Narratives of identity in adopted adolescents: interview analysis

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Summary

The aim of the study was to examine the essential aspects of the process of identity shaping in adopted individuals. Identity development coincides with the period of adolescence, so the study participants were recruited from among adopted adolescents. For the purpose of the study it was assumed that the adoptive family has its own characteristics, different from those of the biological family. Thus, additional elements of development emerge in the life of adoptive parents and adopted children alongside normative developmental tasks. The study used a qualitative method of narrative interview. This was dictated by a small number of findings in current Polish psychological literature on the topic, as well as a scarcity of reliable and valid research methods. The results of the study were then analyzed in terms of self-awareness, family relations and wider social relations, which were described by other adoption researchers as important factors in shaping the adoptive identity. Content analysis of the participants' narratives revealed that early and late adolescence determine other key issues relevant in shaping the adoptees' identity in terms of both the content and degree of involvement in the search for answers. This allows us to advance a thesis that identity formation may take longer in an adoptee and extend into adulthood. Checking the validity of this thesis may be a topic for further research.

adoption, adoptive family, adoptee's identity, developmental tasks

INTRODUCTION

It is important to discuss two relevant issues before conducting research on adoptee identity. The first concerns the scale of adoption in Poland and the second the specifics of the adoptive family against the biological family. The Central Statistical Office [1] reports that in 2014 there were 3492 child adoptions in Poland. Regarding the specifics of adoptive family, several issues are relevant. Adopted children experience the loss of biological family, their roots, which is associated with the loss of continuity of their history of life [2,3]. What is more, such children must also contend with the consequences of adoption in the form of social evaluation. The fact that the adopted child experienced breaking the ties with their biological parents in the past is inextricably linked with the need to go through the grieving process in order to build relationships with adoptive parents [4]. The loss of relationship with the child's primary caregiver affects their behaviour in the adoptive family and can manifest itself as difficulties in establishing close emotional ties, excessive dependence on new caregivers, or aggressive or self-aggressive behavior. The adoptive family, which comprises adoptive parents and adopted children, is formed at different stages of family life cycle. The omission of earlier phases of family devel-

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opment causes the emotional bonds to evolve in a way that is fundamentally different from that in the biological family. The relationship between a parent and a child in an adoptive family begins either already when they meet or only after the child comes to live with their adoptive parents [5].

In this context, we may assume that people creating an adoptive family in addition to the normative tasks of a biological family have to perform non-normative tasks that are unique and fundamentally different from those of the biological family. One is the process of identity shaping in the life cycle of each person forming an adoptive family, which is of special significance in adopted children. This process is particularly important in adolescence [6]. Research on identity formation occupies an important place in Polish [7, 8] and English [9] literature. Researchers suggest that among many social contexts that are relevant in the process of building one's own individuality, the family and relationships with parents play an eminent role [6,10-13].

In adoptees the process of identity shaping is associated with a search for information about their biological family and where they come from, as well as attempts to determine the cause of abandonment by their biological parents [14]. A young adopted person defining their own identity faces the challenge of integrating information from two important environments – their biological family and their adoptive family [15]. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to look at how the process of identity formation proceeds in adopted persons. This process runs in a specific context. Adopted persons must deal with their adoptive history, which they experienced during the pre-adoption period or which was conveyed to them by their adoptive parents. In both cases these histories contain a lot of questions that are often impossible to answer. Due to the usually early stage of development in child adoption, they remember very little from that period. Information about their pre-adoption history, their parents and siblings, depends entirely on the knowledge of adoptive parents and their attitude towards the child's biological family.

There are many definitions of the concept of identity. Jarymowicz describes it as "[…] aware-

ness of one's consistency in time and space in different periods of life, social situations and performed roles, as well as awareness of their own identity, individuality and uniqueness" [16]. Identity is a sense of being the same person despite changes over time and "orientation as to who you are and what is your own place in the world" [17]. Nikitorowicz [18] emphasizes that the identity of an individual is shaped in two complementary dimensions: biographical-vertical, achieving temporal continuity or a sense of connection between who I was in the past, who I am now and who I am going to be in the future, and socio-horizontal, which combines the elements of 'self' in a given time. According to Erik Erikson [6], the process of identity shaping is associated with an attempt to define by the young person who they are, what they most value in life, and their place in the world.

