information ready and then I had to go in there and do like paperwork or something. During the whole thing I wasn't really too worried about or wanting to know anything about the whole process just because, I mean, I was sixteen. I don't really care about the legal stuff. I just know that we're giving all of our rights away so she won't be ours. (Stella)

During information seeking episodes, participants recalled specific information evaluative instances; for example, several participants took measures to identify credential and licensing information for an adoption agency. Similarly some women consulted legal resources

to confirm the information being provided by adoption professionals. However, to a large extent information evaluation strategies involved an intuitive sense of feeling and fit: “I felt it was just meant to be” (Robin), and “Something just sort of clicked for me...we really should be doing adoption” (Laurel). Then, as Laurel examined the brochures describing prospective adoptive families, she recalled the feeling of “knowing” when she had found the right couple: “These two pictures, that’s what sold me on them as a couple. Which sounds so silly, but it was because she just totally looked like she needed to be a mom.” This faith in intuition echoes the trust all participants ultimately invested in the information and intentions communicated by others.

Moving forward along the information engagement and decision-making pathway, the crippling effects of shame and stigma were ever-present in participants’ narratives. Shaming messages, whether self-inflicted or received from others, impacted the way women perceived themselves. “The shame of getting pregnant foreshadows this whole thing, and women feel like they don’t have any rights to make decisions for themselves” (Becky).

As participants began to solidify their decision toward a plan of relinquishment, their relationship with information changed from an open exploration of all potential options to a narrower pathway focusing solely on adoption information. I interpret this behavior as a transformation of information, the beginnings of information use, or putting information into action. This idea of transforming information manifests in five particular ways: 1) pruning and weeding, 2) nurturing, 3) framing, 4) insulating, and 5) trading of trust. The first and second points of information transformation occurred more or less simultaneously. As adoption became the most likely choice, women began to prune away information irrelevant to that pathway, weeding out and discarding sources supporting other options such as abortion or parenting. At the same time participants began to nurture and deepen their engagement efforts with regard to

information sources specific to the adoption plan. They communicated regularly with adoption professionals, pored over the choices of adoptive families, made plans for the birth, talked to other birthmothers, etc. Nurturing information about their own adoption plan helped many participants to feel some sense of control; Laurel captures this attitude as, "...wanting to be able to speak knowledgably on what I'm going to do and what decision I'm going to make."

I also interpret framing as a transformation of information. Cultivating a decision of relinquishment to adoption, participants began to position or frame the choice in a positive direction. Focusing on the potential for a constructive outcome both for herself and her unborn child, May recalls, "I thought it [adoption] might be a good process and do something for me to feel positive about." Similarly, Robin found strength in her faith and spirituality; she felt God would "...use this crisis for a good purpose, just let it be positive...and it has, it has been life-changing for me and other people." Across cases in this study, women developed a positive narrative using information to support their choice. Messages positioning adoption in a positive light are easily accessible through a variety of sources including popular culture (e.g., movies and television), the literature of agencies whose business is facilitating adoptions, as well as material that prospective adoptive families provide to recruit expectant mothers considering adoption. For example, Laurel interpreted the biographical brochures of prospective adoptive couples in this way, "All these couples look so deserving, and I'm just trying to find the fit." The abundance of such positive positioning of adoption information makes it easier for women to incorporate such a message into their framing or reframing of the situation. The reader may be tempted to label this reframing of an adoption decision as beholden to cognitive and informational bias; however, this study aims to document and interpret the meaning women make and continue to make of their experience with adoption. Framing the decision to relinquish

a child(ren) in a constructive fashion is an authentic and evident use of information about the potential for positive outcomes, supporting both the birthmother and the child(ren). Although the question is beyond the scope of this study, a curiosity arises regarding the extent of influence that consumer information on adoption (generally promoting adoption) promulgates such messages of positivity.

A fourth element of information transformation relates to how participants began to put information about adoption into action in anticipation of potential negative reactions from others. We observe several instances in which women insulate or sequester themselves from conflicting information and individuals. In this study, participants often felt the need to protect their decision both from external information sources and even from themselves. Bronwyn remembers the maternity home where she stayed as a space of sanctuary, “I didn't have outside influences to make me second guess the choice that I was going to make.” Other participants avoided disclosing or interacting with people they thought would try to dissuade their decision. On the internal front, several birthmothers recalled preparing themselves for the emotional turmoil and self-doubt they anticipated at the time of birth. Robin invoked self-talk at the hospital, telling herself, “Mothers are supposed to love their children and make the best choices for them, so you are a mother, just in a different way.” Separating themselves from opposing information and influences, birthmothers in this study harnessed and focused on information that supported and confirmed their decision to relinquish. Jenny transformed and internalized the joy she heard in the adoptive couple’s reaction when she decided they should adopt her twin boys. “I knew that I needed to see their joy. That was what was going to help me through the hard times, was [to] remember how happy I made them.” Jenny invested this positive support and communication from the adoptive couple into a sort of emotional savings account; she planned to draw from this

account in the future when faced with conflicting information or negative feelings she knew she would experience.

A fifth manifestation of information transformation involves trust and power, developing trust in information providers and navigating trust with adoptive parents. Most participants recognized, at least after the fact, that there is a perceived power exchange surrounding the parental rights of the child(ren) before and after relinquishment and adoption papers are signed. To be clear, however, none of the participants expressed even a hint of perceived empowerment at any stage in the process; quite the opposite, birthmothers felt overwhelming dependence on the information and intentions that others communicated. Several women spoke about their dependence and complete trust in the adoption professional to provide accurate and complete information on options and the adoption process. Women trusted the adoption professionals to facilitate promised services such as grief counseling; in several cases this trust was misplaced and information proved to be unreliable. Women also highlighted the trust they placed in agencies/professionals to vet prospective adoptive families and connect them with families that matched their preferences and vision regarding the type of adoption (level of openness, ongoing contact, etc.). As adoption professionals and agencies served as gatekeepers and intermediaries throughout this exchange of information between women considering relinquishment and the families wanting to adopt a child, most women in this study were ultimately beholden to these relationships of trust—trust in terms of their own future and the future of their child(ren). Finally, the issue of open adoption and on-going contact required extraordinary levels of trust for participants in this study. Women invested substantial trust in the information and intentions that prospective adoptive families supplied as they forged a relationship. In this study, all participants expressed a full understanding of the limitations of their state-specific laws governing post-

adoption contact agreements surrounding their “open adoption.” In many instances this trust continues to be rewarded through the strong and sustained support of adoptive families that birthmothers were expecting. But in several cases, birthmothers expressed angst and worry about how this will play out in the years to come; the lack of legal recourse surrounding ongoing contact and information flow is ever-present in their minds. Becky used the “walking on eggshells” analogy that several women expressed in regard to this shift in power, “Since the adoptive parents control everything now, I feel like I’m walking on eggshells.”

The voices of birthmothers both within cases and across cases allow us to begin characterizing the information behavior trajectory or pathway that participants experienced during the decision-making journey, beginning with the initial pregnancy confirmation and coming to a close with the actual relinquishment/adoption event. Overwhelming and negative emotions, even outright denial, are consistently the first response as each woman in this study confirmed an unintended pregnancy. The situation rose to a level of personal crisis because pregnancy seemed utterly incongruent with her current life situation; self-assessment, support assessment, and recognition of simultaneous co-crises reinforced this negative appraisal. As women interacted with information about options, outcomes, and possible selves, a range of informational coping strategies was apparent across cases, from extensive and immersive information engagement to reliance on others in managing information flow. Consulting a variety of information sources, participants sought an option that fit with their current situation in life and their vision for the future and that ultimately felt right to them.

Once women moved in the direction of the adoption option, however, their information behavior began to shift from exploratory “engagement” to more action-oriented “use.” In a sense, women began to transform information for their own use through behaviors such as

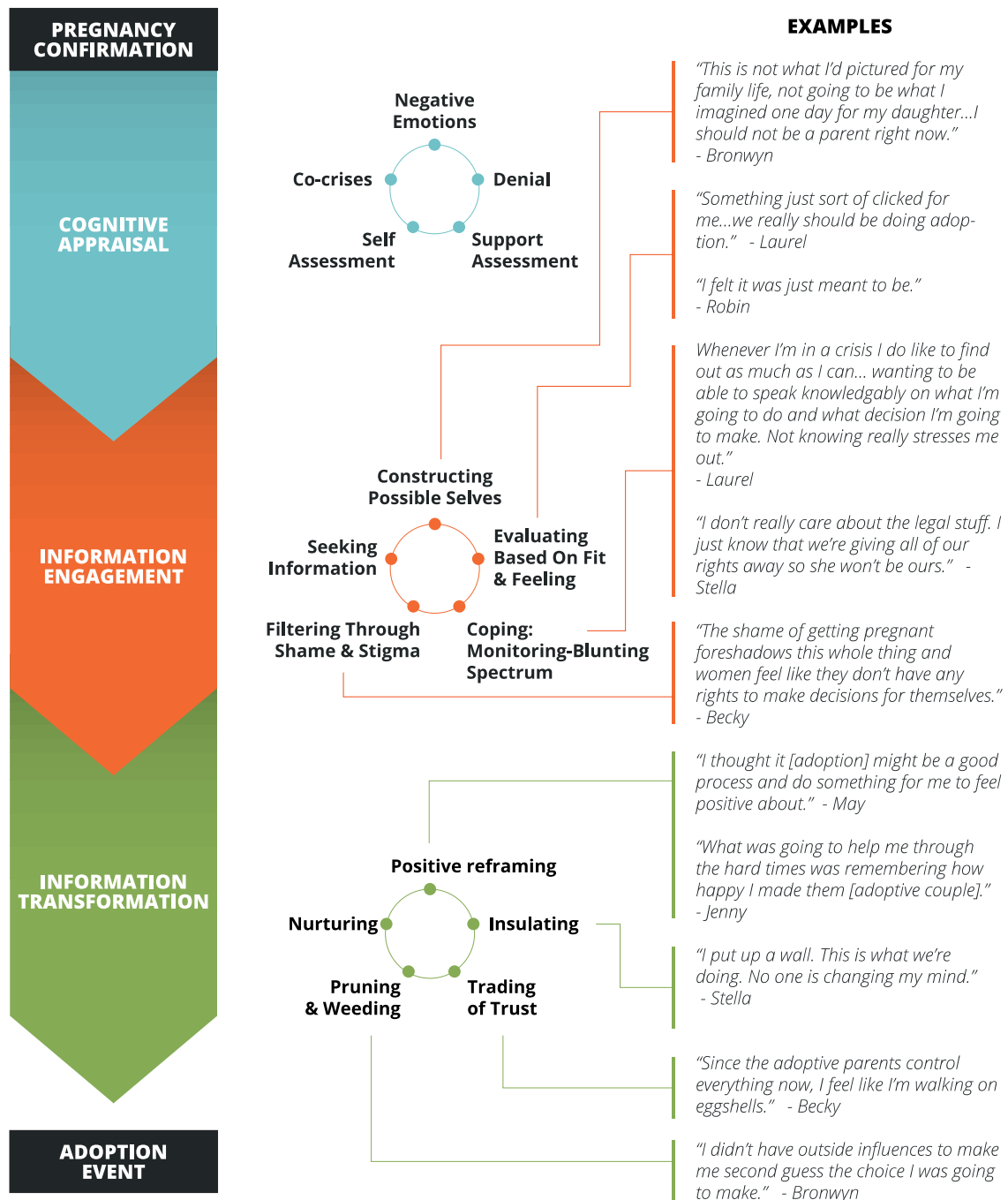
pruning and weeding, nurturing, insulating, framing, and trusting. Participants began to seek and consume only information surrounding the deeper details and decisions involved in the adoption choice, abandoning sources not directed toward relinquishment. By nurturing and attending to information about the adoption decision, women found some shelter from the emotional storm of uncertainty; they began to incorporate and apply information to their own story.

Ever-present undercurrents of shame and stigma, in the form of external and even internal messages, often led women to purposefully insulate and protect themselves from information and voices contrary to the adoption decision. Information transformation is also evident as women framed (or reframed) their adoption decision in a positive light; focusing on the prospects for positive outcomes helped these birthmothers develop a narrative and rationale for their decision. Trading of trust also emerges as a central theme in information transformation as participants began to put information into action. Women were making deeply personal decisions with life-long consequence based largely upon the trust they invested in the information and intentions communicated by others.

Figure 1 below depicts the themes discussed above that characterize this information behavior trajectory in three loosely bound phases: 1) cognitive appraisal, 2) information engagement, and 3) information transformation for use. Emergent themes are nestled within the three phases; however, movement along this pathway culminating in the adoption event is by no means uninterrupted or consistently linear. Nor are these themes completely uniform in how they manifest for each participant (e.g., duration, intensity, etc.).

Figure 1 Information behavior trajectory, pre-adoption

INFORMATION BEHAVIOR TRAJECTORY, PRE-ADOPTION



6.2.2 Information Behavior, Post-Adoption

The intended and initial focus of this research centered on the information behavior surrounding the decision-making and coping experience of women who placed a child for adoption, i.e., the journey leading up to the adoption event. However the stories of participants do not end with the formal relinquishment of parental rights. Life continues for these birthmothers, and they continue to need and engage with information for a variety of purposes. Because of the rich data participants shared, I took the opportunity to expand the scope of this research to include birthmothers' experiences with information through the post-adoption period (limited, of course, to the time period between the adoption event and the study interviews). Through the voices of participating women, we hear specific and on-going information behaviors and information needs post-adoption such as: 1) engaging with information and artifacts from the adoptive family, 2) integrating the adoption experience into everyday life, 3) finding community with others affected by adoption, and 4) fostering the open adoption relationship. I discuss each of these in turn below.

Each birthmother in this study developed a collection of information and artifacts surrounding the birth and relinquishment of their child(ren); these items held deep meaning for participants and played a role in their coping processes in the months and years following the adoption. Unlike a closed adoption that affords no ongoing information flow about the child, birthmothers in this study continued to add to their collection on a regular basis through information exchanges with the adoptive family. Most participants brought some of their collection to our interview; from the careful handling of objects in their collections it was evident that these items were cherished and held deep significance. Robin expressed deep emotional

attachment to her growing collection, realizing the potential it holds as part of her healing process.

I really want to make some way to compile the information in a really nice way. Every time I try to put up a picture, I would just cry and I would just -- but then I felt guilty for keeping them in this bag. So I'm torn. But I think it's almost time. I think it would be healthy for me to make a memory book and keep the information that way. (Robin)

Participants began collecting and curating both informational material and sentimental artifacts even before the birth and adoption event. Women often kept the brochures and photographs describing the prospective adoptive couples (material they used in selecting the parents) and the paperwork/records involved in the adoption. At the time of the birth, many adoptive couples gave small gifts and photo albums to birthmothers, which they continue to treasure. In the years since the adoption, participants regularly received and exchanged information, photos, and other memorabilia with the families. Women proudly displayed in their homes the artwork and photos from the children they relinquished. Social media and private blogs frequently served as the medium through which adoptive families shared information and updates. Participants found the continued communication and exchange of information through the open adoption relationship helpful in coping with their ongoing grief but also in developing this significant part of their life—the self as a birthmother.

For most participants, the open adoption dynamic involved regular visitation in addition to exchanging information. Visits usually took place in the homes of the adoptive families, with geographic proximity determining the frequency. While women spoke of the emotional roller coaster these visits can prompt, the confidence and joy the interactions instilled far outweighed the risks. Stella recalled her first visit to see her daughter with her new family, “Any like sad

feelings or anything I had literally went out the window whenever I saw her at her house playing with her toys and being with her family. It all went away.”

Integrating the adoption experience and the identity of “birthmother” into one’s everyday life is a unique challenge that participants faced. An innocuous question in a casual conversation can quickly become complicated; Stella commented, “When people ask—‘Do you have children?’ I’m like, ‘Well, not exactly.’” Disclosing one’s status as a birthmother takes effort as May noted: “For me, it’s always been really difficult with relationships. I’ve dated a couple people since then and I’m like—when do I explain this, because it’s something I think about a lot?” Participants sought information and guidance on how to integrate their adoption experience into everyday life (relationships, family and friends, acquaintances), but there was little in the way of role models or best practices, another example of the scarcity of information related to the birthmother experience.

Information behavior post-adoption is also characterized by a desire to find community; engaging with other people similarly affected by adoption was a common and welcome source of support and information for all participants in this study. Indeed, most participants encountered my call for participation through some sort of adoption support group (either online or in-person). The concept of community took different forms and served different purposes for women. Some joined birthmother groups (often via Facebook) to access, monitor, and occasionally contribute to the conversations and Q&As amongst other women who had placed or were considering placing a child. Others such as Laurel found the act of contributing to the dialog surrounding adoption to be personally beneficial, “So I think talking about it [adoption] helps me in putting out more information than necessarily taking it in.” In my own experience, as a participant in several adoption support groups, I have observed the value birthmothers place on

the opportunity to talk with and hear the stories of others affected by adoption (including other birthparents, adoptees, and adoptive parents). Rarely, in the course of everyday life, do birthmothers have an occasion to share their story and receive feedback and information from people with similar life experiences.

Related to information behavior through involvement in a community is a reaction I call an “activist response.” Motivated by their own experiences with adoption, a number of birthmothers in this study have engaged in educational, professional, and outreach efforts in order to become an expert source of information about adoption. Laurel and Becky participated in adoption support groups to share their own story in an effort to shatter some of the secrecy and stigma surrounding the birthmother experience. Robin and Bronwyn pursued graduate studies in social work with the intent to become agents of change in the practice and policies of adoption work.

Finally, the most prevalent information challenge expressed by birthmothers in this study revolves around the ongoing relationship with the relinquished child(ren) and the adoptive family. All participants expressed concern over this issue, and May succinctly words the question as, “How do you maintain an open relationship with the adoptive parents long-term?” This is where the information terrain that women were exploring became particularly sparse, with very little in the way of evidence-based literature or practice to inform and guide women (and even adoptive parents) on this important journey. As noted earlier, the “walking on eggshells” analogy throughout the open adoption relationship was voiced many times by multiple participants.

6.2.3 Information Pathways

The voices of birthmothers participating in this study guide us in mapping the information pathways through which expectant mothers considering adoption operate, limited of course to this particular sample and at this point in time. The concept of information pathway is used here to describe the route(s) participants followed in pursuit of answers to their questions and information needs within the context of a crisis pregnancy. As described by Johnson, Case, Andrews, Allard, and Johnson (2006), information pathways are a conceptualization of one's information environment relevant to information seeking. Pathways are distinct from the static schema of an individual's information field, the common starting point of information seeking; information pathways involve the dynamic and mindful efforts to address a problem or information gap. Similarly, the theoretical framework and methodology of information horizons (Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, & Harmon, 2001) focus on information seeking behavior in specific contexts. While data collection methods for this study encouraged participants to articulate their experience with information, collection did not include any graphical or visual expressions; thus I will use the information pathways lens to situate the discussion surrounding information resources. Documenting the information pathways that participants traversed helps us delineate and better understand their expressed information needs, the information sources they utilized in trying to meet those needs, and information needs that remain unresolved.

With the confirmation of pregnancy, all participants sought prenatal care through a physician, where they received information about their health and their pregnancy. Some women consulted local women's health clinics and the popular book, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (Murkoff & Mazel, 2008), for additional information on what they would be experiencing throughout the pregnancy. On the crisis coping front, women sought information

and support from entities such as Planned Parenthood, crisis pregnancy centers, and in some cases, their immediate families. In some instances the discrepancies of information from these sources increased a woman's stress level; such discordance is commonly characterizes sources in information pathways (Johnson, Case, Andrews, Allard, and Johnson, 2006). May recalls how conflicted she felt after visits to Planned Parenthood and a crisis pregnancy center.

Okay, these are two opposite roads. One road is telling me that this decision is fine to terminate the pregnancy, and it's very socially acceptable, and if it's not, it's your decision. I have this other side saying, "You'll feel really bad about this later on. Maybe you won't be able to get pregnant again." (May)

Early in the experience, when participants began to explore the idea of adoption as a viable option, they sought information to help orient themselves through such unfamiliar territory. Stella noted how little she knew about adoption.

I mean especially with adoption, other than Juno, the movie, I just didn't know anything about it. I always thought oh, okay, you adopt people from different countries. I never really thought in America you do that, which sounds weird. But at the same time, it's not really—a lot of people don't talk about it. It's always kind of that secretive thing. (Stella)

Most participants used Internet searches to explore general information and begin the process of orienting themselves to the meaning and process of adoption. Some participants used print literature to explore the adoption choice; Robin remembers, "I just started reading books and books, and I love to read, so I absorbed all that." Robin was the only participant who had some first-hand experience with adoption; the relationship she witnessed when her father and stepmother adopted a child several years before provided some insight into the real-world possibilities of adoption.