Identity shaping concerns essential and vitally important issues which are defined as spheres falling within the scope of identity [7,19,20,21]. In adoptive adolescence, in addition to the normative spheres, some new spheres also emerge, such as: acceptance of appearance, establishing physical similarity [22,23], change in development of thinking – a more critical attitude to the earlier idealistic and romantic aspects of adoption history [24], identity development [9,25] and acceptance from the environment [9]. Some researchers [2,9] pointed out that the inclusion of stories of adoption to one's own life story, and thus identity, is one of the most important developmental tasks that adopted persons face at the stage of adolescence.

Identity formation in an adoptee takes place on three levels [9,26]. First is the level of self-awareness, which contains the meaning of the adoption status for the person. Adoption status belongs to those elements of identity which cannot be chosen. Achieving identity in terms of adoption status does not mean making choices or assessing alternatives [25], but it is rather a mindful acceptance of this aspect of identity and coming to terms with the fact that it is so. Grotevant [9] emphasizes that adoption status is the basis for identity development to which other elements can be attached through independent choices of, for example, goals and values, occupation, religious beliefs etc. A young person can ignore the importance of their adop-

tion status by giving it the same meaning as other aspects of their identity, but they may also put all their energy and time into exploring the fact of adoption, neglecting the alternatives in other areas. The second level is the level of family relations, which means that an adopted person has two families: biological and adoptive. Understanding relations in each of these families is extremely important in shaping identity. Parents are responsible for providing the child with values, meanings, role patterns, symbols and, in the case of adoptive family, also with information related to adoption. Finally, the third level is the level of broader social interaction, which is associated with the transparency of adoption and acceptance of adoption status by the environment [9,23]. Grotevant [9] notes that acceptance of an adopted child by the environment helps them to positively accept their adoption status. Finding oneself in less tolerant environment may be a challenge for the child's identity, can lead to withdrawal from social contacts and may cause the urge to find people with similar experiences.

METHOD

The adoptive family is significantly different from the biological family [24]. Understanding the psychological functioning of the adoptive family requires reliable empirical research, as currently a gap exists in psychological literature. The small number of studies does not allow conclusions to be drawn for psychological practice. Researchers investigating adoptive families [25] draw attention to the difficulties in reaching a representative research group and the lack of reliable and valid research methods. These factors justify the use of a qualitative research design.

The present study is a qualitative research study based on a narrative interview. According to Paluchowski [26], conducting qualitative research means collecting subjectively important data from individuals, comparing them with already existing data from other samples and finding common themes and topics. The disadvantages of qualitative methods include the inability to extend research results to a wider population and the role of subjectivity in interpreting the results [27].

Budziszewska [28] points out that our personal life story provides answers to typical identity questions such as: "Who am I today?" and "How is it that I am who I am ?". Our identity is most fully revealed in language [28]. Narrative allows us to describe our own experience and give it a unique meaning. In a narrative study the participant's task is to create a real or imaginary history, most often one referring to their life. The subject of the present study are participants' life elements associated with their adoptive identity. It is worth noting that storytelling is for humans a natural and comfortable way to express experiences, thoughts and memories [29]. As noted by Straś-Romanowska [30], narratives allow individuals to express their feelings, desires or concerns. In a constructed narrative a person can combine various events of their life together and give them meaning. The narrative is a research method that enables understanding of a person's subjective world [31].

Participants and procedure

Fourteen adolescents aged 17 or 18 participated in the study: 11 girls and 3 boys. They were adopted at 1–3 years old. Their birth mothers left them in hospital. Consent was first obtained from the adoptive parents and then from the participants. The participants were asked to tell researchers about their life (instruction: 'Tell me about your life'). All interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

RESULTS

The material collected was analyzed for thematic threads which were linked to the three levels essential for identity formation in the adopted person: the level of self-awareness, the level of family relations and the level of broader social interaction [9]. Content analysis suggested two dominant developmental periods. The first is early adolescence, for example, "When I was in fifth grade" or "in gymnasium". Developmental psychologists [32] assume that early adolescence covers the period from 12 to 16 years and late adolescence from 17 to 20–23 years. Adolescents in the second period used expressions such

as "I grew up and…", "now", "I am 18". These criteria were applied in the analysis of research material. Given the research topic, elements related to the adoptee's identity were taken into account when analyzing the narratives. They occupied a significant, and in 6 cases dominant, part of the narrative.