In all cases, through self-directed efforts or input from family and friends, women ultimately made contact with an adoption professional (social worker, counselor, facilitator, and/or private adoption agency) from whom they received the majority of their information

about making an adoption decision. This information included details about the process, options and timing, legal issues, rights of birthparents specific to their state, and information on prospective adoptive families. In some cases, information to support a parenting option was also provided. Each woman in this study ultimately chose to relinquish and to participate in some form of open adoption; adoption professionals in all cases counseled women on the legalities surrounding contact agreements with regard to their particular state statutes. A few participants mentioned the brief involvement of a lawyer, working either for the adoption agency or the adoptive family, who offered legal information and facilitated the signing of relinquishment paperwork. In no case did a participant have her own lawyer or independent advocate; the adoption agency and/or the prospective adoptive parents funded all legal counsel.

In addition to information about the adoption process, women in this study sought support—emotional and grief support and occasionally physical or financial support. Robin asked for such support, “I just came out and explained to the social worker that I lost my job. I’m living at my aunt’s. I’m unemployed, and I need some support, and I wondered if that was an option through the agency?” These types of support needs are tied to information about support services, so I include them as part of the information pathways discussion. Participants sought emotional support from a variety of sources including the adoption professional, an outside counselor or psychologist, family and friends, and online adoption forums. Several women recalled the emotional and informational support they received from the selected adoptive families. To varying degrees, most of the adoptive couples became actively involved in the everyday lives of participants during the pregnancy through phone calls, text messages, Skype, and visits, checking in on women on a regular basis. The adoptive mother Stella selected for her baby had already adopted one child; the prospective adoptive mother talked with Stella at length

about that experience, sharing information and possibilities relating to open adoption, what was working well for the birthmother of their other child, and things Stella might consider. While Stella found this helpful during her pregnancy, she also felt some pressure (intentional or not) through this intimate communication. “So the whole time she was like, ‘Are you sure you want to do this? I just want to make sure. Are you positive?’” This example clearly echoes the *trading of trust and power* theme described in Chapter 5. As Stella trusted the information and intentions of this adoptive family, they were clearly investing trust that she would follow through with the adoption plan. This dynamic complicates the context through which women evaluate information, a complication not typically addressed in traditional models of information behavior.

Another significant source of information for participants involved talking with other birthmothers, women who had already relinquished a child for adoption. As noted in Chapter 4-5, almost every participant pointed to a conversation with another birthmother as extremely beneficial in providing a first-hand look into the experience. In some cases birthmothers shared specific recommendations or cautions for decision-making (e.g., selecting an adoptive family living in the same state makes visitation easier). Others helped instill a sense of hope in terms of future recovery: “I just needed to know that there was going to be some sort of normal somewhere down the line” (Laurel). Regardless of the content of these conversations, participants in this study placed high value and found tangible benefits in communicating with women who had already relinquished a child; these interactions were typically the first opportunity at experiencing community with other people similarly affected by adoption. The usefulness of these interactions resonates with information behavior Costello labels as future forecasting (2014). In a study of people living with chronic kidney disease, Costello found that

patients “seek information from people with shared illness experiences; they also seek information from users who are farther along in their illness trajectory” (p. 3). In this study, participants found interactions and information exchanges with other birthmothers helpful in anticipating what the adoption experience might be like for themselves. All participants continue to engage with the larger adoption community in some form (online and/ in-person) to help meet ongoing information and support needs.

Table 6 below delineates the information needs that women expressed throughout the pre-adoption period. The second column lists the primary resources participants identified in meeting those information needs.

Table 6 Information needs and information sources, pre-adoption

Information Needs	Sources Used to Satisfy Information Needs
Pregnancy/physical health	Community women's center <i>What to Expect When You're Expecting</i> (book) OB/GYN
Options surrounding unintended pregnancy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abortion • Parenting • Adoption 	Planned Parenthood Crisis pregnancy center Family (usually mother) Adoption professional
Orienting information relating to adoption	Internet searching Adoption professional Personal experience
Emotional support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis management • Grief counseling 	Adoption professional Professional counselor or psychologist Prospective adoptive family Family and friends Online forums
Legal information on adoption <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process of signing relinquishment papers (timeline, right to reconsider) • Parental rights to the child before and after relinquishment papers are signed • Rights of birthfather • Contact agreement and enforceability 	Adoption professional Lawyer (working for agency or adoptive family) Internet searching
Options/choices within adoption plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of openness • Birth plan (hospital stay, interaction with adoptive family) 	Adoption professional Internet searching
Choosing an adoptive family	Adoption professional Brochures (print and online)
Information exchange with adoptive family	Adoption professional Adoptive family
What is this experience going to be like?	Other birthmothers Adoption professional Online forums for birthmothers

Across all cases in this study, adoption professionals played an enormous role in providing and explaining a wide variety of types of information as women faced an unintended pregnancy. In each interview the adoption professional appears as a direct provider and information conduit for a variety of information needs. From options counseling to presenting prospective adoptive families to explaining legal rights, the adoption professional was the central hub for much of the information women used throughout the relinquishment process. The significance of this role is well documented in the literature (Johnson & Faasse, 2012; Smith, 2007). However, a recent report from the Donaldson Adoption Institute (Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016) is critical of the lack of uniformity across agencies, adoption professionals, and states regarding the information presented to women who are considering relinquishing a child to adoption. Several recommendations to improve adoption practice are offered in the report that relate directly to the findings from this dissertation. These include recommendations for adoption professionals to: 1) develop and adopt best-practice guidelines for the provision of options counseling; 2) develop and disseminate evidence-based written materials about options; 3) increase expectant parents' access to support groups and other parents; and 4) develop best practice guidelines for therapeutic work with expectant parents.

These recommendations for adoption professionals are clearly echoed in the information needs expressed by participants in this study. While most women participating in this study spoke highly of the information and support they received from adoption professionals, participants identified specific gaps and unresolved information needs that mirror the recommendations from the Donaldson Adoption Institute report (2016). Overwhelmingly, participants wanted informed guides and role models for the future as they made an adoption plan. Laurel clarifies this information need: "There's no real kind of playbook out there for how

to go about any of it. So that’s what makes it really kind of challenging.” Participants were disappointed at the scarcity of information resources relevant to their situation—both in online and print formats. Content was particularly sparse with regard to open adoption relationships (e.g., best practices for preparing and developing post-adoption contact agreements; launching and maintaining a positive open adoption relationship). Support groups played an important role for birthmothers as they attempted to mitigate the lack of available information and meet some of their information needs through adoption communities (both online and in-person). Likewise, women who had already placed a child for adoption were key informants for participants in the decision-making processes. Finally, a lack of substantive, consistent, ongoing, and free professional counseling was detrimental to the emotional well-being of several participants, especially post-adoption; the recommendation above to develop therapeutic guidelines echoes this expressed need. Table 7 below recounts the unresolved information and support needs expressed by participants.

Table 7 Unresolved information and support needs

Emotional support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-existent or insufficient grief counseling • Bare-boned and outdated online forums • Lack of community in terms of support for birthmothers
Easy and direct contact with other birthmothers to learn from their experiences (the good, the bad, and the ugly)
What is the birthmother experience going to be like over a lifetime?
What is a good family? How to determine if a prospective adoptive family will be the right fit for the type of adoption I want?
Examples and/or role models for open adoption relationships
Guidance and continuing support to launch and develop a successful open relationship with the child and adoptive family

6.3 Implications for Information Behavior Research

This study contributes to basic research on human information behavior with an emphasis on the context of personal crisis. In particular, the findings from this work offer an opportunity for theoretical dialog regarding the framework of Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) as well as issues of trust surrounding information behavior. These are discussed in turn below.

6.3.1 Convergence and Divergence With ELIS Framework

ELIS offers a lens through which to examine the way people seek information in the course of everyday life (as opposed to exclusively work or academic contexts) based upon a combination of social, cultural, economic, and psychological factors. Savolainen (1995; 2005) characterizes information seeking within everyday life as being of two types: 1) search for orienting information; and 2) search for problem solving information. Orienting information is associated with contexts of “way of life,” the general order of things in one’s daily life world. The pursuit of information to solve a particular problem supports “mastery of life” contexts, those efforts to attend to life demands and interruptions in order to return things to meaningful order; in their essence, these are reciprocal contexts. In this study, we hear participants recounting a situation that significantly disrupted the meaningful order of their way of life and required a shift into active information engagement in order to address a situation of crisis. Through active attendance to information to support decision-making and cope with negative emotions, women engaged in problem-solving efforts associated with mastery of life. The factors addressed in Savolainen’s model (1995) that contribute to or determine the ways individuals maintain order and solve problems are helpful in situating themes from this study. Savolainen identified elements of capital such as values, attitudes, and current phase of life, as well as material and cultural capital that affect and determine one’s way of life and mastery of life. Each

participant in this study appraised her situation as one of crisis sufficient to disrupt her way of life based upon factors that mirror those of Savolainen's model. These included financial and emotional fragility, negative emotions, mental health co-crises, and shame.

The birthmother experience involves two distinct but intertwined periods of information behavior. The first is the pre-adoption phase, as a woman confirms an unintended pregnancy, considers choices in terms of outcomes (parent, terminate, or relinquish), and finally, within the scope of this study, makes a decision to move forward with an adoption plan. This phase is characterized by cognitive appraisal, information engagement, and transformation of information for use. The official adoption event marks a shift into the post-adoption period, which lasts a lifetime. Information needs and behavior change focus but are clearly evident across participants in areas such as navigating an open adoption relationship, coping with lingering grief and shame, integrating the birthmother identity into everyday life, and seeking community with others similarly affected by adoption. These two phases correspond in large degree to the concepts of way of life and mastery of life. However, Savolainen (1995) offers a cautionary note surrounding this framework:

Way of life or mastery of life are not alone enough to tell how a person seeks information in individual situations. As a constellation of everyday activities and their mutual valuation, way of life provides only general criteria for choosing and using various information sources and channels in that it indicates which choices are natural or even self-evident in the light of earlier choices (p. 267).

The question arises as to the appropriateness of fit of this inquiry within the realm of ELIS as detailed by Savolainen (1995) in terms of way of life and mastery of life contexts.

The categorization of a personal crisis context within ELIS may be problematic by definition. Savolainen (2004) explains the scope of ELIS: "The key word is everyday life, which refers to a set of attributes characterizing relatively stable and recurrent qualities of both work

and free time activities. The most central attributes of everyday life are familiar, ordinary, and routine” (p. 1). Findings from this study suggest that an unintended and crisis pregnancy may shatter a woman’s way of life and overwhelm her existing problem-solving, mastery of life strategies far beyond a mere life complication or simple disruption. She may not be able to identify any information sources or options that seem natural or self-evident as this context of personal crisis is so far removed from her everyday life information pathways. The emotional trauma many birthmothers experience moving from pregnancy through decision-making toward a relinquishment and adoption plan may impact a woman’s ability to effectively determine information needs and evaluate information sources (Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016). Brodzinsky and Smith (2014) characterize a crisis pregnancy that culminates in the placement of a child for adoption and the accompanying loss as the most significant and stressful experience a woman may face in her lifetime. The findings from this inquiry may change how we view the ELIS framework in asking the question, is there sufficient room for contexts that are beyond the everyday—those that are deeply meaningful, unfamiliar, extraordinary and profoundly personal?

I suggest that the context of personal crisis, a profoundly personal situation replete with overwhelming emotion, deeply meaningful significance, and potentially life-altering consequences does not fit well within an everyday life information seeking framework. The birthmother experience is just one example of a life event, the nature of which may push an individual beyond the scope of mastery of life contexts. A personal crisis may present itself in an acute fashion initially with an overwhelming emotional response, decisions to be made, options and outcomes to consider. But beyond the immediate incidence of a negative life event, there lies the potential for residual and even life-long impacts that confound or even prevent a return to the

normalcy of the ELIS fundamental “way of life”. Findings from this study suggest that an unexpected pregnancy resulting in child relinquishment does not end at the point of adoption. There are ongoing information needs, periodic decisions to make, and perpetual coping behaviors over the course of a lifetime. Other situations of personal crisis and negative life events likely prompt similar life changes and adjustments. The somewhat binary and sequential nature of EILS may not be sufficient to address research exploration into such contexts; indeed an individual may need to create a new way of life or expand their identity and information behaviors to encompass the effects of a personal crisis. The information behavior trajectory described earlier identifies themes that significantly impacted participants’ relationships with information, their decision-making processes, and ultimately their ability to cope with a crisis pregnancy and child relinquishment to adoption. This information behavior trajectory may be useful in exploring other crisis contexts of existential import to an individual, where repercussions, information needs, and subsequent decisions may be life-long.

6.3.2 Trading of Trust

Trust and trading of trust emerge as a significant theme across all cases as described in Chapter 5. Participants recall a complete dependence upon the information and intentions provided by the adoption professional helping to facilitate the adoption; they also recognize the faith they instilled in the prospective adoptive parents when crafting a shared vision for the adoption—including level of openness, ongoing communication, and information exchange amongst parties. Often this reliance on trust was precipitated by a sense of shame and perceived lack of power that women experienced surrounding the unintended pregnancy.

The concept of trust is prevalent in several areas of information and library science including information literacy and information repositories. Definitions of information literacy

revolve around the ability and skills necessary to “detect biases, to discern fact from nonfact, and information from noninformation, and to be able to choose only high-quality and respected information sources for use” (Tuominen, Savolainen, & Talja, 2005, p. 335). The premise of such measures of information literacy involves a binary logic of evaluating information for either acceptance or rejection. Such binary logic seems to defy the experience of participants in this study. Participants expressed the need to rely on feelings and intuition when evaluating whether or not they could trust the information supplied by adoption professionals and/or prospective adoptive families; only their experience after the fact, in the ensuing years, could determine whether or not they had invested in facts rather than fiction, whether or not their trust was well founded or misplaced.

Recent inquiry into data reusers’ processes of making trust judgments about data from information repositories (Yoon, 2017) suggests that trust is often associated with confidence in the intentions of others. This characterization of trust of information resonates with the voices of participants in this study. Across cases, women described their confidence in the information and intentions relayed by adoption professionals and prospective adoptive families; these feelings and intuitions toward fit contributed to the credibility participants placed in information as they transformed it for their own use. I suggest the concept of trust with regard to information evaluation and credibility in the context of a personal crisis may require additional measurements and considerations beyond those that current models offer. With regard to the position of an expectant mother considering adoption, we must recognize certain vulnerabilities within existing systems and processes. For example, it is important to understand that expectant mothers are not generally the clients of a private adoption agency, adoption facilitator, or adoption lawyer; the prospective adoptive families are the paying clients. A history of coercion of expectant mothers

is well documented in the literature (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Johnson, 2017; Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016) but commonly unrecognized by the general public. As Stella began to move forward with an adoption plan, the prospective adoptive mother became a source of information and close confidant during the pregnancy. While Stella welcomed this personal support, it became evident that the adoptive family was investing trust that she would follow through with the relinquishment of her baby when the time came. Such a dynamic and potential for pressure complicate the context through which expectant mothers evaluate information, a complication not typically addressed in measurements or models of information trustworthiness.

This study identifies the precarious levels of trust required of women considering child relinquishment to adoption and of birthmothers, post-adoption, navigating an open adoption relationship without solid legal rights to post-adoption contact. The nature of information sources coupled with the sparse information landscape surrounding adoption place a burden of trust on women far beyond traditional methods and metrics for evaluating information in everyday life contexts. The skills and strategies typically associated with information literacy and/or information repositories do not transfer easily into situations that depend almost completely upon the authenticity and intentions of other people. So while this exploratory research does not offer prescriptive recommendations regarding trustworthiness of information, it exposes significant problems in how people must navigate unfamiliar information pathways and evaluate information of significant consequence in the face of a personal crisis.

6.4 Implications for Adoption Research

Findings from this research contribute to adoption research in a general sense and suggest implications surrounding the practice of adoption. This study provides an in-depth look into the information needs and behaviors of eight expectant mothers who considered and chose adoption

in response to a crisis pregnancy. Their voices clearly articulate specific information needs during the decision-making process leading up to the adoption event as well as ongoing and yet unresolved information needs post-adoption. These needs include 1) options counseling surrounding an unintended pregnancy; 2) extensive and ongoing emotional support; 3) legal information and counsel; and 4) preparation and ongoing support for maintaining an open adoption. Participants characterized the information landscape through which they tried (and continue to try) to identify supporting information as sparse, difficult to navigate, and often irrelevant to their situation-specific needs. The information needs identified in this study correlate very closely with the findings from a recent, large-scale, mixed-methods study into the options counseling experiences of expectant mothers and adoption professionals (Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016).

Unresolved information needs expressed by participants center around a lack of ongoing support. The impact of child relinquishment on a birthmother is life-long and visible through ripple effects across her life experience—through relationships with family, partners, friends, other children she is parenting, and of course the adoptive family. Participants continue to seek guidance and support in integrating their role and identity as a birthmother into their everyday lives. The desire for community as an opportunity to engage with other people who “get it” is fierce. Adoption support groups, whether in-person or online, are often the only resource birthmothers perceive as available, free, and relevant following the adoption event; these communities serve a vital role in providing women a safe space to seek and share information. Adoption professionals can enhance their role as information providers and conduits by promoting such opportunities for women to connect with other birthmothers during both the decision-making phase and following the relinquishment and adoption events. As more

birthfathers engage in pre- and post-adoption decisions and relationships, adoption professionals could increase support for these often-unheard voices by facilitating similar and more inclusive opportunities for dialog. The ripple effects evidenced in themes of this study highlight the important role of sustained and ongoing information and communication support for the broader adoption kinship network as well, including the biological extended family of the child (birthfathers, birthfather's extended family, maternal grandparents, and siblings) as well as members of the extended adoptive family. Cultivating safe spaces for members of the adoption kinship network to share and explore information could offer tremendous and authentic opportunities for information exchange and first-hand insight into what is working or not working for other people similarly affected by adoption.

6.5 Limitations of this Study

The first limitation of this study is one common to all IPA studies; this is an exploratory, albeit in-depth, look at a phenomenon as seen through the eyes of a limited sample, in this case, through the voices of eight birthmothers. Every woman interviewed for this study made a point to say that each story is unique. Hesitant to jump to any conclusions about *all* birthmothers, Laurel was adamant that, "Every situation is so different and it's hard to get any sort of general consensus on what the experience is going to be like." So while some generalizations or overarching themes may be gleaned through this project, we must recognize the unique and unshared aspects of a woman's particular context and circumstance. Related, the experiences participants described were situated in a specific point in time following relinquishment of their child(ren) to adoption and the ongoing relationship they experienced with the adoptive family. People, perspectives, and even relationships change over time. The thoughts and meanings

birthmothers expressed during out interviews may change (even drastically) depending upon time and circumstance.

Second, the design of this IPA study involved a purposeful and somewhat homogenous sampling of birthmothers (e.g., restricted to women who voluntarily relinquished a child(ren) to adoption since the year 2000). Recruitment efforts for participation were limited to university-affiliated emails, local public bulletin boards, and adoption support groups. A particular point in time limited the sample as well to potential respondents' self-determination of their ability and willingness to share such a personal experience. The reader might question whether individuals who responded to recruitment messages felt more comfortable and more confident in their decision regarding adoption than birthmothers who did not feel comfortable in disclosing or confronting their regret.

Third, the various settings for interview interactions may have played a role in the level of comfort participants felt in relaying their stories. Interviews conducted in participants' homes, in the private rooms of public libraries, and the single interview at a public park were longer, while those conducted in coffee shops and restaurants tended to be shorter. In arranging interviews I suggested various options to potential participants such as a coffee shop, personal home of participant, local library, and public park but left that choice up to each participant. The shortest interview (Stella) took place at a restaurant and this more public and noisy environment may have contributed to the abbreviated nature of the conversation. However, I suspect that the personality of individual women played a significant role as well; some participants were simply more straightforward in telling their story while others were more open to reflection and lengthier conversations.

Lastly, since this was an IPA study, I was an active participant as the researcher in interpreting the meanings participants made (and continue to make) of their experience (the double-hermeneutic aspect of IPA). Although I have followed the guidelines suggested in IPA texts and previous studies regarding transparency in including my own active reflexivity, a different researcher might interpret these data differently. My intent has been to present data with such a degree of transparency as to empower the reader to participate and follow my interpretations.

6.6 Future Research

The major themes emerging from this study offer an interesting perspective with which to study information behavior in other contexts of personal crisis. The themes prevalent across the phases of cognitive appraisal, information engagement, and information transformation for use in this study may be useful in comparing and contrasting the trajectory of information behavior evident in the experience of other phenomena that are deeply meaningful, profoundly personal, and potentially stigmatizing. I was drawn to this inquiry into information behavior within the context of personal crisis, one filled with emotion, life-long consequences, stigma and unfamiliar pathways, because of my own tenuous relationship with information in such circumstances. Due diligence in terms of information seeking is supposed to inspire confidence, expand our understanding, and help us weigh options through an informed evaluation process. Too often my experience with information in such situations has been frustrating, entrenched with uncertainty, and even regret. Navigating information sources in the face of a personal crisis with the intent to discern the “right” or “best” decision is almost never straightforward and rarely results in a clear, confidence-inspiring answer. With that sentiment, there exist in the journey of life many

different contexts of personal crisis that we might explore—to uncover the commonalities as well as the diversity of information behaviors surrounding an episode of personal crisis.

There is a growing fervor for evidence-based research and best practice guidelines in order to inform practitioners and providers of information in the area of adoption (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014; Madden, Ryan, Aguiniga, & Crawford, 2016; Smith, 2007; Wiley & Baden, 2005). In particular, the adoption field is replete with calls for current and ongoing research into the practices and policies surrounding openness in adoption. A follow-up inquiry with participants in a study such as this could offer a unique and in-depth view into the changing information needs of birthmothers and their experiences of open adoption as their child(ren) mature. Another aspect relating to adoption and information behavior that deserves timely exploration involves the impact of the Internet and social media amongst individuals whose lives are affected by adoption. The Internet offers a means for ongoing communication between birthparents, adoptees, and adoptive families, search and reunion between birth families and adoptees, as well as spaces for individuals within the adoption kinship network to communicate and exchange information. But there is a related need for ethical, legal, policy, and practice guidelines to protect individuals (Howard, 2012).

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Are you a birthmother?

Have you relinquished a child for adoption
in the last 15 years?

Would you be interested in sharing your story by
participating in a research study?

The purpose of this research is to better understand the experience of birthmothers, women who have relinquished a child to adoption, with particular emphasis on the role of information in the decision-making and coping processes during and in the years following relinquishment. Placing a child for adoption may be a highly emotional extremely personal decision often compounded by the stress of an unplanned pregnancy.

This study focuses on a woman's information needs and information search behavior surrounding such a personal crisis. What information do women seek and find useful in the decision-making process? What role does information play in the coping process following child relinquishment?

You are eligible to participate in this study if you:

- Have voluntarily relinquished a child through a formal adoption process since 1999 (in the last 15 years) in the U.S.
- Are at least 18 years of age
- Are willing to share a detailed account of your child relinquishment experience through a personal interview

Your story will be treated as confidential; no information will be reported in a way that could reveal your personal identity.

Participants will receive \$75 cash.

If you are eligible and interested in participating in this study, please contact:

Rachael Clemens
Doctoral Candidate, School of Information & Library Science
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
IRB Study # 15-0259

Email: rclemens@unc.edu
Cell: 714.926.1098
Web: <http://www.unc.edu/~rclemens/>



APPENDIX B: SCREENING CONVERSATION WITH POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Screening Conversation with Potential Participants [to be conducted via telephone]

Thank for your interest in this study of birthmothers. My name is Rachael Clemens and I am conducting this study as my dissertation work through the School of Information & Library Science at UNC Chapel Hill. I am looking for birthmothers who have relinquished a child for adoption in the last 15 years to tell me about their experience – with a particular focus on their engagement with information through the adoption decision process and in the years following.

I would like to tell you more about this project, collect a little bit of preliminary information about you and then see about setting up a face-to-face interview with you.

First, a little more about this study. I am interested in how people who are faced with a personal crisis engage with information in terms of decision-making and coping with the situation. This includes searching for information, figuring out where to look for information, who to ask, who to tell, evaluating information sources, dismissing or avoiding information, using it to evaluate options, barriers to complete information, keeping information, using it to make a decision and ultimately using information to cope with the experience down the road. So I am interested in how birthmothers engage with information in the pre-decision phase, at the time of adoption and in the years following.

There are of course many situations that might be considered a personal crisis – and indeed, an unplanned pregnancy and choosing to relinquish a child for adoption may not necessarily be considered a “crisis” for every birthmother. As a birthmother myself, I relinquished a child for adoption 20 years ago, I am curious about other women’s experience with adoption, that’s why I chose this particular context to study.

If you decide to participate in this project, you will be one of about 7-10 birthmothers that I will interview. I will set up a face-to-face interview at a time convenient for you and in a place where you feel comfortable sharing your story. I will audio record the interview, transcribe our interview and analyze the transcript. If you have any documents or artifacts that relate to your story that you have kept – and that you are willing to show me and tell me about, I’ll ask you to bring those to our interview. The interview itself is not highly structured, I will simply ask you to tell me about your experience, though I may probe a bit to ask you about your engagement with information. I expect the interview to last about 60-90 minutes. I realize talking about the experience may bring up some painful memories; your comfort and well-being are my primary concern.

When I transcribe the interview, I will assign each participant a pseudonym and delete any information that might identify you (name of adoption agency, other details that might identify you). At the conclusion of the interview I will ask you if it would be okay to contact you again if I have any follow-up questions that come up as I analyze data (possible brief follow-up interview).

For participating in this study, you will receive \$75 cash at the conclusion of the interview as a small token of my appreciation for sharing your story and your time.

Do you have any questions or concerns about the project?

Now that you've heard more about the project, are you interested in participating?

- If **NO**, then thank the individual for her interest and ask if she might pass along the invitation to anyone else she knows that might be eligible.
- If **YES**, then proceed with brief questionnaire.

Name	
Preferred contact information	
Date of birth	
Date of birth of child	
Date of child relinquishment / adoption <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If before the year 2000, let her know that the study has specific requirements and I'm sorry but she won't be able to participate this time. Thank the individual for her interest and ask if she might pass along the invitation to anyone else she knows that might be eligible.	
State in which relinquishment was finalized	

Thanks for sharing that information. Now that you've had a few minutes to think about things, would you like to move forward and set up an interview?

- If **NO**, then thank the individual for her interest and ask if she might pass along the invitation to anyone else she knows that might be eligible.
- If **YES**, then proceed with arranging interview.

Interview date/time/location preferences	
Willing to share and tell me about any artifacts/documents related to adoption?	
Any requests or things I should know to make the interview more	

comfortable?	
I will confirm with you a couple of days before our interview. Is email or phone call okay?	

Thank you for your interest in this project. I will email you the information sheet about this study that provides a few more details and all my contact information. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns that you think of in the meantime. I'll contact you a couple of days before our interview to check in (and remind you to bring any documents or artifacts if you feel comfortable doing so).

APPENDIX C: CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

Email to Triangle Adoption Support Group, Adoption Triad Dialogue Group, and UNC mass email system

Subject Line: Birthmothers Needed for Research Study

Are you a birthmother? Have you relinquished a child to adoption in the past 15 years? Would you be interested in sharing your story? If you know a birthmother, please consider passing along this invitation to participate in this important study.

Title of Study: Human information behavior, coping and decision-making in the context of a personal crisis: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the voices of birthmothers on relinquishing a child for adoption (IRB #150259)

The purpose of this research is to better understand the experience of birthmothers. These are women who have relinquished a child for adoption. I'm interested in the role of information in the decision-making and coping processes during and in the years following relinquishment. Placing a child for adoption may be a highly emotional and extremely personal decision, sometimes including the stress of an unplanned pregnancy. This study focuses on how women seek and use information during such a personal crisis. What information do women seek and find useful in the decision-making process? What role does information play in the coping process following child relinquishment?

What happens during this study?

If you decide to participate, you will be one of 7-10 birthmothers participating in this research study. During our first phone conversation I will tell you more about this study and ask you a few questions to prepare for the full interview. I will answer any questions you may have and set

up the face-to-face interview at a time and place that will work for you. I anticipate the face-to-face interview will take about 90 minutes.

During the interview I will ask you to tell me about your birthmother experience in detail. I may ask questions about your use of information during and following your decision process. If you are willing, I will ask you to show me and tell me about any meaningful objects or documents that you have kept related to your birthmother experience. At the end of the interview I will ask you if you are willing to talk with me further (a brief follow-up interview) to address any questions that come up as I analyze your interview transcript. Your responses during the interview will be treated as confidential. In the data set, you will be assigned a pseudonym and no information will be reported in a way that could reveal your personal identity.

Participants will receive \$75 cash for participating in this study.

How do I know I can participate?

You may participate in this study if you:

- Have voluntarily placed a child for adoption at any time since 2000 in the U.S.
- Are at least 18 years of age
- Are willing to share a rich account of your child relinquishment experience

Contact

If you are eligible and interested in participating in this study, please contact:

Rachael Clemens

Doctoral Candidate

School of Information & Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

rclemens@unc.edu | cell: 714.926.1098 | <http://www.unc.edu/~rclemens/>

APPENDIX D: INFORMATION SHEET / INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Information about a Research Study
Adult Participants

Consent Form Version Date: May 4, 2015

IRB Study # 15-0259

Title of Study: Human information behavior, coping and decision-making in the context of a personal crisis: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the voices of birthmothers on relinquishing a child for adoption

Principal Investigator: Rachael Clemens

Principal Investigator Department: School of Information and Library Science

Principal Investigator Phone number: (714) 926.1098

Principal Investigator Email Address: rclemens@unc.edu

Faculty Advisor: Barbara Wildemuth

Faculty Advisor Contact Information: (919) 962-8072

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary.

You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research is to better understand the experience of birthmothers, women who have relinquished a child for adoption, with particular emphasis on the role of information in the decision-making and coping processes during and in the years following relinquishment. Placing a child for adoption may be a highly emotional and extremely personal decision often compounded by the stress of an unplanned pregnancy. This study focuses on a woman's information needs and search behavior surrounding such a personal crisis. What information do women seek and find useful in the decision-making process? What role does information play in the coping process following child relinquishment?

You may participate in this study if you:

- Have voluntarily placed a child for adoption at any time since 2000 in the U.S.
- Are at least 18 years of age
- Are willing to share a rich account of your child relinquishment experience

How many people will take part in this study?

There will be approximately 7-10 people in this research study.

How long will your part in this study last?

Your participation in this study will take about 2 hours of your time. After contacting me about your interest, I will conduct a brief screening interview on the phone (about 10-15 minutes) to explain the study to you, ask you questions about your eligibility to participate and find a date/time/venue for a face-to-face interview that is convenient for you. The interview itself will last about 60-90 minutes depending upon your comfort and energy. Within two weeks following the interview, I may want to follow-up with you via phone to ask you for clarification on your comments; I expect any follow-up conversation to last 10-20 minutes.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you decide to participate, you will be one of approximately 7-10 birthmothers participating in this research study. During a brief, introductory phone conversation I will tell you more about this study, ask you a few questions in preparation for the interview, answer any questions/concerns you may have, and set up the face-to-face interview at a time and place that is convenient for you. I anticipate the face-to-face interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes.

During the interview I will ask you to tell me about your birthmother experience in detail; I may ask questions about your engagement with information during and following your decision process. If you are willing, I will ask you to show me and tell me about any meaningful artifacts or documents that you have kept related to your birthmother experience. At any point during the interview you may take a break or stop the interview. At the conclusion of the interview I will ask you if you are amenable to talking with me further (possible brief follow-up phone interview) to address any questions that arise as I analyze the transcript from the interview.

Your responses during the interview will be treated as confidential; each participant will be assigned a pseudonym and no information will be reported in a way that could reveal your personal identity.

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. You will not benefit personally from being in this research study.

What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?

You will be describing your experience surrounding placing a child for adoption; undoubtedly this was an emotional and difficult experience. In telling your story and in a sense re-living parts of the experience, you may feel emotionally vulnerable. As a birthmother myself who relinquished a child for adoption, I am keenly aware of the sensitive nature of this conversation and your emotional well-being is of the upmost concern to me. During the interview, if you are uncomfortable with any of the questions you may skip it, take a break, or stop the interview at any time. At the conclusion of the interview I will provide you an information sheet with the name and contact information of some recommended counseling services in your area in case you would like any additional emotional support following our discussion.

How will information about you be protected?

The interview notes and audio recording will be kept secure on a password-protected computer and destroyed after I transcribe them. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym and any other potentially identifying details will be omitted from the transcript (e.g. name of adoption agency). Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study, pseudonyms will be used in data analysis and reporting.

Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety. Audio recording of the interview may be requested to be turned off at any point during the conversation.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

_____ OK to record me during the study

_____ Not OK to record me during the study

What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?

You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. You may stop or pause the face-to-face interview at any time.

Will you receive anything for being in this study?

A \$75 cash incentive will be given to you at the conclusion of the face-to-face interview. This is a small token of appreciation for sharing your time and story.

Will it cost you anything to be in this study?

It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

What if you have questions about this study?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If

you have questions about the study (including payments), complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Barbara Wildemuth, Professor, School of Information & Library Science, UNC CH Email: wildemuth@unc.edu Tel: 919.962.8072	Office of Human Research Ethics, UNC CH Email: IRB_Subjects@unc.edu Tel: 919.966.3113
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APPENDIX E: COUNSELING AND CRISIS SERVICES

<p>HopeLine Crisis Hotline + Referral (919) 231-4525 (877) 235-4525 Specializes in providing suicide prevention & crisis intervention, supportive and non-judgmental active listening, understanding discussion of crisis resolution & referrals to appropriate community resources.</p>	<p><u>Durham County</u> Freedom House 309 Crutchfield Street Durham, NC 27704 Phone: (919) 560-7305</p>
<p>United Way 211 Individuals can dial 211 from their phone and be connected with their local operator who will help find local resources that they may be looking for.</p>	<p><u>Person County</u> Person Counseling Center Freedom House 355 S. Madison Blvd., Suite C Roxboro, NC 27573 Phone: (336) 599-8366</p>
<p>Mental Health Association in North Carolina Helpline: 1-800-897-7494</p>	<p><u>Chatham County</u> Chatham Counseling Center 287 East St., Suite 421 Pittsboro, NC 27312 Phone: (919) 542-4422</p>
<p><u>Orange County</u></p> <p>Chapel Hill Outpatient Clinic Freedom House 104 New Stateside Drive Chapel Hill, NC 27516 Phone: (919) 442-1844</p> <p>UNC Hospitals/Department of Psychiatry Walk-in Clinic (For emergencies only, 9 AM to 3 PM) Neurosciences Hospital, 1st Floor 101 Manning Drive, Chapel Hill, NC 27514 Phone: (919) 966-2166</p> <p>Mental Health Association in Orange County Non-clinical services, including education, advocacy, information and referral, and peer support Phone: (919) 942-8083</p> <p>24-Hour Crisis Services Screening, Triage, Access & Referral (STAR) Phone: (919) 913-4100 or (800) 233-6834</p>	<p><u>Wake County</u> Wake County Counseling Services (Free or Reduced Price) New Leaf Behavioral Health www.nlbh.org Phone: (919) 781-8370</p>

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introductory comments:

This study focuses on the birthmother decision process and coping process through the lens of information behavior. This research seeks to understand the ways in which birthmothers made (and continue to make) meaning of their experience through child relinquishment, their interaction with information surrounding that decision and subsequent coping strategies.

As a woman who has come through the experience of child relinquishment, your first-hand account and insight will help us develop a more concrete and sensitive understanding of the information needs and challenges facing birthmothers and ultimately help improve information delivery, navigation and support systems serving the decision making and coping processes.

First I want to express my sincere thanks for agreeing to speak with me about your own experience. I appreciate the very personal nature of adoption and the impact such an emotional decision has undoubtedly had on your life. I fully respect your decision and my inquiry is wholly outside any moral, ethical or religious discussion – I am interested solely in the way someone may interact with information during and following a personal crisis period.

In talking with birthmothers I am curious about things like:

- How did you learn about the process of adoption?
- Where did you first turn for information about adoption (family, friends, agencies, internet, doctor, etc.)?
- What questions did you have and what answers did you find?
- How did you come to a decision about adoption? What particular bits of information helped you weigh your options?

- Did searching and sifting through information help you cope with the situation or did you find it overwhelming at times? If yes, in what ways?
- What challenges did you find in looking for information? What information was not available or accessible to you at a time that would have been helpful?
- Has information played any role in your understanding and sense-making surrounding the adoption? What does that look like?

Your privacy and emotional well-being are extremely important to me. The interview notes and audio recording will be kept secure and destroyed after I transcribe them. Anything you choose to say in the interview is confidential. No real names will be used and any other potentially identifying details will be omitted from any publication. If you are uncomfortable with any of the questions you may skip it or ask me to turn off the recorder. You may take a break or stop the interview at any time. I also have the name and contact information of some recommended counseling services if you would like any additional emotional support following our discussion.

Are you comfortable? Ready to begin?

[TURN ON RECORDER]

To give us a little bit of structure, I want to ask you about your experience in relation to three general phases.

- 1) What was your experience like leading up to the adoption event?
- 2) What was your experience like in relation to the adoption event itself?
- 3) What has your experience been since the adoption?

**OPENING QUESTION/PROMPT FOCUSING ON THE PRE-PLACEMENT DECISION-
MAKING PHASE**

Can you tell me about your experience leading up to the adoption?

Potential probes and follow-up questions

- How familiar were you with adoption? What did you know about adoption and the adoption process?
- Had you ever heard the term ‘birthmother’ before? Did you know anyone who had placed a child for adoption? If so, how did you know and what did you know about it?
- Can you tell me a little about your reaction when you learned you were pregnant? What emotions did you feel? What was your stress level?
- Did you turn to anyone in particular for support? Can you elaborate?
- If you can recall, describe your state of mind in the weeks and months after you found out about the pregnancy.
- How and where did you try to get information about anything that you didn’t know about being pregnant? (e.g. prenatal care, morning sickness, pregnancy in general)?
- How did the idea of adoption come up for you and what did it mean to you?
- Were there concrete details about the adoption process that you wanted to find out? Things like legal issues, rights of the father, selecting adoptive parents, assistance with housing or medical insurance, adoption agencies, etc.? If so, how did you go about learning more?
- Did you go online to look for any particular information about adoption or try to find any online support groups? If so please describe. How easy and helpful were those experiences?

- Did you approach any professionals to help guide you to information and/or support during your pregnancy? If so, how did you connect with them (office, online, agency)? How helpful or unhelpful were they?
- Did you ever feel the need to be secretive about your situation or disguise the reason you were looking for certain information? Why or why not?
- As you considered your options or made plans did you feel the influence of family members, the father, friends, or anyone else? Can you talk about that some?

QUESTION FOCUSING ON THE ADOPTION EVENT

Can you tell me about your experience with the formal adoption process?

Potential probes and follow-up questions

- At what point did you actually decide that adoption was the right option for you (early in pregnancy, later in pregnancy, right after the birth, down the road a little while)?
- What do you think ultimately helped you make a decision regarding adoption? (a person, a feeling, a story, particular information, decision tree, etc.)
- Did you receive and/or keep any documents from the adoption process? If so, can you show me and/or tell me about them?

QUESTION FOCUSING ON THE TIME SINCE ADOPTION

Can you tell me about your experience since the adoption?

Potential probes and follow-up questions

- Is there anything you have learned or come to understand more fully since the adoption process that you wish you had known beforehand?
- If yes, where should the information you describe above have been placed so that you would have found it or who would have been the best person to share it with you?
- If you were talking with a woman considering placing her child for adoption, what information resources would you want to make sure she knows about?

Additional Feedback

Do you have any other insights or comments that may help me better understand the information seeking behavior of women considering relinquishing their child for adoption?

Follow-up

Are you willing to let me contact you in the next few weeks in case I need to clarify any of your responses? If so, what would be the best way for me to contact your?

APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE: LAUREL

Laurel: birthmother

Michael: birthfather

Roberta: adoption social worker

Kira: daughter

Heather and Greg: adoptive parents

In 2009 at age 21, Laurel had finished college, was working a full-time job and living back at home with her folks in Missouri. She was dating Michael for just a few months when she unexpectedly became pregnant. After working through the initial shock, their tentative reaction was to just “go for it” and keep the child, abortion wasn’t an option for Laurel. But within a month, Laurel was having second thoughts.