Early adolescence – level of self-awareness

The analysis looked at a selection of narrative strands by which participants described themselves. The names are pseudonyms.

Tamara, 18 years old:
"My dream was that in the future, just like now, at the age of 18, I would go and find my mom, my dad, someone from the past, but it was a long time ago and I doubt that I would dare to take such a step. I grew up and so I stopped thinking about that all the time, but there was a period of time when not a day went by that I didn't think of it (adolescence, in gymnasium, when I talked about this in support class or religious education)."

Karolina, 18 years old:
"When my parents were at home, I was of course thinking about something else, but they often went out for a walk in springtime. On Sundays […] I would be at home studying and I would look for photos or papers from the adoption center, and would dig further. I searched adoption centers on the Internet, once I even found an e-mail address and wrote there. It was awful. I wrote, I don't even remember what it was, that I would like to know my past and I asked for help. When I got the answer I froze. They wrote back that they had to contact my parents in the first place and then we would be able to proceed. Of-course I deleted everything, I wanted to forget about it, but of course I couldn't. I thought about it all the time, I dreamed about it at night […]"

Dominika, 18 years old:
[…] "When I was in gymnasium I didn't like to talk about it, about the past. The fact that I was adopted was something strange to me, like a fairy tale. It is so unusual. […] When I was in elementary school, probably in sixth grade, I met a boy and it was my first love. I revealed my secret to him, but now I regret it, because I think it should have stayed just between us, between me and my parents and perhaps within close family. Also, several years later my friend and I had

a fight and I was afraid all the time that he would reveal my secret."

Wiktoria, 18 years old:
[…] "When I was in the fifth grade of primary school my friend accidentally told me that I was adopted. I was surprised at what she said to me. At home it was never said openly that I was adopted. My friend started me thinking about whether I really was adopted until I asked my mom, who confirmed everything. This made me indignant and I cried that I hadn't known about it. But my parents told me that I had known about it, but somehow it was not clear to me. […] It was a blow. At the beginning I denied it, I thought it was impossible… I often talked with my parents about how it was possible that it was not clear to me?!"

Sandra, 17 years old:
[…] "I have a friend. She tells me to find my biological parents, but I don't know if I want to know them. […] But when I turn 18, then I will try to find them."

Agnieszka, 18 years old:
"When I was younger [in gymnasium] I really wanted to know, why had they given me away, whether I had any siblings and who they were."

Marta, 18 years old:
"That I was adopted was on my mind all the time when I was growing up. Once, probably in sixth grade, I asked my mom if she had given birth to me and she said she hadn't. I was simply growing up with that knowledge, she didn't lie to me, despite the fact that my grandmother didn't like it at all. Grandma thought that there was no need to confuse the baby, that I could have some problems then, that children would talk ugly about me. I think it was a good thing my mother did. I just asked if she had given birth to me and she said she hadn't. I didn't respond to that at all I think. It was nothing out of ordinary for me, nothing strange."

Wiktoria, 18 years old:
"When my parents confirmed that I was adopted I felt rejected. That is for sure, in the end she [my biological mother] gave me away! That's how I felt."

Early adolescence – level of family relations

Here the analysis focused on the participants describing members of their biological and adoptive family.

Karolina, 18 years old:

[...] "In gymnasium I was thinking all the time about being adopted, about my biological mother, about my dad and stuff, where I came from etc. Being alone at home I liked looking at the photos and remembering. We had a cabinet with photos and there were also some documents. Once I found a paper from the court with my biological name and it was a shock to me. I hid it in the desk. It was not a good idea, because I could have hidden it somewhere else, I don't know, somewhere behind the bed. When my mom was tidying my desk one day she found it and she called me to come back home immediately, because I was playing with friends outside. So I came back and my mother tearfully asked what it was. I told her that I had found it and my mother was terribly hurt that instead of asking them I looked on my own. I should have asked them if I'd wanted to find out about my past. I promised them that if I wanted to know something, then I would ask them, but I never did, because I just didn't want to hurt them, I was afraid. Mom is terribly sensitive and even talking about it now makes her cry and me too. [...] I looked into it further, I continued my search. I was curious, I wanted to know if I look like my biological mother, what she looked like, what her name was, everything."