I was toward the end of my first trimester I was like, we really should be doing adoption. Something just sort of clicked for me...that really made a lot more sense. We weren’t really financially or emotionally ready to be parents. And I just knew it was not going to go over real well. Like I could see how this was going to go...I felt like we were just going to end up on welfare for the rest of our lives. I had a really great childhood with my parents, they weren’t necessarily well to do or anything but we had family vacations, all sorts of activities. So I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to provide all that for my child. I was 21 at the time. Something just clicked in my brain that we really should be looking at adoption.

When Laurel brought up this idea of adoption with her boyfriend, he was not a fan. He had been raised by a single mom and was committed to the idea of being actively involved if he ever had any children of his own, something he missed growing up. Michael’s mother was also vocal in her opinion against adoption; she had raised several kids on her own and didn’t understand why anyone else couldn’t do the same. But Laurel was persistent in exploring the option slowly with her boyfriend.

A friend of Laurel’s had a connection with a local adoption social worker so Laurel made an appointment to go talk with her.

And so we met with Roberta [adoption counselor] for the first time and we just sort of sat down and talked about why we were considering adoption. We both went together, it was a very tense meeting.

Laurel was impressed with Roberta from the start, her warmth and knowledge about the adoption process. Michael did his own research on Roberta’s credentials and reporting record. Roberta had years of experience working in the field of adoption. She made sure they knew the relevant vocabulary and options in terms of closed, semi-open and open adoption and what those can look like in real life. The particular agency that Roberta works with advocates open adoption in practice.

The agency we ultimately picked is sort of a full-service, they took care of all the legal stuff on both ends...for the parents...the birthparents and the adoptive couple – also for the child as well. So it was kind of all-inclusive. That was reassuring to me so that when I went to meet with Roberta [social worker] that she was knowledgeable about...I mean she was really warm but she could also get down to brass tacks about you know what our rights were, what an adoption would actually look like, our different options as far as doing a closed, semi open or open adoption – and just kind of what that looked like. For them, they were really a big advocate for open adoptions.

Before they made any sort of commitment, Laurel spent a fair amount of time online searching for information and exploring numerous adoption websites.

I went on the internet and just sort of tried to click around on different agencies and just kind of see what I could get from..., just a feel. I almost feel bad because it's almost like if it [an adoption agency] didn't have a web presence then it was really hard for me to invest in it. I would go and kind of look and see what their motto was and look at the parent profiles. A lot of time they'll post testimonials or adoptive parent profiles and just kind of getting an idea of the feel of different agencies.

She would look at the agency mission statements, the prospective parent profiles, and testimonials to get a feel for different adoption agencies. Some were larger and nationwide but an agency that had an office and adoption counselor in her own town was ideal, she wanted to have immediate and easy access to a real person. Roberta and the adoption agency she worked for fit this bill so they felt ready to move forward.

Together Laurel and Michael started looking through the profile material of prospective parents; they would go over to Roberta's house to examine these scrapbook-like catalogs. They contained seemingly everything about each couple: financial circumstances, what their home looked like, their hobbies, family and friends, how they met as a couple, basically what they had to offer a child. Laurel described the experience as nerve wracking because each couple looked so deserving of a child and it was difficult to figure out who would be a good match.

I just felt so silly, you know in a lot of ways because I mean it's like all these couples look so deserving and I'm just trying to find the fit. They are all wonderful people and they are in that situation where they wanted a child and I'm like oh, I don't really feel anything with them and you set them aside.

Ultimately they picked a couple because as Laurel said, "*she just totally looked like she needed to be a mom...and he just looked like he is so much fun.*"

This was actually the page [in the parent profile], these two pictures, that sold me on them as a couple, which sounds so silly, but it was totally it because she just totally looked like she needed to be a mom. And then there is another picture of the adoptive father, he just looked like he is so much fun. And I love the kind of

balance that they looked like they had. So I loved that about them. They just seemed like a really fun couple

During the interview, Laurel talked a great deal about the emotional nature of looking through the prospective parent profiles, trying to decide which if any of the couples would be the right people to raise her child. Trying to envision the life she wanted for her unborn child brought up feelings of guilt and shame about herself and her situation.

It's kind of weird because there's all this stuff that you want the couple to mimic in you but at the same time it's so strange to think that you're imposing what you think these people should and should not be – it's like, I don't feel fit to be a parent right now and I'm telling you what you should and should not have in your life [laughter]

Roberta arranged for Laurel and Michael to meet and talk with a birthmother who had relinquished her child about two years earlier. Laurel said this was extremely helpful, hearing first-hand about someone else's experience. She and Michael also made some specific decisions based upon that interaction: they wanted an open adoption and they wanted the adoptive family to live in the same state to make visitation easier. Laurel found talking with a birthmother valuable on a different front, the conversation allowed her to start envisioning a "return to normal" at some point in the future; the birthmother mentioned that it took about 2 years for her to feel "normal" again and Laurel has found this to be the case in her own experience. The assurance of the possibility of some resolution and "back to everyday life" gave her some hope.

Laurel tried unsuccessfully to find information about what it was like to be a birthmom while she was pregnant. She could find plenty of blogs and stories describing the experience of adoptive couples but almost nothing from a birthmother's perspective. She suspects this relates to the history of shame and secrecy of out-of-wedlock sexual intimacy, unwed mothers and adoption. This lack of information makes her grateful for that opportunity to talk with another birthmother and to Roberta for coordinating it.

That was one thing I remember when I was pregnant is trying to find information about what it was like to be a birthmom. And there was like nothing. I had the hardest time finding anything because I think for a really long time adoption was like this shameful thing that women did in the dark of night at a Catholic hospital and just like try to move on. But now this trend seems to be shifting more toward open adoption these days at least it seems that way in this area. And I think a lot of that has to do with kind of past experiences, learning from those, but there's not really a lot you can find online. There's so many blogs and stories of what adoptive couples experience, there really wasn't much about what my experience would be. And I think that was what really drove me to talk to the social worker about – and that's what drove her to pull in the other birthmom,

Roberta set up a meeting between Laurel and Michael and the prospective parents they selected through the profiles, Heather and Greg. Laurel and Michael wanted to make sure the couple was

on the same page in terms of what the adoption plan would look like – that it would be an open adoption with regular visits until the child was old enough to dictate her own preferences.

One thing we wanted to make sure they had the same plan as we did. So we asked them what an adoption plan would look like for them ideally. And they really wanted the birthparents to be involved and kind of for her [daughter] to know them, to be able to ask them any sort of questions so that it was never a mystery and they never felt like there was never any kind of stigma around it and it was nothing to feel ashamed of or to hide. So that was something that we really valued. And yeah, we just kind of really clicked with them.

Laurel credits Roberta for clearly explaining the rights that she and Michael would and would not have as birthparents: “...*the most you could get would be a good faith agreement that they [adoptive parents] don’t just cut ties completely and cut you off.*” Laurel further explained that she understood and agreed that the adoptive parents would have a responsibility to protect the child. She used the example, “*if Michael and I ended up strung out on drugs, they would have the responsibility as parents not to put their child around something like that. And so that’s why it’s important for them to have that say.*” At the same time Laurel notes that she was afraid to ask for different things or appear demanding. Regarding this quandary, she comments:

In a lot of ways I was scared to ask for different things or come off as demanding. It’s kind of like this whole trading of trust. You’re going into it, they’re just really trusting and hoping that you’re going to give them a child but then afterwards you are really just trusting and hoping that they don’t cut off ties. So it was always just trying to get that balance of asking for things that you wanted but at the same time not making them feel like you are being demanding or you’re asking too much. But yeah, it’s kind of hard.

Laurel was very thoughtful and deliberate in coping with her unintended pregnancy. “*That’s how I handle those things, I guess when it’s serious stuff, it’s like you gotta have a deadline, I guess that’s how I function.*” Once she decided against trying to raise the child on her own or with her boyfriend, she set a timeline for herself and took deliberate steps to meet those targets.

Well I was weird in that I set arbitrary deadlines for myself. So by like 5 months I wanted to decide whether or not I was going to do adoption. So at 5 months, I knew that was what I wanted to do and I just had to convince my boyfriend. And then I think the other deadline that I set or that I really remember was that at 6 months I wanted to be talking to an agency, I remember that one. I wanted to have an agency that I felt comfortable with. And then at 8 months we needed to have a couple. And that was because I really didn’t want to feel like I was going to be making a last minute choice, like we were just going to be throwing a Hail Mary and going with a couple that we weren’t really comfortable with. We actually met them the week before that deadline.

Gathering information and taking time to think through and process the information seemed to help Laurel cope with the crisis situation. With the help of Roberta she was able to plan out

many of the details surrounding the birth event and adoption arrangements. Laurel credits this strategy of proactive information gathering and evaluation with helping her feel prepared and ready to work through some of the stress and grief she knew she would experience. The information and time to process helped her clarify what was important to her. For example, in preparing for the birth of her daughter, the social worker had conversations with Laurel about what she wanted in terms of a birth plan – who did she want to be there, what would make her most comfortable?

Because she actually sat down with me and was like let's put together a birth plan and come up with what you want that to look like. And she kind of threw out different ideas and different stuff. Oh this is what some of them [birthmoms] will ask for and this is what some of them think to leave out. Just giving me an idea of what options are out there. And I think that kind of goes back to monitoring – her giving me enough information to make me feel like I'm prepared for the situation to come. I knew I was going to have to fill out a lot of paperwork when I was there. And I knew that there was going to come a point where we have to say goodbye and we would leave and they would leave separately. Just all that stuff was really helpful to know all that.

At the hospital Laurel invited the adoptive parents into the room after her daughter, Kira, was born, as she wanted them to participate in the experience and it was a good bonding experience for them all. The couple took baby Kira home afterwards and then two weeks later they all met at the courthouse to stand before a judge and finalize the adoption. Although the situation was emotional, Laurel felt confident in the future for and with her daughter.

We went in the courtroom and you have to stand up and say yes, I understand that I am terminating my rights. And then Michael stood up and did the same thing. And the judge asked him a couple of questions because you could tell he was having a hard time. But they were just making sure that this was something that he really wanted. So it was just kind of a get together and knock that out. And then we went and had coffee afterwards. And that was the first get together where my mom started to feel comfortable with Heather and Greg. She started to understand that we weren't saying goodbye it was really just see you soon. So that was really big for her. So yeah, it went pretty well.

Reflecting on her experience since the birth of her daughter, Laurel feels confident in her decision to place through adoption but remembers strong feelings of guilt she had to overcome in order to move on with her life. She also points out the unintended ripple effects on her family and the extension of grief and guilt.

I had to forgive myself for being irresponsible enough to get pregnant when I wasn't ready to have a baby. So I had a lot of guilt associated with that. Especially with my parents because at the time they were kind of mourning this loss, what felt like a loss for them of a grandchild, so there was that. At one point my mom came to me and was like you know, your dad and I can raise her, we'll adopt her and raise her as our own. And I was like no, no, I can't do that, that's not going to

work. So they tried to be as supportive as they could but it was really hard for them and I understand that.

Laurel found herself needing to carry a lot of the emotional load – her own and that of others; she had the grief of her parents and family to deal with and she also felt responsible for the well-being of her boyfriend.

I think he [boyfriend] was really dependent upon me as a supportive system, which in some ways was kind of bad because then I just always felt responsible for his well-being as well as mine. But in a lot of ways I just focused on trying to get through it and Kira [their daughter] being healthy and I wasn't really concerned about what everyone else's opinion was of it.

Laurel involves herself occasionally with a local adoption support group and has even spoken on a panel about her experience as a birthmother. She feels strongly that each situation is unique and different.

You know it's hard to talk with someone and say this is what it's going to look like, these are the things you are gonna likely experience. It's hard to even say you'll likely experience anything because it just really, really depends. I am like the unicorn of adoptions, at least it feels that way, because I get along really well with my adoptive couple.

Information continues to play a large role in Laurel's ongoing strategies to cope with the relinquishment of her daughter. She feels that information surrounding adoption is extremely fragmented; the challenge of knitting together various strands of information is left up to the woman contemplating an adoption decision. There are few (if any) role models that birthparents can use in making decisions and formulating adoption plans. While she doesn't have an easy solution, Laurel points to the lack of consistent and easily accessible information as a very real stressor that permeates the birthmother experience. She tries to be part of a solution by sharing her story, emotions and experience with others.

There's just such a lack of information on what you're even going to experience that you don't know what to ask for. For a lot of birthmoms they don't think to ask for those things, they don't know what to ask for. Because there's not a ton of information out there as far as this is what a negative situation looks like or this is what a positive situation looks like. They don't know what it's going to be like.

So I think talking about it helps me in putting out more information then necessarily taking it in. Because I think more than anything else I've learned that NO situation is the same, I mean you might have some similarities but it's just so hard to find a good common thread through all of them. I guess you kind of draw little kernels of different stuff. And that was what was great about doing the different birthmom groups as kind of seeing how different people reacted to different stuff and different situations. And how their ongoing relationships are.

So there's no real kind of playbook out there for how to go about any of it. So that's what makes it really kind of challenging.

Laurel and her former boyfriend, Michael, get together with the adoptive family and their daughter about twice a year to spend time together. Laurel and Heather, the adoptive mother, communicate regularly exchanging photos and updates.

So she [adoptive mother] sends me a lot of little stories and whatnot about Kira. You know I always feel like all the things I hear about her and seeing her so happy – people ask me does that make you so sad? But for me it's just more so reassurance, it's like, okay, I know I made the right decision. She really happy, she's having so much fun and having a great childhood. So I love getting all the information.

APPENDIX H: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE: LIZ

Liz: birthmother, single mother at time of pregnancy and adoption

John: birthfather

Dakota: older daughter

Alayna: baby girl

Barb: adoption social worker

Russ and Elly: adoptive parents

At the time of her pregnancy and adoption experience in 2011-2012, Liz was in her early 20's and a single mother of a 2-year-old daughter, Dakota. She was working in a restaurant in Missouri, and barely making ends meet. She told me her story after recently being diagnosed with major depression and seeking treatment; she indicated that this realization has helped her understand more clearly why she chose to place her second baby for adoption.

Liz was working to keep herself and Dakota afloat when she started dating and became pregnant by a young man, John, who also worked in the food industry. Liz's initial reaction was frustration with herself for not making smarter choices and using protection. After telling John, she thought he might step up and help support the baby but after a series of disappointments when he didn't come through with an apartment deposit and learning that he already had at least three other children he didn't support, she realized that she was on her own.

This baby's father is not going to help me. Can I, I guess, mentally of course along with financially and physically do it all for two babies. I felt like sure I could have done it to a point but what would their quality of life have been? I mean Dakota and I were already in what you could call looking back a crisis situation. At that point, it clicked. He's not going to be there for us. He wasn't abusive or mean or a drug addict. He just was not going to be there for us physically, financially, any type of support that you will have to have to have a child and a family, he wasn't going to do it and I told him I'm considering adoption because I feel like it's going to be all on me and I know, I have enough self-awareness to know that I can't give her what she needs.

The idea of adoption started to percolate in Liz's mind a few months into the pregnancy, Liz was questioning the future of this unborn child, her toddler daughter and herself; she doubted the quality of life any of them would have and felt that all of them deserved better than just getting by.

Knowing I was going to have another child to care for and somewhere in my life, in my head, somebody put into me that we deserve better than just getting by and that's not how I was raised. She deserved better. Dakota deserves better. I deserve better. I had that in my mind for a long time and it took me a long time to even tell people I was pregnant

Liz started searching online for information about adoption, as abortion wasn't an option for her. Since this was unfamiliar territory for her, she also searched for things like, "how do I know if this adoption agency is legitimate or legal".

I looked at a few different places, different websites and stuff and then I wondered how do I know if these are legitimate and so I remember trying to look up – I don't even know what I looked for exactly but I probably just Googled that, how do I know if this adoption agency is legitimate or legal or whatever and so there's some accreditations that I looked for on this website and they were there.

After a few weeks of intermittent searching online, Liz made the call to an adoption agency late one night and spoke with a social worker, Barb, who was very nice and had the credentials she had researched about. She said the idea of adoption just felt right for her and things started to fall in place.

For me when I feel like something is right, I'll usually go with it and so I kind of felt like it was okay and then after calling and talking to her [social worker at adoption agency], she seemed really nice and really legitimate and they had whatever degrees and titles and stuff.

Barb sent her a large packet of information and forms to fill out; the questionnaires included information about herself, health, education, why she is choosing adoption, race and religious preferences of an adoptive family, and location preferences. Throughout the pregnancy and adoption event, Liz communicated with Barb via phone, text and email; they never met in person.

During the decision making process Liz talked with the people closest to her, her father who lived locally and Gail, her daughter's babysitter and good friend. They both indicated they would support whatever decision she made.

I remember sitting at Gail's kitchen table and I told her I was pregnant and I am sure I started crying and I told her I was going to put the baby up for adoption. I felt it was best for everybody and she told me flat out, she's like "I couldn't do it." She was like "I could never give my baby away" and she said "but if that's what you have to do, it's your decision, I trust you to do what's best and I'll support you" which is perfect. Yeah.

She also talked with her manager at work about her situation and found him comforting and supportive.

My manager at work was a really nice guy, really down to earth and he was a preacher but he was like younger and he didn't judge people. He was really I guess involved with people my age and so he knew crazy things everybody was doing and life I guess and which I needed to tell him because of work also but he was supportive also and he would kind of joke and kind of like rub my belly, not rub it but when it was bigger and be like "you're going to a good home" and stuff

like that or whatever, kind of things like that just trying to be supportive. Other than that I can't think of who else I talked to.

John, the baby's father, was not in favor of adoption and told Liz that he planned to get a lawyer to fight it; however he dropped out of communication around that time and never pursued any action or custody. Liz assumes he ultimately signed the termination of parental rights documents but isn't sure.

Barb with the adoption agency sent Liz a bundle of prospective adoptive family brochures – each a full-color catalog featuring biographical information about a couple, their home, their education, lifestyle and professional photographs. One profile caught Liz's attention and she zeroed in on the couple, Russ and Elly, as her choice for three primary reasons. First, the couple looked "too perfect" in the photos – Elly was blonde and beautiful, Russ was dark and handsome, and they lived by the beach in California. The second feature that struck her was that they had already adopted a little boy from Ethiopia. Liz's baby was going to be bi-racial, Liz is Caucasian and John, the father, is African-American; Liz thought the adoptive siblings, by sharing a bond of race, would develop a positive connection. Third, Russ and Elly talked a lot about the opportunities they wanted to provide for a child in their profile material, this struck a chord with Liz as she wished she could provide that.

So Barb set up a phone conference with Liz and the prospective parents, Elly and Russ.

They called me at seven o'clock on a Tuesday evening and my sister was there of course. She's always in my business. They had me on speakerphone and I don't really remember what we talked about. I mean I know Elly asked how I was feeling and they said that they were so happy that I'm even considering them and they kind of asked about Dakota [Liz's older daughter] a little bit and what was she doing and she was in bed and all this stuff. They asked a little bit about John. I'm like "he's not around, I don't know." And then at the end of the call, I remember Russ saying something like "I think you like us." Coming from these super professional people and well off people, wealthy I guess you could say and it was just not something – "so you like us," I'm like "yeah, I do."

Liz asked Barb for details on the adoption process and "how people do this." Specifically Liz wanted to know how open adoption works. So Barb gave her some ideas about potential arrangements like regular photos or letters and suggested a written contract between her and the adoptive couple.

It was one of those things I talked to the social worker first to ask her how do people do this. I mean I don't even know how people come to those arrangements or agreements unless it's like said I want closed and then that's easy to do I guess. But she kind of gave me some ideas. Some people, they ask for pictures twice a year or letters three times a year or updates or whatever and stuff like that and she said that we can write out a contract of what we want and I think we actually started to.

But once Liz and the prospective parents started communicating via phone and text they developed a connection and level of trust such that Elly even called Liz her friend. They decided to forgo any written agreement and let things develop more naturally; Liz told Elly that because it was all so hard and emotional that she wasn't sure what sort of schedule would work. They all wanted the adoption to be as open as possible and that sentiment has continued: Liz calls, emails, texts and Skypes with the family frequently. But Liz is upfront in recognizing that the adoptive couple holds the power in terms of ongoing contact:

We wanted it – which is really trusting I guess for both of us for her to tell me but I guess she does have powers. If I were making choices, she didn't want Alayna [daughter] to know about them, then Alayna would never know about them basically. I guess if I were a problem, I would not be in the picture I guess.

Elly and Russ flew into town the day before Liz was going to be induced for delivery. This was their first face-to-face meeting. Liz brought Dakota along to meet the couple at a hotel; they had brought lots of gifts for Dakota. The next morning Liz's father drove her to the hospital where they met Elly. Elly went through the labor and delivery with Liz and even cut the umbilical cord when Alayna was born. Russ and Elly's extended family all came to town to share in the experience and meet Liz.

After the birth and adoption, Russ and Elly wanted Liz to get some counseling so they paid for professional mental health services for her. Liz also attended a few adoption support group sessions, which is how she heard about this study.

Liz married a wonderful man, Kirk, about two years ago; they have a 6-month-old baby girl together. Dakota was too young to remember much about Liz's pregnancy and adoption, but Liz is thinking about how she will continue to talk with her about it as she gets older. Elly has sent Liz a few children's books on adoption to help with those conversations.

Liz has continued and steady communication with the adoptive family through text, phone calls, gift exchanges and visitation. Liz and Elly are purposely not connected on Facebook but Liz's father and sister are Facebook friends with Elly.

We wanted it to be as open as possible. If I wanted to call her right now, I could Skype and we could see her and we could talk to her and we email all the time and we text a little bit now. We were never friends on Facebook just because that was too much for me and because not everybody I was friends with on Facebook needed to know but she's friends on Facebook with my dad and my sister and my dad talks to Russ every now and then.

Recently Liz, Kirk, Dakota and their new baby spent a holiday weekend with Russ, Elly, Alayna, her brother through adoption, and their entire extended family. Liz expressed to me how sensitive and welcoming the large, multi-generational family was to her; she was particularly impressed with the thoughtful comment made by Elly's grandmother, "I think it's so neat you and Elly have this connection."

Since depression permeated her adoption experience, Liz reflected on a potential connection between mental health and adoption. She pointed out that it is common to hear generalizations about birthmothers – young, troubled, drug problems, etc. But she hadn't heard anything that might tie depression and other mental health concerns with a woman's decision to place a child for adoption.

I guess what I don't get is for me when I hear about birthmothers, you think young, drugs or trouble with the law and that kind of thing but I guess I have never heard and maybe it's just my ignorance or just not being involved with it very much... of mental illness and adoption.

Liz is very thoughtful in reflecting on her own unplanned pregnancy and decision to place her daughter for adoption: she was struggling to take care of herself through the challenges associated with low wages and single motherhood, she didn't have the resources or the time to get help for the depression and mental health issues she was experiencing. She says she knew her limits and felt things would not end well if she tried to raise a second child in that situation.

I don't have any regrets because I know if I had kept her, all of us would be living in a terrible situation. I would have snapped. I would have started drinking just to cope and I knew – maybe I didn't know it in my head or couldn't articulate it which I still kind of struggle with but that's just me, I felt that this wouldn't end well if I kept her. So I think the timing of this [interview] is really good because I have that clarity now where I can really explain if someone can stay with me and follow what I'm trying to explain, I can explain why.

APPENDIX I: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE: MAY

In 2007, May was 20 years old and facing some life complications. She had just entered a drug rehabilitation program when she found out she was pregnant. The news was unexpected and overwhelming; initially she was in shock and wanted to be alone to figure out how she would handle it. May had a hard time processing the news and even believing she was pregnant. A mentor at the rehab center encouraged May to share this news, "I really think you need to be sharing this with people. You shouldn't feel alone and your parents, they may not agree with your end decision, but I think that since you're in a place where you're vulnerable, this would be a good thing to ask for support for." Over the next week, she came to the realization that this was a really big decision for her and agreed with the counselor to reveal this information to her parents over the phone; they were upset but supportive. They told her they were glad that she invited them into the situation.

May went to Planned Parenthood to reconfirm the pregnancy, still not really believing this could be happening. In addition to confirming her pregnancy, they provided information on different options, how to get support if she decided to parent the child as well as a time frame if she decided to terminate the pregnancy. At the request of her mother she met with a counselor at a crisis pregnancy center within the same week. "That experience was traumatic," she reflected. They performed an ultrasound and told her the heart was beating and showed her images of aborted fetuses..."all these really disturbing things". Her mother apologized later indicating she had no idea how "extreme it would be".

During this time May struggled with overwhelming emotions of shame and embarrassment, she wanted the situation to go away. Time pressure was also a significant stressor; she felt like she needed to make a quick decision about the abortion option. After much internal processing, she framed her situation like this:

I felt I was at a place in my life where I didn't have a lot going on, and I could go through with the pregnancy. It might be a good process and do something for me to feel positive about, and I was going to see what happened.

May used the internet to look for information on adoption, learn some of the vocabulary and familiarize herself with the process. She recalls browsing through online adoption forums as an emotional experience even as she was still struggling to accept the reality of the situation. Reading the forum conversations surrounding adoption and birthmothers was upsetting but helped her process the situation. The forums she found were disappointingly shallow and seemingly inactive so she didn't initiate any questions or conversations through them.

Throughout most of her pregnancy, May stayed with a close friend and her family. She found it helpful to be away from her small hometown but kept in close contact with her own family.

The OB/GYN determined that May had a genetically related, high-risk pregnancy with the possibility of complications for the baby. The diagnosis and overload of medical information added several layers of complexity and stress to the situation: risk of miscarriage, angst about the health of the baby, and concerns about her future ability to have children. The diagnosis

information also raised a concern about the “adoptability” of her child; it might be difficult to find a family willing to commit to accepting a baby with health or developmental issues.

May’s mother researched adoption options and identified a local Christian agency. May started communicating with them via email and then met face-to-face with an agency social worker. At that point she felt fairly confident in moving forward with the adoption decision so she began looking at “picture books of families”. Prospective adoptive couples prepared professional-looking scrapbooks with information and photos about themselves (hobbies, parenting style, careers, education, home, pets, other children, etc.). She looked at about 10 different family books but felt it was something of a “toss-up” trying to choose. The high-risk nature of her pregnancy didn’t help in this part of the process, “I’m in this crappy situation, and people don’t even want to adopt my child if I want to move forward with it.”

May speaks highly of the adoption social worker throughout the process as she provided information, guidance and emotional support. Once May selected a couple from the portfolios, the social worker hosted a face-to-face meeting at her home. May had come back home to stay with her parents toward the end of her pregnancy and so her mother was also involved in meeting the adoptive couple. The couple expressed how grateful they felt to be selected but also conveyed their grief and anxiety related to a previous experience with another birthmother who had changed her mind about the adoption. This emotional information weighed heavily on May, “I will literally break these people’s hearts if I decide when I have the child that I don’t want to go through with it.”

May was in her eighth month of pregnancy before she met the adoptive couple and she has some regrets about feeling rushed to finalize plans. She found herself surrounded by religious people (her parents, the adoption agency, the adoptive couple) who assumed she was also religious. In fact she is not a fan of religion but felt things had already moved too far for her to change her mind and select a different, non-religious family. She was conflicted by the religious attitudes around her, praising her decision, as God’s will, giving the child to a family who will raise him with the same religion and values. She saw herself as a burden to people and wanted to make the situation right. She regrets not voicing her uncertainty:

I just wish that maybe if I had been able to build a relationship or gone about the process sooner, that I could have picked someone that I felt more comfortable with or that was just more like me or had similar interests that I could connect on them with because now I have this couple that I really have nothing in common with, and I’m trying to build a relationship with, other than the fact that they are raising the child that I gave up for adoption.

The lawyer involved in the adoption process advised May that she would need to contact the birthfather. This information brought on a new wave of overwhelming emotions and stress. May did not want to broach those conversations, as the potential fathers were not really part of her life. But the lawyer was adamant, warning that the birthfather could show up at some point and cause problems with the adoption. “I was just such a pushover during that experience, so yeah, I did it.”

The agency social worker helped May prepare for the birth of her son by mentally walking through the hospital experience and planning how she would like things to go.

I had to decide if I wanted them [adoptive couple] there for it or if I wanted them to wait. I was glad that I decided I don't want them there for it and I want a day before they come, so that was something that I'm really glad I did. That was hard for them, I think, which was a little weird for me because I was like, "Well it's hard for me." I think I literally blacked out. I don't remember going to the hospital. I was just like – I don't know. It was really scary.

May's parents were with her in the hospital and she remembers those couple of days as an emotional rollercoaster.

It was just a weird experience, yeah, but really good. It was a really happy – I felt really happy, yeah, and then after that, I felt terror because I was like, "Oh, my God. I love this child." I never felt this way about any person, you know? People say that, and it sounds corny, but it really is. You just feel euphoric.

The hospital nurses took extra care in making sure May could spend as much time as possible with her newborn son. She told them about the adoption situation and recalls, "they actually were crying whenever it happened, so that was nice because I felt people were in it with me."

After the birth, emotions overwhelmed May's mother, she had a difficult time and didn't want her to go through with the adoption. Ultimately she was too distraught and had to go home but May's father was able to deal with the emotional tension and stayed. During this time the social worker sensed that May was struggling with the decision and asked May if they needed to talk. May responded, "I don't know, leave me alone."

Eventually the adoptive parents came in, and I felt angry with them a little bit, but I think in the end, I decided this is what – I decided and, right now, I have a lot of emotions. Those will become easier to deal with as time goes on.

Grappling with these emotions, May quickly signed the relinquishment papers that the lawyer brought to the hospital. She doesn't recall receiving copies of any of the relinquishment papers but assumes the adoptive family would share those if she asked. The adoption was finalized a week later through the court system. May had picked out a name for her son and regrets not discussing that with the adoptive family beforehand:

I named him and I wished I would have talked to them about that because they immediately changed his name. I was like that hurt my feelings because I was thinking of this person. They knew, but they were like, "This is our family name. We want to name him this." Yeah, but it's interesting because I have a birth certificate or I have a copy or something, but it's his first name [that she gave him]. I always wonder how he'll feel about that later, he has two different names.

Another *ripple* in the story relates to the birthfather and his family. May and the birthfather (confirmed through blood test) didn't really have a relationship, she hadn't told him she was pregnant, so she was initially hesitant to broach the subject. But at the insistence of the adoption agency lawyer she did communicate with him and he signed the relinquishment papers. She describes what happened with the birthfather after the baby was born and placed for adoption:

He had a really hard time understanding what was happening because I think I let him know really far down the road, so his parents were super mad. They thought I manipulated him and didn't tell him what the [adoption] contract said, and they wanted to see the contract, and they saw the contract. I was like, "He's over 18, he can make that decision." They were like, "Well, we're going to sue you. We want custody. We want to raise the child." I was like, "We don't even know each other, and we've never met; just have some sympathy for what we're going through or whatever." That was scary because I was like, "Can they do that?" but they can't. They would lose.

May's son is 7 years old now and she has an open relationship with the adoptive family. The couple divorced a few years ago and the son lives primarily with the father and his new wife. May travels to see them occasionally and keeps in contact via phone, text, social media and gift exchanges. May's parents and her brother are also involved with the child's life through visits and social media. But the complicated emotions surrounding the divorce of the adoptive couple added new and unexpected challenges and stressors to the mix. May must navigate the former couple's custody issues and communication problems in order to maintain a connection with her son, not something she anticipated in the initial adoption plan.

Following the adoption event, May described reading books on grief as therapeutic. But she points out a significant contrast between communicating grief attached to loss through a death and grief surrounding loss through adoption. People are familiar with grief following the death of a loved one, but the experience of a birthparent grieving the loss of a child is unfamiliar, unusual and perhaps awkward to confront in everyday life.

I actually ended up reading a lot of books on if somebody dies close to you because I felt the most...I felt the most comforted by those texts afterwards. I don't feel I have to read that kind of text anymore, but in the beginning, yeah, it was like how do you deal with someone being there and then not being there? It's not something you can really talk about...if your dad dies you can say, "Oh, I lost a family member or something" but you don't want to be putting this [loss through adoption] on people...because it's just always an awkward reaction.

May found it difficult to mesh her role as a birthmother with new relationships; for example how does she talk about something that is so important to her with a casual date? Now May enjoys a supportive relationship with a long-term boyfriend; she feels comfortable talking with him more in depth about her experience with adoption and together they discuss what future interactions with her son might look like.

APPENDIX J: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE: ROBIN

Sharon: adoption agency social worker

Warren and Gigi: adoptive parents

Corey and Collin: twin boys

In 2011 Robin was in the midst of a personal crisis; she had just entered a mental health in-patient facility suffering from severe depression. At 30 years old, she had recently broken off with her boyfriend and was struggling financially and emotionally with her life. In the midst of treatment at the facility, her doctor confronted her with some completely unexpected and shocking information: she was 3 months pregnant.

The only reason I found out is they were doing medicine changes, and they did a blood test. They said, "Well --" The doctor came in my room, and I was half asleep, and he says, "Ms., I need to tell you this" and he said, "Do you have a boyfriend or are you intimate?" I thought, why is he asking? "No, not anymore. We just broke up." He said, "Well, you're pregnant." I was like, "No, I'm not. You're going to have to --" and I asked for another blood test to be done the next day and they did. I was in denial and so I finally -- a couple of weeks after I got out of the hospital, it hit me that it's true and yeah.

I was totally in shock for about three weeks. I just couldn't sleep, and I was processing, okay, I'm pregnant.

Initially Robin was angry, angry at the doctor for the unceremonious manner he delivered the news, mad at herself, but mostly frustrated with the whole situation. Disbelief and denial turned into information processing; once she was back home she started journaling about her thoughts and emotions. She credits the act of journaling as being very therapeutic in the situation and helping her come to terms with reality. Robin started reading everything she could find on pregnancy. She collected informational pamphlets and brochures from a crisis pregnancy center, her doctor and a local women's center.

After Robin was released from the mental health facility she went to live with an aunt; she had lost her job and could no longer afford her apartment. She opened up to her family and friends about the pregnancy wanting to hear what other people thought she should do. Although her parents had divorced years before, Robin maintained close relations with relatives on each side. Robin devoted a substantial amount of time and effort in coming to terms with the pregnancy by gathering and immersing herself in information on pregnancy, journaling, reaching out to family and friends and listening to what they had to say.

I just wanted someone else's opinion, so I talked to family and also friends about opinion-based. What do you think I should do, and how do you think I should even start thinking about this stuff? I talked to mostly my mom's side of the family, but they're very emotionally driven. My dad's side is great about being calm and being rationale in a crisis, so I spent a lot of time with dad's family, so that was really good. Me and dad would have lunch once a week, and we would

talk, and because my parents divorced when I was so young, that's so precious to me; that we got a lot closer during this time.

Robin received all sorts of input and information from her family and friends, varying offers of support and thoughts on what she could do. Although overwhelmingly positive in their trust that she would make the best decision, one friend bristled when the idea of adoption came up:

I had one friend who was very just angry. She said, "How could you do that?" She said, "I would... how could you give away your child?" she said it in those words. She said, "I've waited ten years to have a baby, and I finally did," and it was a personal thing for her. I've let that go since, but she was the only friend who actually acted like that. Everybody else was, "You know what? I'm praying for you. You'll do the right thing. It will be okay. Whatever you need, I'm here." They were so supportive so yeah, a big range of different kinds of support.

As she began prenatal care, Robin received more startling news about her pregnancy – she was having twins. This information factored heavily into her decision-making process.

I think, to be honest, had it been one baby, my decision might have been different. I think there's a huge chance it would have been different, but twins. I was a nanny for twin girls several years ago, and I know the level of stress as a caregiver, so I can't imagine being a parent, a single parent to twins. I just -- yeah, so that had a lot to do with my decision.

The idea of adoption was familiar to Robin because her father and stepmother had adopted a baby several years before. Of course Robin was intimately familiar with that situation and had watched the process unfold. Being so closely involved with the adoption of her half-brother, Robin was more familiar with the details, process and vocabulary surrounding adoption than most. She reflected strongly on the positive impact that adoption had on her family's life and how it undoubtedly served as a model for how it might work in her own situation

I felt it was so meant to be because my dad remarried -- they wanted to adopt a child, and they did several years ago. Nathan is my half-brother, and he's awesome, and I know his story. I know he came from Colorado. They were there for the birth. They were there for the whole process, writing the papers, and brought him home two weeks old and everything. I've just seen what a blessing that is in so many ways, and Nathan was told at age five that he was adopted. They got some children's book and showed him, "This is what happened, and you have two different families. If you ever want to meet them one day, you can." Once a year, he'll send a letter and a picture to the family but it's mostly -- I guess it's semi-open, but it's not really open. When he's 18, I think he might want to go meet them if they're open to it, so yeah. That's always impacted me just to see the beauty of that.

Robin points out the important role her Christian faith plays in her life, the trust and assurance she places in God and prayer. In our interview she described her plea for God's intervention in

her life and how she made some meaning and framed this unintended pregnancy through a positive lens.

I'll be honest just to talk about my faith for just a second. I know it's not research-based or whatever but...I'd been praying when I was going through this crisis before I found out that I was pregnant, and I said, "I need a sign, okay? Shake me up, do something to get my attention," and then I found out I was pregnant. I said, "Okay, so use this crisis for a good purpose, just let it be positive," and it has. It has been hard. It has been emotional, but it has been really life changing for me and for other people so that's all.

As Robin started thinking more concretely about adoption, her Aunt offered a connection with her boss, Delia, who had been adopted as an infant. Delia emailed Robin directly describing how much she appreciated the life and family she had gained through adoption. She suggested Robin contact the same North Carolina adoption agency that had facilitated her own adoption. So Robin looked up the agency online and found their website. After reading through all the material and positive reviews she contacted the agency. Sharon, a social worker from the agency came to her home for a meeting with Robin, her mother, and her Aunts. She gave them an overview of the services the agency provided, details on the adoption process, and left some brochures and profiles of couples wanting to adopt.

Moving down the path toward adoption, Robin had to make some decisions about the process – whether she felt comfortable with this agency or if she wanted to explore some of the other options on the table. Family and friends offered some suggestions such as a private attorney or personal connections with people wanting to adopt a child. Robin weighed those options but was drawn by the advertised services provided by the agency such as free counseling. She felt these services would really help her cope with the crisis and more effectively manage her own well-being.

What changed my mind or made a difference was the fact that they [adoption agency] offered post-adoption counseling, and they told me in writing, they told me verbally, but that never happened, and I'm very -- to this day, I'm very mad about that. I think I felt a lot of pressure from them honestly to choose. I think that was emotionally based for me to go with that option. I had other people saying, "Maybe you want a private attorney" and I weighed those choices, but I finally decided.

Fallout over the failure of the adoption agency to come through with the support services clearly had an impact on Robin's experience surrounding the adoption event. She vividly recalls the additional stress caused by the breakdown in support; she describes these as "broken promises" and feels they undermined her ability to cope and recover in the aftermath of the adoption.

I have spoken to the director [of adoption agency] -- and she said that she's sorry for any confusion, but they had some staffing changes, which I get that. I do. It happens, but they should still make some way. No birthmother should ever go through this without counseling ever, but she did tell me she was truly sorry and

that she gave me other leads, but they all -- I can't afford counseling out-of-pocket. I couldn't then. I can't now and so anyway, the counseling part fell through.

Negative pushback on the adoption idea from the birthfather further complicated the situation and added another significant layer of stress. Robin and the birthfather had broken up about a month before she entered the mental health facility and found out she was pregnant. It was an amicable breakup and she felt comfortable telling him about the pregnancy. Although he was initially supportive and sympathetic to the situation, he quickly voiced his strong opposition to her intended decision to place the twins for adoption. This unexpected reaction caught her off-guard and upset her further. Robin was thankful that her father stepped in to calm things down; he talked with the birthfather and relayed the very real challenges of being a single father based upon his own experience.

After I told him, he was like, "Yeah, I want to be supportive, but we do need to weigh all the options." He said, "What if my family could help out, and blah, blah, blah?" I said, "I don't know about that. I don't think that would be the best thing." He calls me maybe a few days later and just exploded, "What kind of person are you? You're evil and when they grow up, I'm going to tell them that you were the one who wanted this and not me." He was just letting me have it, and I said, "I'm pregnant. I need to take care of myself, and I don't need to hear this from you," and I hung up on him. Basically, it took my dad, a phone call and visit, to convince him to please sign these papers. He was going back and forth, "Do I sign them or not?" Dad said, "Well, I'll give him a call and I'll talk to him." He said, "As a single dad, I know how hard it is, and he doesn't want that for his family if he can help it." My dad was the one who talked him into signing the papers, so yeah.

Robin was searching out and absorbing all sorts of information relating to adoption, in particular open adoption. Not only did the material help inform and shape her understanding of her options but helped comfort and quell some of the anxiety and uncertainty she was feeling.

I got comfort from reading articles. I just started reading books and books, and I love to read, so I absorbed all that and reading things like this...[information sheet from adoption agency]. Those tell you about open versus closed adoption, so I got a lot of my information there and from the social worker. I have a piece -- Adam Pertman is an adoption advocate. He's adopted as well. I've read so many. I've read so many articles, the Adoption Congress book. I borrowed a few books from them [adoption agency].

Among the many things she was reading, Robin was looking at the prospective adoptive parent profiles supplied through the adoption agency. She describes what made one particular couple, Warren and Gigi, stand out to her:

I read their profile and they live here in North Carolina, pretty close actually. That was the number one reason I went with them, and they looked just simply

happy. They had an active lifestyle. They traveled a lot. They're successful in both of their jobs. They had faith, and all those values meant so much to me so that was... They said a boy or a girl. Twins would be fine. What else did they say? Open adoption, regular visits, things like that. Yeah, so that was it in a nutshell. I saw their photo.

So Robin let Sharon, the social worker, know she was interested in this couple and she set up a meeting with the couple at the agency.

The social worker was the mediator between myself and the family and finally, we all met, Sharon, myself and the family. We all met at [the agency building], and we had a good one-hour meeting or so. I was so nervous, and I know they were, too, but we laughed a lot. Warren, the dad, is very -- he's just funny, and he has that way of making people feel at ease. His wife is a lot more quiet but yeah, it was a good first meeting. I just said, "Do you want to keep in touch? Do you want to talk about possibilities and maybe --?" They invited me to lunch I think the following week so from there on, we had lunch every week. Lunch or dinner almost every single week, and they were comfortable with me bringing my dad or my mom, my aunt, whoever.

They got to know each other as time moved forward; Robin was feeling a sense of peace about things.

I just said, "I think I'm going to choose this family because they seem to want to be involved, and they know, most importantly, I wanted a family that wanted an open adoption for the children's sake and for the health and growth of the child."

But Robin's personal situation was still tenuous. She was struggling financially with health insurance, transportation to doctor's appointments, having to rely on others for everything; even getting to the lunch meetings with the Warren and Gigi was a challenge. The information on the adoption agency brochures clearly indicated that birthmother support was provided so Robin broached the topic with Sharon.

I just came out and explained to Sharon that I lost my job. I'm living at my aunt's. I'm unemployed, and I need some support, and I wondered if that was an option through the agency? I stated it that way and then she explained about it's a nonprofit, and she would try but she can't promise, and then I said is the family open to it?

That, I feel like, was not approached at all in a delicate way, and that also made me mad because I don't ever -- I definitely wanted it to be a temporary possibility. I didn't want them to look at me any differently or to sway their decision in any way and she just didn't -- I think she was so frazzled and so stressed with her career, quite honestly, that she didn't have the right words to ask them.

They stepped back for a little, short period of time, and they said, “We need to talk and think about this,” and then they came back and saying, “No, that’s not what we had in mind. We’ll definitely support her emotionally and things like that, but we’re not going to be able to help financially.” I just think if you advertise or you say that you provide these services, then do it in the correct way and be sensitive to everybody involved in the triad of adoption.

These awkward communication mishaps put a damper on things. Robin recalls that ultimately the agency provided her with a few fuel cards to travel back and forth from her home to meet the adoptive couple on a regular basis but she was deeply hurt by the lack of support and the way things were handled. Moving forward through the end of her pregnancy Robin recounts another difficult and emotional exchange through the agency with the adoptive couple. She wanted to be involved to some extent with naming the twin boys.

That was another one of those awkward things. I think I had it all in the same email written out to Sharon. One of the things was...actually I had two concerns; well, really three, counseling or any expenses that would be covered, if any, and then also the names, like would it be an option? Yeah, they were my three concerns, and they said, no, they would really prefer to name them. I just felt like can I give them -- I think I asked if I could give them a middle name or something, a compromise, and they were like, “We really want family names, sorry.” That hurt but they are the parents.

Robin worked through these emotional ups and downs with the support of her family and friends. Because she was having twins Robin’s pregnancy was considered high-risk so she was on bed rest for the last month. She recalls the birth experience with competing emotions: it was hard but she felt cradled in love.

I had this euphoric -- I guess it was hormones. I don’t know but this okay, everything is going to be fine, and everything is going to work out fine. My labor was very easy, thankfully. The recovery was great, easy. I had a doula, a good friend of mine in the hospital, and she was great. I had my doula, my best friend, my sister and mom all in the room with me, and that I’m telling you, like, oh, there was incredible love in that room helping me through that.

One of the babies required specialized care so was immediately transferred to another hospital. But she cherishes the time she spent with the other newborn at the hospital.

Corey was with me, and we bonded a little bit. I look back, and I wouldn’t take it back for anything, but I’ll still have dreams, and remembering his little face, and what it felt like to hold him, and change him, and feed him. He would be with the nurses in the nursery and then he would come to my room off and on for about two days, three days, until I went home and yeah. I bonded with him, but I didn’t even get to see Collin until after, yeah.

The adoptive parents were at the hospital as well and brought Robin flowers. They took turns holding and caring for Corey and then Warren and/or Gigi would go to the other hospital to see Collin. While she was still in the hospital, Sharon brought the relinquishment paperwork to Robin. She had to do a lot of internal processing and self-talk to work up the nerve to sign the adoption papers.

I remember when Sharon brought me the papers and said, “Okay, I’m going to give you the papers now, but you still have seven days to think about it,” and that was rough.

Nothing will ever prepare you. I learned from the adoption agency that you’re given seven days in North Carolina to sign the papers and I thought, “Who made that stupid law? Why don’t they give you more like two weeks, three weeks? I don’t understand. Those laws are archaic. That’s not enough time to process” but anyway, yeah. I signed the papers and then the family would visit me in the room with Corey and brought me beautiful flowers and they were great, but it just was still so hard.

Leaving the hospital without her baby boys was extremely emotional. Robin mentally walked through the decision she was making and focused her motivation on what she felt was best for the children. She framed her identity as *mother* in terms of loving her children enough to make this difficult decision; she would be a “different way”.

I walked down the hallway, and I just felt so empty like, “I’m leaving him here? What is wrong with me?” It was the longest walk back to my car or I don’t know. I think I was picked up. I can’t remember. Yeah, I was picked up. I was picked up, but I just said, “I don’t know if I can do this.” I immediately thought, “No, Robin, if you’re a mother, you will always be a mother until the end of eternity.” Mothers are supposed to love their children and make the best choices for them, so you are a mother just in a different way. I told myself, “Think about them. Think about how it would traumatize them if you ever tried to take your decision back or take it to court, not that you would win.” I said, “Robin, just think about the consequences for the kids. It’s all about them and their feelings.”

In the weeks following the adoption event, Robin received periodic calls and emails from Sharon checking up on her. Warren and Gigi were very busy with the infant twins; Collin left the hospital several weeks later and both the boys are healthy. As established in their contact agreement, Robin spoke with Warren and Gigi when the boys were 3 months old. The adoptive parents send her periodic photos and cards and updates, all of which Robin keeps as treasures.

The adoptive family and Robin drafted a contact agreement delineating the amount and type of ongoing communication they wanted for their relationship. It specifies regular visitation and photo exchange. For the most part this has worked well for Robin although she notes that life is busy and neither of them follows the contract in every detail. She is also hyper aware of the potential delicacy of relationships in an open adoption and the timidity and fear that birthparents often feel, afraid to overstep boundaries and risk communication being cut by the adoptive family.

It's a contract but it's informal. It's not legally binding, unfortunately, but it was just saying we would have visits every three months, phone calls periodically as decided by both people, both parties, and that was about it. We haven't met every quarter. We haven't met every three months, but it's been pretty close. We would at least call each other when life gets busy and sometimes it is just that life gets busy.

I always want to leave it up to them how we contact each other because I don't want to be too intrusive. I still, to this day, I think every birth mother in an open adoption always feels, or at least for the first five to six years, like, "Is it really okay? Is it really okay that I call?" Sometimes, I sense a lot of stress in the family, and I know they've got a lot going on, so I've just been careful with their boundaries.

During our interview, Robin shared some of the material items relating to the adoption experience and her ongoing relationship with the adoptive family and twin boys. She carefully keeps many mementos, documents, journals and photographs. These items hold memories and deep meaning for her but she generally keeps them put away. However she is considering putting some of them together in a sort of scrapbook format when she feels ready.

I really want to make some way to compile the information in a really nice way, a really pretty way, whether a scrapbook or something like that because I have a lot of cards and pictures and things that I want to -- I've never felt I could display it for whatever reason. Every time I try to put up a picture, I would just cry and I would just -- but then I felt guilty for keeping them in this bag, so you're torn, but I think it's almost time. I think it would be healthy for me to make a memory book and keep the information that way.

The birthfather has been involved with the family to a very limited extent. Robin thinks he had one or two visits with the boys at the agency. And she sends pictures and updates to his mother and grandmother.

Robin is generally comfortable talking about her adoption experience and twin boys but points out the delicate nature of casual conversations about kids, how they can spark an emotional reaction in herself.

All of my friends know because I'm a naturally open person, but I've definitely learned how to control that when someone asks you, "Do you have kids?" Sometimes, you want to say yes, and sometimes it almost could become emotional, but I can keep it...I just don't go there, it's just easier not to.

Based upon her own experience with adoption, Robin has three strong recommendations: 1) provide extensive and more formal information for both birthparents and adoptive parents on navigating the landscape of open adoption; 2) change legislation to enforce open adoption contact agreements; 3) guaranteed, free, and high-quality pre and post placement counseling for birthmothers.

I think birth parents and adoptive parents could use some kind of curriculum or book or some kind of guide that's some kind of help because there are tough conversations that you don't really know how to start. You don't want to hurt anyone's feelings because there are three different points of views going on. I think that that curriculum could be a really good thing for the future. For birth parents and adoptive families -- basically, how to navigate the adoption process, if it's going to be open. How often should we communicate? How do we follow through with it and implement it so that it's consistent? How do we talk about feelings? How do we talk about boundaries?

I wish there was a way for open adoption visits to be enforced. I don't know if that sounds too militant or whatever, but I think I'm partly at fault in my situation for not reaching out more, and they're partly at fault as well because we just get so busy. I think it's important to the kids to be consistent and to say, "Well, if it's every three months, then we need documentation or something."

I feel there should be legislation about counseling. I think every birth mom needs it, for sure. That should be enforced; counseling is the number one thing.

Robin feels much more in control and happy with her life these days; she finds her job in social services personally rewarding and is currently enrolled in graduate school pursuing a career in social work. She plans to work in the area of adoption and wants to use what she learned through her own experience to help other women. She enjoys spending time with her boyfriend who is deeply supportive of her ongoing relationship with her boys and adoptive family. Robin is active in adoption support groups and feels these opportunities to share and engage with other people whose lives have been impacted by adoption are extremely important in the long-term coping process.

APPENDIX K: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE: STELLA

Stella: birthmother

Jason: birthfather

Analise: baby girl

Stella was a 16-year-old high school student, living at home with her family in Alaska in 2011. After dating her boyfriend, Jason, for a few months, she discovered she was pregnant. Initially she was afraid to tell her mother, as she knew this conflicted with the religious practices and attitudes of her home. Stella confided primarily in her boyfriend at first but then word leaked out through a phone call from the church bishop to her mother.

I grew up in a Mormon family so it was not okay so I was kind of scared to tell my mom and then there was a whole bunch of like family stuff that happened and my stepsister ended up telling her mom and her mom told our bishop at our church and so the bishop called and left a message on my mom's phone saying that there was talk about me being pregnant. My mom found out in a really not good way.

Because of their young age and lack of financial stability, Stella felt it was not the right time for them to raise a child. The idea of adoption originated with Stella's mother who collected information about the process through her local Mormon Church and affiliated adoption agency.

We were still living with our parents in high school. I didn't want to be able to not buy diapers and buy what I needed to buy so I just knew that it wasn't the right time I guess for us and I never really thought about adoption because I didn't know anything about it but my mom had brought it up and through my mom's church, they have like an adoption agency and so we went through them and honestly I didn't really talk to anyone. They kind of did like the legal stuff and that was about it.

The adoption agency gave Stella and Jason access to a website where prospective adoptive couples offered descriptions of themselves, their lifestyles, their homes and photos. Looking through the prospective adoption families, Stella and Jason felt an immediate connection to one couple in particular because they looked so nice and had similar interests. After selecting the couple, Stella began communicating with them directly about 6 months into the pregnancy. Stella and the adoptive mother communicated via phone and text almost daily for the duration of her pregnancy. During this communication, the prospective parents expressed some anxiety and concern about Stella actually going through with the adoption.

We emailed and texted them back and forth all the time just like getting to know each other and she [adoptive mother] was very skeptical during the whole thing just because literally right before I had emailed them, they had one girl like back out and my daughter's mom, she physically can't have kids and so the whole time she was like "are you sure you want to do this? I just want to make sure. Are you positive?"

Although this particular layer of information was stressful for Stella, she learned a lot about adoption and what an open adoption might look like from the couple as they had already adopted one child. Stella's mother spearheaded the information gathering process initially and the adoption agency provided all the information on the formal and legal process. Reflecting back on the experience, Stella comments that because of her young age, she relied on her mother, the agency social workers and the adoptive parents to help walk her through the adoption process.

Even to this day, I still don't know all that goes into it just because I mean I was sixteen so my mom pretty much did all that stuff. I mean she was mine so I had to sign the papers but I didn't know what any of it really meant.

Stella talked about how little she knew about adoption at that point in her life. She commented on how uncommon it is to hear about adoption in everyday life and how easily misinformation is spread even unintentionally. She also expressed frustration with the secrecy and shame surrounding adoption even reflected in her own family.

I have an aunt that was adopted and that's all I knew about it. I didn't – I mean I knew people like got adopted because when I grew up, we had a girl that was at our school and her whole family was adopted from Russia and then there was another family that all of them were adopted – I don't remember from where but I always thought oh okay, you adopt people from different countries. I never really thought in America you do that which sounds weird but at the same time, it's not really – a lot of people don't talk about it. It's always kind of in that secretive thing because even with my family, my mom kept it a secret from like everyone and we ended up getting in a few fights about it just because I was like okay, it happened. You can't just ignore it.

In addition to her mother and the adoption agency social workers, Stella remembers some less likely sources of support and information. During her pregnancy Stella attended a public school for teen moms that offered special classes and services for new and soon-to-be mothers. Stella was their first student to be making an adoption plan so they made a concerted effort to bring in relevant information. She thrived in this environment, the academic support she received allowed her to excel in her coursework and graduate high school early. The midwife supporting Stella was also new to adoption; she made special arrangements in scheduling appointments and pre-planning the date of delivery in order to be a consistent presence throughout the pregnancy. She and Stella are still in communication largely because this was the first experience with adoption for both of them.

Stella used the internet to search for information about adoption to a limited extent.

I don't know so much about the process but like whenever me and my mom would talk, I would look up different words that she would say like I didn't know what an open adoption was versus a closed adoption and so I would Google stuff like that but I mean during the whole thing, I wasn't really too worried about or wanting to know anything about the whole process just because I mean I was sixteen. I don't really care about the legal stuff. I just know that we're giving all

of our rights away so she won't be ours. No, it was mostly just like words that she would say and I'm like, "what is that?" - but I mean that was real helpful.

Stella reflected on her relationship with Jason during the pregnancy and his part in the adoption decision.

Honestly he just had to sign stuff during the delivery thing because we got pregnant three months after dating...we knew we were doing this [adoption] so he didn't want to get super attached and so he kind of let me do my own thing. Honestly I don't think he went to any of the doctor's appointments but like if I had to talk to him about anything, he would talk to me. I just don't think that he wanted to get attached. I mean he was there for the delivery but all the other stuff he wasn't really there for.

The adoptive couple flew to Alaska to be at the hospital when Stella's daughter was born. Stella spent one night with the baby in the hospital and then she and Jason signed the papers relinquishing their parental rights and the couple took the baby home with them. The adoptive couple named the baby Analise but Stella was able to pick the baby's middle name.

Stella is comfortable and confident with the adoption decision she and Jason made for their daughter. She wanted Analise to have a stable and loving home and because of the open nature of the adoption with the family, she is able to witness and participate in the life of her daughter. Immediately following the adoption, the adoptive mother set up a private online blog through which she continues to share photos and updates with Stella and her family. Around Analise's first birthday, Stella, Jason and a few family members went to visit the family at their home.

I always just pictured her like being able to have everything that she wants and being with someone that they were financially stable and then with the people we picked, it went way past what I could even ask for. I mean her mom is a stay-at-home mom. They travel all the time. She has everything she could want so I don't know. Any like sad feelings or anything I had literally went out the window whenever I saw her [Analise] at her house playing with her toys and being with her family. It all went away.

Stella married Jason a few years after the birth and adoption; she says they grew up fast and now find themselves hanging out with older and more mature people now. She stays in close communication with the adoptive family and keeps Analise's artwork on the fridge. She is occasionally conflicted about how to include her adoption story in everyday conversation:

If people are like oh, do you have children? I'm like "well not exactly" and like I'll tell it and it is kind of I know the story so it's like straight to the point. I don't really tell a lot of details. I mean unless people ask.

Reflecting on her own experience with adoption, Stella feels strongly that every situation is different and that it would be difficult to identify many/any generalizations or recommendations that would support women considering adoption. Although she doesn't actively participate in

online conversations Stella monitors several online adoption forums and has read many birthmother stories. She remembers vividly the emotion rollercoaster she experienced throughout the information gathering and decision making process and recognizes the importance of both timing and understanding yourself.

I just feel like every story is different and that really the only thing I could say is that just make sure that that's what you want or that's what you want for this child because there are the times when people do it and they literally regret it to no end. Whenever I was in labor and delivery, actually I was in labor and I had this nurse and apparently so many years ago, she had placed her son or daughter for adoption and the whole time I was in labor, she was trying to talk me out of it and it got so bad, my husband doesn't be rude to people or anything but he should have told her to leave and I needed a new nurse. I would never tell someone that especially when they're hours away from doing it. If you're going to try to just make sure someone is for sure about it, do that whenever they're pregnant or just found out or are weighing all the options. Don't do it when they're in labor.

APPENDIX L: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE: JENNY

Jenny: birthmother

Sylvie: pregnancy counselor and adoption social worker

Taylor and Trent: twin boys

In her early 30's, Jenny was a stay-at-home mom to four kids in rural Michigan in 2013 when she separated from her husband and had a brief affair. The resulting pregnancy added to the stress she was already experiencing in her life. She felt abandoned and conflicted; the biological father made it clear he wanted nothing to do with the situation and her husband was angry about the affair. On her own, suddenly Jenny found herself working full-time to support her children and struggling to envision how she could manage with two more babies (she was pregnant with twins). Abortion was not an option for her. In talking with her regular counselor, Jenny tried out the idea of adoption; the counselor had a connection with a local pregnancy support agency so Jenny met with a social worker there.

Jenny quickly developed a trusting relationship with Sylvie the pregnancy counselor; she appreciated the non-judgmental attitude of Sylvie and her willingness to support whatever decision she wanted to make. Throughout her pregnancy Jenny wavered between parenting the twins and placing them for adoption.

I didn't know if I was emotionally strong enough to even do that [relinquish for adoption] and so I had decided I might just try to parent these babies. So I told Sylvie that and she went right to trying to help me figure out a way to parent them. She didn't go... "well, if you're not doing adoption, I'm not talking to you anymore". She was great and wonderful and stayed in contact with me all the time

Toward the end of her pregnancy Jenny reassessed her situation and after much thought decided adoption would be the better choice for the twins. She loved being a mother but felt at this point in her life, all of her children would ultimately suffer if she tried to manage six kids. She preferred to take on the emotional impact of relinquishment if it meant the twins and her other children would be better taken care of. Jenny reflects that she did not come to this decision lightly; she spent countless hours exploring and envisioning every option and route she could think of.

There was no possible way I could keep them and them not suffer – the kids I already had and the twins. Every single road that I went down, there was no way that they were not going to suffer in some way emotionally – not physically, not money, but emotionally. And I'm not going to do that to my children. I'd rather take all the pain and all the suffering in order for my children to be happy.

Jenny likened the situation to the Biblical story of King Solomon and the two mothers (1 Kings 3:16-28 King James Bible). Two women gave birth on the same day, one of the babies died during the night and both women claimed the surviving child was hers. When brought before King Solomon to decide the fate of the child, Solomon commanded the baby be cut in two, one half for each woman. One woman quickly agreed to give the child to the other woman rather

than kill the baby, the other woman agreed with the split. Based upon the first woman's compassionate sentiment to give up the child to the other woman, King Solomon determined that she was the "real" mother indeed. For Jenny, although a decision to relinquish the twins to adoption was made with anguish and pain, she felt it would be best for the children.

The decision to place the twins for adoption was not welcomed by everyone; Jenny recalls the judgmental and hurtful reactions by some family and friends. These painful responses came in person, on social media and in behind-her-back whispers.

But the adoption has taught me a lot. If people can't be there for me, then I don't need them. I don't hide anything, it's not like it was some big secret – that I cheated on my significant other and that I got pregnant with twins. I owned up to what I did because it was a true mistake, it was not something I planned to do. And so I did what I had to do to take care of it.

Jenny credits her life experiences as a big influence in her decision-making, "I had a better understanding of life. I've been through a lot of different and traumatic things in my life and I didn't want my kids to go through that too." With that sentiment, Jenny started to formulate what she wanted for the adoption. Most of the information she considered came from Sylvie through the adoption agency. She recalls Sylvie going through exploratory conversations with her to sift through options and possibilities related to the adoption process. Jenny wanted to talk with another birthmother who had been through the relinquishment experience. Sylvie set up that opportunity and Jenny found the conversation very helpful. Jenny did some online searching herself, primarily checking on the legitimacy of the adoption agency and for legal information on the adoption process.

I did get online a few times just to look up the legal part of it. Just to see if there was a time frame, like how long I had if I wanted to change my mind after I signed papers. To see if I was even legally allowed to do that. And then I did research to find out what rights the biological father had. Like what are my rights if he really wanted to stop the adoption – could he? Of course I stuck with the .gov and .org websites that tend to be a little more reliable.

But outside of these particular information searches, Jenny wanted to insulate herself to a certain degree in order to process and assure herself that she was making her own decision.

I kind of stayed off-line for quite some time because I wanted to make this decision on my own. I didn't want to be forced or coerced or anyone telling me what to do and what not to do. So I stayed off-line for a while.

Sylvie presented Jenny with several brochures/information sheets describing families who wanted to adopt and also met her criteria of living locally and wanting an open adoption. Jenny was drawn to a couple that already had a few children but was looking to expand their family through open adoption. After meeting the couple in person she knew that they were right, "we just clicked". Jenny believed that because the adoptive mother already had kids of her own, she would be more empathetic to what Jenny would go through emotionally. She wanted to let them

know that she had chosen them in a special way; typically these conversations are mediated by social workers but Jenny wanted to make a personal connection and tell them herself. This meeting was extremely meaningful and memorable for Jenny:

I knew part of what was going to bring me around and keep me on a good side of this instead of going very negative. I knew that I needed to see their joy. That was what was going to help me through the hard times, was to remember how happy I made them.

This meeting launched a very close relationship between Jenny and the adoptive family. She remains very close to and emotionally supported by the adoptive mother. Jenny knows her adoption situation is somewhat unusual in how open everything is. Sylvie has also made comments to that effect. Jenny regrets not making the decision earlier so she and the adoptive mother could have developed their relationship even sooner.

I have an open adoption so I see the twins quite frequently; my other kids, my other four kids that I have, see them quite frequently. I talk to the adoptive mom all the time and we text back and forth. They live only about 10 minutes away from me. So it's scheduled visits, it's not like I just drop by her house all the time but I call her all the time, text her whenever I want. And we will just set up visits from time to time. She's really great about it if I ask her for a visit or tell her that I need a visit.

But this level of openness and ongoing contact is not without emotional challenges. Jenny relives the grief and emotions of relinquishment on a regular basis.

One of the biggest things is hearing them call her mom, that's hard, that's rough, it's rough every time. But the worst would probably be saying goodbye... every time, because that's the difference between a closed adoption and an open adoption right there. When it's closed, you say goodbye at the hospital, that's it, that's the last time you ever see them again unless possibly when they're 18 years old. But with an open adoption you have to say goodbye over and over and over again. I mean we have a fantastic open relationship. But every time I walk out, I feel like I'm giving up, abandoning my children every single time I leave there. Even though I know they're okay, even though I know they're happy. But do I regret my decision? No, and I would do it again. Because it feels like I go back to that day at the hospital when I left, the hardest day of my life. Definitely the hardest day of my life and I've been through some crap.

Jenny occasionally participates in adoption support groups online when she needs to vent or just read what other birthmothers are talking about. But she is selective in which sites she visits as she has witnessed some hurtful bullying activity from anti-adoption individuals. By "anti-adoption" she means people who have had an extremely negative experience with adoption (birthmothers who feel they were coerced into relinquishing a child, birthmothers who have been cut out of the relationship, adoptees who openly express intense abandonment and anger, etc.).

Jenny has been disappointed in the polarized extremes of many adoption forums, either pro or anti-adoption. She is still looking for a more balanced support group to be a part of.

Jenny is well-versed in issues related to adoption because of the research she did and the detailed information the pregnancy counselor provided. She is particularly sensitive to the adoption laws in her state, Michigan, that preclude enforcement of contact agreements. She experiences constant fear that the adoptive parents could close the adoption at any time and cut off Jenny's contact with the twins.

Saying goodbye over and over and over again because you never know if it's the last time. I could say goodbye and she [adoptive mother] could call me 10 minutes later and say, "well, you know, you said this at the visit and I didn't like it so you're not seeing them again." It's really hard to have that hanging over your head ... there's nothing that compares to that feeling. I feel like I can't be completely 100% open around her. ... **I feel like if I do one thing wrong, she's going to close the adoption because she can.** It's hard, it's kind of like you're walking around on eggshells all the time.

So while Jenny is comfortable and confident in her decision to relinquish the twins for adoption, she feels like she is often "walking on egg shells" in trying to navigate the open relationship she has with the adoptive family. She recognizes that the balance of trust shifted with the formal adoption event; the adoptive couple had to trust her to follow through on the adoption and now she has to trust them to keep it an open adoption. To alleviate some of this uncertainty and stress, Jenny feels strongly that post adoption contact agreements should be legally binding arrangements.

APPENDIX M: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE: BECKY

Becky: birthmother

Harrison: birthfather

April: daughter

Dawn and Craig: adoptive parents

Becky was 22 in 2006, living with her parents and finishing her second year of college. She had been dating Harrison for about a year when she suspected she was pregnant. Actually they had gotten pregnant about 7 months earlier but because of a flare up with her own chronic health issues, she and Harrison decided to terminate that pregnancy. He was supportive through that event. This time she was feeling better health-wise but pretty quickly decided to end this pregnancy too, so she made an appointment for an abortion. In the time leading up to the appointment she started having second thoughts.

I was sort of leaning towards NOT but then we had the appointment [to terminate]. And I was like, let me just think this through. And when he drug his feet I was just like, that was the last straw. I'm not going to do this and we're not rescheduling.

Becky found herself in a complicated situation; she was grieving from the previous abortion, wanting to finish college, and struggling with a chronic health disease. But there was no easy answer. She didn't feel like she could financially support a baby, her parents were dealing with significant health issues themselves and couldn't provide support, and Harrison wasn't coming through with either financial or emotional support to even participate in the decision making.

Secrecy was Becky's first coping strategy. She kept things a secret and hid her pregnancy from her family and friends.

I didn't want to tell anybody because my family gets pretty judgy. Being the Catholic family, you're not supposed to do those things, you know. I didn't want to tell them, I just needed some alone time. I closed my world off pretty far when I was pregnant. Because I'm like people are on a need to know basis. I think like only 1 person knew. I was buying baggier clothes to hide it. And I could tell my friend I was pregnant because she was never going to run into anyone I knew.

Becky started looking for information to help her come to terms with her situation and explore some options in a concrete manner. She met with a crisis pregnancy center that she saw advertised on a billboard and found them helpful in listening to her story and prompting her to talk about her thoughts surrounding her decision-making.

I had met with a crisis pregnancy center and they were like, they were a little religious heavy but they weren't super judgy like I thought they'd be. They were more open than I thought they'd be. They were like, "If I think I hear you, I think

that you're probably going to place, second chance is parent and then terminate is probably your third choice".

She also started searching online for information on adoption. Since she was hiding the pregnancy from her family she spent a lot of time alone in her room sifting through Google search results on adoption and open adoption. Quickly she was reading the profiles posted by prospective adoptive families and comparing details.

Just searching Google for adoption and then parent profiles comes up where they've got like 200 potential, home-study ready parents. And they've got these big picture portfolios that are like "here's us being happy, and here's us on vacation and here's us with our pets and everything is happy". Things like we've always wanted to be parents and it just never worked, we come from a loving family, and here's some funny jokes about us. They all try to be very warm and inviting. And you could tell some people had done more research with their writing than others. But a lot of it is pictures – could you picture your kid in these settings.

Immersing herself in these parent profiles, she began trying to imagine whether any of these couples would fit with her situation and her baby. She found herself coming back to one particular couple and weighing other profiles against their webpage. She wanted a couple that was a bit older and had completed their education, and they must have or like dogs. She was drawn to Dawn and Craig who fit these requirements and more.

They were very open, that didn't seem like they were hiding things, they weren't speaking down about birthparents. They weren't expecting us to be all crack addicts or teenagers. I could have seen myself [as them] as if I were older and never could get pregnant. Sort of paying it forward a little bit.

Dawn and Craig had created their own website to publicize their desire to adopt a child. So Becky had their direct contact information and mentally prepared to call them.

And so I waited until one evening, it was approaching Christmas and I was like this is going to be their best call ever. I was like let's just have a conversation. I'm not going to give them my last name, I'm not going to give them my phone number, and I'm not going to give them enough identifying information at this point. But at least I can kind of get a feel for them and what their circumstances are and where they're at right now

The conversation went well and Becky began texting and chatting online with the couple on the phone on a regular basis. Dawn and Craig were working with an adoption agency to secure some of the legal requirements such as a home study but had also hired an *adoption facilitator* to help support the process. This facilitator had years of experience working in adoption and adoption education; she advised both the couple and Becky on some of the issues and challenges they would face. The facilitator also connected Becky with a psychologist for weekly counseling sessions; the adoptive couple paid for those sessions during her pregnancy and 6 weeks after the

birth. Although this facilitator lived in another state, she became a close confidant and support person for Becky. She sent her loads of material and books on the birthmother experience, grief, and planning for the future. Becky was consuming a great deal of information about adoption – material and books provided by the facilitator as well as material she found through online searches. The information was helpful in educating her about all facets of adoption but also induced a substantial amount of anxiety and stress.

And you'd be crying through this whole book because of some of the things that kids go through because they're adopted, feelings of loss and identity and relationships between people, how it affects them. And you feel super guilty for even considering placement. They were hard to read at times. I'd read for a while and then have to put them away and then go back to the adoption boards [online] and read.

Based upon her extensive experience, this facilitator was a strong proponent of open adoption relationships and worked exclusively with adoptive parents and birthparents that were committed to an on-going and open relationship.

Her mantra was "very, very open". She was like if you're going to be weird about it and try to hide or misrepresent things, she was not going to work with you. She believed in very open adoptions and she would have these monthly meetings at her house with the other families that had paid \$10,000 a year to be working with her. She was very warm, very open, very educated.

The focus on openness resonated with Becky. Through her online information searching she read research articles on the benefits of open adoption, particularly for the child.

It's not that I'm not familiar with adoption, it's just that the adoptions in my family have been closed or mostly closed and I was looking to be more open. Because when I was Googling I would see research studies that would say it's better for the children, that they don't wonder who their parents are...that they can answer questions like where do my features come from or where does my athletic ability come from. That it was just healthier for everyone involved, to be open about everything.

Becky's efforts at keeping her pregnancy a secret came to an end when her mother confronted her directly.

I was almost 6 months pregnant and I was sitting in the living room and my mom was just point blank, "are you pregnant?" I'm like yes and I'm making an adoption placement, all in one sentence. [laughter]. I found out later that she knew much earlier but didn't want to say anything. She was crying, it was more shock than anything. Maybe a little bit of disappointment but that didn't resonate like I thought it would have. I figured that I was going to be on the streets. I had even called around to see if there were maternity homes in the area because I thought my folks were going to kill me or kick me out of the house.

Becky's parents did not kick her out of the house; although her mother was disappointed she tried to support Becky as best she could. But there was very little conversation in the house about the situation before the birth.

We just don't talk about it out loud when we're in the same room together. It's like this big pink elephant in the room that nobody wanted to talk about.

Harrison, Becky's boyfriend and father of the baby, was becoming less and less supportive as the pregnancy progressed. He had wanted her to take care of things on her own and have an abortion.

He even printed up a letter that if I continued the pregnancy that he would not be responsible for support and tried to get me to sign it. And that's when I was like, well he's definitely not going to be involved. There's no way I could co-parent with him. He would just be more drama than it would be worth.

After Becky decided to move forward with the adoption plan and began communicating with the adoptive couple, Harrison relented and expressed his desire for the child to go to a good home.

Throughout her pregnancy, Becky experienced a great deal of shame and felt judged by people who did find out she was pregnant and unmarried. These negative comments and judgments came from close friends, medical professionals and strangers on the street.

I did tell one close girlfriend about both pregnancies and she got really judgy. She couldn't understand why you would end a pregnancy or contemplate placing – like it was my job to raise this child that I created – like it was my fault that she's [the baby] there so I should pay the price by raising her myself. And that I shouldn't breast feed because that will make it harder on me and all these crazy ideas about like placement and adoption.

I was going to my OB/GYN visits and there's that woman that takes your blood pressure and draws blood to check things before you go to see the doctor. And she knew that I had termination the first time from just having my file open and that this was a pregnancy where I was probably going to place. And she got up in my case about, "you should really have a hysterectomy or tie your tubes because if you're not the kind of person that can raise a child then why go through this?" And I said really? And I ended up going home crying.

And people would get judgy because I'd be shopping for maternity clothes and I didn't have a ring on my finger. And one time I just turned around and got snarky – I'm like my fingers are swollen, my husband...

These shaming attitudes and comments took a toll on Becky's mental health. But she did find support in the prospective adoptive couple as well as the adoption facilitator. The couple, Dawn and Craig, invested substantially in developing their relationship with Becky in terms of time, effort and money. The couple came out to Minnesota to go through a birthing class with Becky.

They also flew her out to their home for a 4-day stay so she could experience the home life they wanted to provide. While there Becky also met with the adoption facilitator for the first time in-person.

She wanted to see how I was feeling and whether I was comfortable with the adoptive family. And she wanted to give me a lot of books about open adoption – that I’ve got scattered everywhere. And make sure that I got resources for grief and try to build my network so I’m not left out in the cold after the birth and the placement. She was like make sure you take time for yourself, the adoption paperwork itself is daunting.

Since this would be an interstate adoption, Becky was also meeting with an adoption agency in her home state of Minnesota. They helped her with paperwork and also a birth plan – what she wanted the hospital experience to look like. Becky participated in crafting a *post adoption contact agreement* directly with the adoptive couple to delineate requirements in terms of communication, visitation and information exchange in the coming years. Because the adoptive family lived in California, Becky understands this to be a legally enforceable contract, both she and the adoptive couple signed the agreement and included it in the adoption paperwork.

Ours was written so that I send them at least one picture a year and they give me pictures 5 or 6 times a year, like holidays and birthdays, certain days that were set up in advance. We wrote that we wanted email contact, phone contact. Then Facebook came along and we friended each other so I could see pictures like almost every day. They would call once in a while and just check on me after the baby was born.

Because of medical issues, Becky knew when she would be entering the hospital to deliver the baby. Dawn and Craig drove cross-country to be there for the birth and Becky’s recovery. Although Becky’s medical condition complicated things, she gave birth to a health little girl. Becky’s family was there to support her and Harrison came to the hospital a couple of times to see the baby. And then a few days later they all met together to complete the final paperwork.

Me and the birthfather had an appointment at the adoption agency to sign the paperwork at the same time so his rights didn’t supersede mine. We ended up crying for so long. I had to have them [adoptive parents] hold the baby while I signed, I can’t hold the baby while I’m trying to do this. I’m trying to be okay about this. This is hard. So they were actually in the room when we both signed. They had like an assembly line, 3 or 4 people from the adoption agency, one was a notary. It was like “boom” “boom” – all these different pieces of paperwork.

Becky still has all of the documentation from the adoption including the original birth certificate with her name and Harrison’s name and the relinquishment papers. She knows that the finalized version of the birth certificate indicates the adoptive parents’ names and her daughter’s new last name.

In the months following the birth and relinquishment of her daughter, Dawn and Craig continued to communicate regularly with Becky. Because of the extensive education efforts by the adoption facilitator they were well informed about the grief and stress that Becky would face.

We would chat here and there just to make sure I wasn't going to jump off a cliff or something [laughter] but actually was more of a concern than I realized, they were concerned about that. Because I guess some birthmothers have committed suicide after placement. Just to make sure I was eating, sleeping, functioning. I guess it depends on your definition.

Throughout her pregnancy and in the years since, Becky spends time online looking through adoption-related blogs and websites, reading about the experiences and comments/questions posed by birthparents and people trying to adopt. Although some of the stories are painful and bring up strong emotions for her, she feels a sense of connection to this community. The forums also give her insight into the thoughts and emotions of adoptive parents, including the couple that adopted her daughter.

The discussion boards are supposed to be more controlled to just birthparents to try to get them through that first, second, third year. And then you'd see some posts where somebody had committed suicide. And there was a lot of crying, a lot of poems, a lot of artistic outlets that people would use on there. To try to get through whatever they needed to get through on there.

My Type A personality kicking in, I immersed myself online probably way too much. Anything that was posted online about adoption scams, open adoption, I connected, I was more of a lurker than a poster, I was kind of watching what potential adoptive parents were posting about adoption. And then I was Googling her [adoptive mother] email address in quotes so I could see what the adoptive parents were posting.

This immersion in information satisfied some of Becky's efforts to cope with the situation and allowed her to, in a sense, get out of her room, to feel a sense of connection with other people who were dealing with similar emotions and situations. She used the adoption reading material and the online forums as a distraction to an extent, to keep her mind off things: first regarding the upcoming birth and painful emotions swirling around her, and later, the new life her daughter was experiencing with the adoptive family. But she found at points that she needed to turn off this connection, to face things in her own world.

There was a point, when I was approaching the due date, that I had to put the books away. I was like, I was so emotional right now that I can't possibly absorb any more. So I had to put away the adoption stuff, the grief stuff, I mean if I don't know it by now, and if I continue to read this stuff, it's going to be hard for me to give birth... and put this away, I can't read any more.

That was the one thing that fascinated me so I immersed myself probably too much. So I was online all the time – Dawn was posting pictures of April [her

daughter] a couple times a day and I was like sucked into that. My shrink was even like, “Maybe if you stepped back a little bit, you’d be better”. But I’m like what else am I going to do, I’m stuck at home and can’t work much. I was taking a lot of medication and bedridden and couldn’t get out very much. So I just sort of got sucked into the online stuff.

Reflecting on her own experience and what she’s learned, Becky offers several points of caution to women considering placing a child for adoption. She has heard from and read about many women who regret their decision or who have had extremely negative experiences. Because of these stories, Becky was very slow and cautious in her decision-making. She urges women to do the same – do your own research, listen to people carefully, take time to get to know people, and employ a critical eye if moving forward with an adoption decision.

I think it is definitely a buyer-beware for potential birthparents. They need to do lots of their own research because there are definitely a lot of adoption agencies that will get pushy with you to make you fit whatever they want. And they will trample on your rights if they can, if it makes their job easier. And there are a lot of social workers out there that are not, shouldn’t be in it.

There are a lot of potential adoptive parents that are very unethical, that will say whatever they think you want to hear so they can get the baby. Like not keep up any kind of commitment. You need to have time with them to work through that and be able to dig in enough to know that they’re not... Like if you want open adoption, then find a family that is really open and not lying about it to tell you whatever you want to hear. You should have time to go through your contact agreements and the birth plan

And then understand the ethics of your agency. Because I’ve heard of agencies in the state that will fail to acknowledge your letter of changing your mind in time – even though you did. They’ll pretend they didn’t get it in time for the legal revoking.

In addition to concerns about the systems and potential pitfalls surrounding existing adoption processes, Becky has strong feelings about the effects on self-esteem and self-efficacy that women experience throughout a crisis pregnancy decision-making process. She specifically points out the impact that shame and stigma have, the crippling effects they can have on a woman’s ability to exert her own rights and make decisions that truly work for her in the long run.

The shame of getting pregnant foreshadows this whole thing and women feel like they don’t have any rights to make decisions for themselves. The shame of getting pregnant, the shame of not having the support, of having bad circumstances, you have this horrible self-esteem. That’s the hardest thing I think, not feeling like you’re worth enough to demand what you need to make it work and to put yourself back together afterwards. That was the hardest thing for me, because you don’t feel worthy of this child. The way that people can talk to you can definitely

affect your self-esteem during that process and affect the rest of your life. You have to have enough self-esteem to know that you can walk away. The more you can make yourself not vulnerable and the more you can have people in your corner, the better.

Lastly, Becky recognizes the pervasive nature of grief. Grief is written all over the context of a crisis pregnancy and never fades completely. She remembers taking time and doing a lot of work to process elements of grief from her life unrelated to the pregnancy. She found that helpful in that she was able to set those things aside and concentrate on coping with the stress and grief she was experiencing during the pregnancy and adoption event. But Becky continues to run into some of these same emotions even 9 years later; life events can stir things up unexpectedly and she will find herself confronting grief and continuing the process of coping.

You need to take time to deal with grief. Because if you don't deal with the grief, it compounds on everything you've grieved before – like losses, animals that have died before, your own family, like whatever issues you have with your own parents will come out as you're dealing with this big cloud of birth and post placement. So try to get rid of everything you can before, that was probably the only thing that saved me.

It's still hard, people think that 6 weeks after you give birth you should be fine. But it affects everything you do for the rest of your life. Things you don't even think about come up, things you don't expect to trigger. Like my friend who had a baby, we've been friends since junior high. She had a baby and I had to turn off my feed on Facebook because I just can't watch this right now, it's too hard. I mean I'm happy for them but it's just too painful.

Becky continues the open adoption relationship with Dawn, Craig, and daughter, April. She visits with them 2-3 times each year staying in their home for a few days and the family travels to Minnesota to see her every other year. Harrison sees April when the family visits. Becky finished her undergraduate degree and completed a Master's degree; she enjoys her work and spending time with her new boyfriend; she is heavily involved in volunteer activities. She continues to monitor some online adoption support groups.

APPENDIX N: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE: BRONWYN

Bronwyn: birthmother
Clark: birthfather
Sophia: daughter
Claire: adoption social worker

The day before starting her senior year in high school in 2003, Bronwyn worked up the nerve to take a pregnancy test; she'd been avoiding the situation and the possibility for several months.

I didn't actually even take a pregnancy test until I was maybe five months pregnant, because I was in denial. I kept thinking there had to be a reason why things were changing with my body, and it couldn't be pregnancy. There was no way.

The motivation for an immediate answer was the start of the school year; she knew she wouldn't be able to go back to her private Christian school if she was pregnant. So she picked up a test and met her boyfriend, a recent graduate of the same Christian school, at a local park. The public restroom is where her fears became reality: she was pregnant at 16.

The test was positive. I know that I'm talking like just nonchalantly about it now, but that was probably one of the worst days of -- ever. Crying so hard, I think I couldn't even stand up. I was just in the bathroom. It was really bad. But it was like over 10 years ago, so I can talk about it now

Bronwyn came home crying and her mother simply said, "You think you're pregnant." Although her mother had some suspicions, her parents had dismissed the possibility, this couldn't happen to their daughter. The pregnancy revelation launched some extreme emotions for her close-knit family: Bronwyn felt her life was over and shut down to a certain degree; her mother felt it could ruin their marriage; her father was stricken at the thought of his 16-year-old being pregnant. But her mother took charge of the situation; she made an OB/GYN appointment for the next day and she also mentioned to Bronwyn, "You are going to place this baby for adoption."

And I really didn't care what happened. I didn't care if I placed the baby for adoption, I didn't care about an abortion -- I just didn't want this to be happening. I wanted to be a senior and do the stuff that seniors do. So I don't really remember thinking one way or another about what I wanted to do at that point.

Abortion was on the table initially at the insistence of her father but the OB/GYN closed that discussion down as she was too far along under North Carolina law. Bronwyn and her mother picked up a few brochures on adoption at the doctor's office. One of the adoption agencies had the word "Christian" in the name so they contacted that agency to find out more; as practicing Christians they felt this agency would likely be the best fit.

The adoption agency Bronwyn and her folks selected facilitated a placement for her in a church-supported maternity home in a town about two hours away from her family's home. Although her family is quite open about the adoption now, at the time they wanted to keep the pregnancy secret from their extended family and community. Bronwyn found the maternity home experience helpful as it allowed her some anonymity and space away from the emotional situation at home.

We just didn't want anybody to know so we were going to keep it a secret. Even though it meant that we were all ashamed of me and what this would bring shame to our family, that sounds not cool, but living in this maternity home was so good. And I didn't have outside influences from other people. A lot of people don't necessarily think adoption is the greatest thing. They would have said, "oh, no, no, don't give your baby to somebody else. We will help you. We'll have baby showers for you. We'll blah-blah-blah." And that probably would have been the case had I stayed [at home], and people would have known I was pregnant. So that was good. I didn't have outside influences to make me second-guess the choice that I was going to make.

The birthfather, Clark, went back to college and was not significantly involved in the decision-making. Bronwyn's family did have a sit-down meeting with Clark and his parents; his parents initially wanted Bronwyn and Clark to parent the baby but Bronwyn's folks were adamant about the adoption plan so Clark signed the relinquishment papers. He and his folks did visit Bronwyn and the baby in the hospital after delivery but they have not been involved in the story since.

We had a little meeting once. After I went to the doctor and we decided moving away -- we decided everything that was going to happen -- we had a meeting with him and his mother and father. They were not okay with this. They didn't necessarily say no, we're not okay with this, but this wasn't what they wanted. They wanted us to raise her together ...

She stayed at the maternity home for the remaining 3 months of her pregnancy and attended a public high school during that time. She remembers the home as beautiful and speaks warmly about the opportunity it affords women and girls to get away, receive support during their pregnancy and help in getting back on their feet. The two other expectant mothers staying at the home with her during that time were also planning to place their children for adoption but she indicates that now it is more common for women who stay at the home to ultimately parent their child and just need some interim help. Local churches support the maternity home financially and the women receive food stamps and WIC resources during their stay.

Bronwyn received lots of emotional and educational support at the maternity home. Through weekly meetings and conversations with the agency social worker, Bronwyn learned about the process of adoption and options open to her. The social worker, Claire, was a significant source and conduit of information for Bronwyn: she coordinated weekly sessions with a psychologist for Bronwyn; she facilitated conversations with other birthmothers, women who had already relinquished a child for adoption. Bronwyn found it helpful to hear first-hand how other women were coping; one birthmother she talked with was struggling with depression and loss two years

after placement. Yet others seemed to be more satisfied with their choice. One birthmother dropped off a Christmas ornament to be sent to her child, something she did each year and a tradition that Bronwyn adopted as her own. She continues to send an annual Christmas ornament to her daughter to let her know she is thinking of her.

She reflects positively on her experience at this maternity home especially how it allowed her to get away and not second-guess her adoption decision. She spoke about how she was able to insulate herself from some of the pressure she might have felt from friends back home; she thought they would try to talk her into parenting the baby and offer short-term support through baby showers. By going away to this maternity home she felt more confident in her adoption plan and didn't experience outside influences on that decision. However many of the high school girls at the alternative public school she attended while staying at the maternity home were pregnant themselves or new mothers. At school Bronwyn was reluctant to share that she was planning to place her baby for adoption; as a racial minority in the school she noticed a difference in attitudes toward adoption; Bronwyn is Caucasian and most of her classmates were Hispanic or African American. Classmates that were expecting or new mothers asked her what she planned to name her baby and she responded that she would let the adoptive parents name the child. Many of her classmates found this odd, they said they could never consider adoption as an option in an unplanned pregnancy, neither could their families.

So I remember being asked one day at school something about -- oh, what was I going to name my daughter? And I said, I don't know. I'm not going to name her. I'm going to let the adoptive parents name her. And I was always hesitant to mention that I was placing her for adoption because I was a minority at that school, and I feel like this is Hispanics, African-Americans, they -- I don't know how to word this. Socially acceptable. You don't give your family away. They did not understand why could I possibly do that, why would my mom let me do that.

Bronwyn saw her pregnancy as consequence of her adult decision to have sex and now she needed to step up and make another adult decision – in this case the adoption decision. She remembers having confidence in her adoption decision both before and after placement. But she did have a moment of fantasy at the hospital during delivery, hoping that the adoptive parents would change their minds.

This is how I was raised, too -- that you have to make adult choices sometimes on top of making an adult choice. So then I was forced to make -- here I was, pregnant in high school, because of an adult choice I made, so it was time to really step it up and make an adult choice. So I don't ever really remember thinking this isn't what I want to do. Actually, that's not true. At the hospital, when I was giving birth, I remember thinking maybe they'll call and they decided they didn't want a baby anymore

Bronwyn's parents kept in close contact with her while she was living at the maternity home. Although the situation was stressful and difficult for them to come to terms with, they provided ongoing support and love.

I would come home on the weekends. I would have to stay at home, in the house. I couldn't go out, which was fine. I didn't care. Or they would come see me. My mom would come see me during the week and we'd go to lunch or something. I remember originally my dad wasn't going to come to the hospital when I had her, because he didn't want to see her, but he did. He changed his mind.

Claire, the social worker, was instrumental in educating Bronwyn about the details and options surrounding the adoption process. Bronwyn admits that her understanding of adoption before this time was limited – she thought it might be sort of an auction scenario with prospective parents gathering to see which baby they might want. It was a surprise to learn that she could have a voice and could *choose* an adoptive family.

I really thought after you had a baby and you wanted to place it for adoption, they're all in this room at the agency and the parents who want to adopt come in and they're like okay, that's a good one. Even then, up until when I decided to place for adoption, that's what I thought adoption was. So, of course, then you find out -- you're talking to your case worker and you realize you can choose a family if you want, and it can be as little contact or as much contact as you want. I didn't know any of that.

Claire prompted Bronwyn to identify criteria, what she wanted in terms of an adoptive family. Bronwyn decided she wanted a couple that had been married for at least seven years and already had children. She felt a couple would be more empathetic to her situation and how hard her decision to relinquish would be if they already had kids of their own. She also felt a couple with a 7+ year marriage and kids would demonstrate a more stable and proven environment for a baby. So Claire provided portfolios depicting prospective adoptive families and helped Bronwyn look through them. Claire also explained different types of adoption arrangements – varying levels of contact from none to on-going and extremely open. Bronwyn felt most comfortable with a semi-open arrangement that would include on-going exchange of photos. Communication and exchange of information would be mediated through the adoption agency.

The adoptive family has to send photos once a month for the first year. After that, it's once a year, but they have to. Of course, there may be more than that. Mine was semi-open, so we went through the agency. So they would send their stuff to the agency and the agency would send it to me. I would send my stuff to the agency and the agency would send it to them. And they wanted to probably proofread stuff. They don't need a birth mom writing I wish I hadn't done this, it's the worst decision I ever made.

Looking through the portfolios of prospective adoptive couples, Bronwyn was drawn to a particular couple based upon their photographs and their *letter to birthmother* explaining how they felt called by God to adopt a daughter. They fit her criteria as they already had three children of their own. Bronwyn appreciated how stylish the mother appeared, a characteristic she personally enjoyed. So the agency facilitated a meeting between Bronwyn and the

prospective adoptive couple. The first meeting went well so her mother came to the second meeting. As the social worker, Claire was always involved in these meetings.

When the time came for Bronwyn to deliver the baby, her folks were at her side. Claire encouraged Bronwyn to decide what she wanted in terms of timing and who should be at the hospital. She felt Clark and his family should be allowed to come, so they did visit. She decided she didn't want to see the adoptive couple taking the baby, so she left the hospital first. Reflecting back, Bronwyn found this time period extremely hard and emotional, "I'm going to go home, and I'm going to just live life...that was hard." Although she's not sure how things could be improved, she didn't feel prepared to go home, the grief was overwhelming. Her parents were so concerned about her sadness in the days following the birth that at one point her father told to her mother that since they were still within the 7-day window they should just go get the baby back. Bronwyn wasn't privy to that conversation and it didn't happen. Even though her sadness was apparent to her family, Bronwyn doesn't remember being so sad, just numb.

It's interesting to note the difference in information seeking behavior between Bronwyn and her mother. From the very beginning, Bronwyn's mother did almost all of the searching and gathering of information – investigating different options and adoption agencies. She also pursued information about the family they selected to be the adoptive parents through clues in their prospective parent portfolio.

My mom said she -- she was like a detective. In their portfolio, I didn't notice this but they have three sons. They had on T-ball shirts and it said like the name of their town. I didn't notice that, but my mom did. So then she knew their first and last names so she Googled them. I'm 16. I'm not Googling things. I mean, today 16-year-olds Google everything, but not then. So she knew their last names and everything for years. But, of course, she didn't tell me. Which was fine. It's not like I ever asked.

Bronwyn wasn't as concerned with knowing more identifying information about the adoptive family; she was comfortable with the semi-open nature of the relationship and the mediation by the adoption agency in terms of information exchange. In the intervening years, Bronwyn maintained contact with the adoptive family through the agency, exchanging photographs and the annual Christmas ornament. But the development of social media facilitated a more engaged and frequent method of communication between Bronwyn and the adoptive family. About 6 years ago the adoptive mother "*friended*" Bronwyn on Facebook so she has regular updates and insight into her daughter, Sophia's life.

I was fine not knowing their last name. It didn't matter. Maybe when Sophia was five -- her mom had friended me on Facebook. I don't know if that was just -- maybe she got to the point where she thought this Bronwyn is normal. And then now -- so, of course, I have their address now, their physical address, so I just send the Christmas ornament and her birthday gift right to them. She doesn't really send me anything anymore, but we're friends on Facebook so I can see -- I just messenger her.

The accessibility of information through social media brought up a sort of moral dilemma for Bronwyn recently: should she follow her daughter's Instagram feed or not?

A couple of weeks ago -- oh. When I said what is Sophie into now, because I really don't know what to get her for her birthday, the mom said she really likes to play in makeup. She says, I let her play in makeup at the house. When she goes to school she doesn't really wear it, but when she gets home she really just loves to play in makeup. She said she has an Instagram page where she'll do her pictures after she does her makeup. So I searched for her [Sophia] and it wasn't private. And then I thought I could really follow her on Instagram, but I thought, you know what? I'm not going to. Because while I could message the mom and say is it okay if I follow Sophia on Instagram, Sophia and myself, we don't have any direct -- and I don't want to -- I feel like that's kind of disrespectful if I did that. So I didn't. But I looked at her pictures. But I said no, I'm not going to follow her. Because then she would see -- this is how I thought about it in my head. She would see that I followed her. She obviously knows who I am. She sees pictures of me. I don't know what that would make her feel, and I don't want to do that.

Although the adoptive family lives in the same state as Bronwyn, they don't get together physically, in fact they haven't seen each other since her daughter was born. Bronwyn expressed that she is comfortable waiting until Sophia is old enough to decide when/if she wants to meet face-to-face.

We don't have any direct contact. It's just never been said. Her mom tells me, if Sophia -- when she wants to meet you, that will be wonderful. I hope for her to be older so she can kind of wrap her head around things a little more than this is the lady, this is my tummy mommy -- what she's called me since she was little -- who sends me ornaments and gifts and now I'm meeting her and she's crying like an idiot. You know? This is not what I thought it was going to be. She should be older, is what I think. I don't really know. I've never done that before.

Reflecting on her experience with adoption, Bronwyn remembers grief and the struggle to cope in the aftermath of the pregnancy and adoption event.

Afterwards. Afterwards you leave the hospital and you don't have your baby. It's like, what? Now I'm going to go home. I haven't been living at home for a couple of months. I'm going to go, pack up my stuff from this maternity home, I'm going to go home, and I'm going to just live life. That was hard. I don't think that they really, while there was counseling available for me after that, I don't think that...I don't remember being prepared well for going home. Yeah, the grief counseling could have been a little better.

Bronwyn frames her adoption experience as positive for herself and her daughter in the long run.

Sophia's mom and dad gave her a better chance at life than what I could have, but they also gave -- in a sense -- they gave me another chance, too, at doing something that I probably couldn't have done if I would have parented at 16. Oh, and the resolve and peace of mind that comes from it -- that's another thing I wanted to say. So that was good for healing and also, yeah, seeing that she is growing up and she's happy and smart and safe.

Bronwyn's experience with adoption has had a significant impact on her life; when her schedule allows, she talks with other birthmothers and women contemplating an adoption plan through the agency and adoption support groups. She is also working on a graduate degree to become a professional working in the realm of social work, focusing on adoption.

APPENDIX O: EXCERPT FROM DATA ANALYSIS SPREADSHEET

Participant: Robin

Interview: Saturday, September 5, 2015 in XXX, NC

Potential emergent themes	Original transcript (highlight text which seems important)	Exploratory comments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive (normal text): participant's experiences in terms of their relationship to the important things in their world • <i>Linguistic</i> (italics): use of language; ways context and meaning are presented • <u>Conceptual</u> (underlined): more interpretive; look towards the participant's overarching understanding of the experience
	A: Okay. I'll tell you first that I am one of those people that didn't know I was pregnant until my third month, and so I was very --	"one of those people" <i>views herself as irresponsible, not paying attention to her body</i>
Denial Internal processing	I was totally in shock for about three weeks. I just couldn't sleep, and I was processing, okay, I'm pregnant.	Pregnancy came as a shock Shock at the news, trouble sleeping <i>Processing: internal dialog seems like a coping strategy</i> <u>Internal processing in order to face reality – move from denial to realization with the potential to move forward</u>
	and I just had irregular periods anyway from the birth control I had stopped taking	Stopped taking birth control (pills?) [question: why had she stopped taking the birth control pills? Any link to her depression – literature on that link]
	Q: How did you find out that you were pregnant?	
Depression (diagnosed) Denial Co-crises (depression, financial)	A: Okay, so there's a story, okay. I have suffered with depression, and that's part of the reason that I chose adoption because of other medical things as well in my family and myself. I was in the hospital at a mental health facility at the hospital when I found out. The only reason I found out is they were doing medicine changes, and they did a blood test. They said, "Well --" The doctor came in my bed, and I was half asleep, and he says, "Ms., I need to tell you this" and he said, "Do you have a boyfriend or are you intimate?" I thought, why is he asking? "No, not anymore. We just broke up." He said, "Well, you're pregnant." I was like, "No, I'm not.	Robin was in the midst of a depression-related crisis when a blood test revealed her pregnancy. She has a history of depression <i>Part of the reason that I chose adoption - depression</i> <u>depression/mental illness link to unplanned pregnancy literature – but how about link to adoption?</u> <u>Dual crises – mental health + unintended pregnancy</u> The doctor confronted her with the blood test results "No, I'm not." <i>Initial and adamant denial</i>

	<p>You're going to have to --" and I asked another blood test to be done the next day and they did. I was in denial and so I finally -- a couple of weeks after I got out of the hospital, it hit me that it's true and yeah.</p>	<p><u>Initial coping reaction was shock and denial</u></p>
<p>Anger at information</p> <p>Emotional reaction to information</p> <p>Self-appraisal</p> <p>Options</p> <p>Possible future selves</p>	<p>Q: What did that feel like to hear that from a doctor that's not probably close to you or something? What was that told from -- you can say as much as you want or not.</p> <p>A: The way he said, it was so impersonal and so just, "Do you have a boyfriend?" For one, that's not how you approach a woman and ask and reveal this critical information for her. You get the patient when they're awake, when they're sitting up, when they're ready to hear it. You have to prepare somebody for that, but anyway. I knew it was a crisis center, so I was mad at him. I was mad at the situation thinking different things, thinking abortion, thinking adoption, thinking maybe I can do this on my own, but all at once.</p>	<p>Initial reaction included anger at physician who gave her the news of the pregnancy</p> <p><i>Critical of doctor's bed-side manner in delivering emotional/critical information</i></p> <p>Anger at deliver of information – felt cold and cruel</p> <p>She immediately started imagining options and outcomes to deal with the pregnancy</p> <p><u>Flurry of self-assessment</u></p> <p><u>Quick appraisal of possible selves</u></p>

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