Wiktoria, 18 years old:

"Once, when I was younger, I thought a lot about my biological mother."

Michał, 18 years old:

"When I was little, I remember watching a movie with my mother and there was a woman with a big belly. I asked my mother if it was like that with me too. She said it wasn't... I didn't understand a thing, but I remember that from that time on somehow I didn't like pregnant women. [...] When I was in the second grade I asked my mother how it happened that I found myself in this family. And then I remember that my mother told me that I was adopted and that another woman gave birth to me. Since then that thought had never left me. I kept thinking about how it must have been and why she had left. In the first grade of gymnasium I had to write about my family in English. I screamed at my mother that she was not my mother and what she had taken me for. I said that she must have hurt the woman who had given birth to me... My mother started to cry... and I was very sorry. From that day on I have never raised this subject again..."

Early adolescence – level of broader social interaction

Here the analysis looked at the participants describing their friends, acquaintances, school environment etc.

Sandra, 17 years old:

"I learned that I was adopted in elementary school. [...] At school one classmate teased me because of it [...] Then in gymnasium fewer people knew that I was adopted and it was better. But there were also some people who once again laughed at me. And now, in technical school, no one knows that I am adopted and I don't talk about it with anyone, because I'm afraid that it will be as before, that they will laugh at me. [...] And now it has somehow faded, that I'm adopted."

Late adolescence – level of self-awareness

Tamara, 18 years old:

"My dream was that in the future, just like now, at the age of 18, I would go and find my mom, my dad, someone from the past, but it was a long time ago and I doubt that I would dare to take such a step. I grew up and so I stopped thinking about that all the time..."

Michał, 18 years old:

"It is very hard for me to live with the awareness that I am an abandoned, unwanted child."

Late adolescence – level of family relations

Karolina, 18 years old:

"Once my boyfriend came to see me. It was not so long ago. Looking at me and my parents, he asked 'Who do you look like? You are neither like your mom nor your dad.' I then told him that I had taken after my father's extended family."

Sandra, 17 years old:

"The older I get, the worse it is. When, for example, someone talks about pregnancy in my family, or, for example, that my cousin looks like my dad. This is so weird, because I can't say that. [...] But sometimes it is hard to call my parents Mom and Dad..."

Patryk, 18 years old:

"I wanted to... just see her [the biological mother], to look her in the eye and ask why she had giv-

en me away… and one more thing – had she given away only me or my siblings too? I went to see her and that was enough for me… I don't want any further contact.**"**

Patrycja, 18 years old:
"These parents [adoptive]… yes, I know that they love me, I feel good here… but they don't understand me really, this is not it. But then they are only my adoptive parents…"

Alicja, 17 years old:
"I would love to know, why had they just given me up for adoption…?"

Szymon, 17 years old:
"My sister is looking for [our biological mother]. I don't want to… I don't want to know. I'm fed up with her [the biological mother]. She did what she did. I have my parents and I don't want them to think that I don't love them. And my sister is stupid that she is looking for her [biological mother]…"

Klaudia, 18 years old:
"My thinking about the biological family wasn't negative. If it was negative, then I guess I would not have wanted to find them, because then how would I look my mother in the face? I wanted to know what the reason for this [adoption] was. I just wanted to see her, to know if she was still alive, if she was fine and the reason for all this. But when my mother told me roughly how things had happened then… Life has its own scenarios and I don't see it in a negative way. […] Today I don't know whether I would be able to do it, whether I would have the courage to just go and look for her?"

Dagmara, 18 years old:
"I am grown up and now I can find out. I was at the registry office and they gave me my birth certificate. It reveals little. There is no address. I called all the people with that name in the whole province. One woman was fudging, I didn't like her […] My [adoptive] parents are against it. I don't want to hurt them. I love them but they have to understand that I need this… It's hard…"

Wiktoria, 18 years old:
"Once, when I was younger, I thought a lot about my biological mother. Now? Well, it crossed my mind, but I decided that I don't need it to be happy, because I found happiness in this family. I don't want to disrupt the rhythm that is in the family to which I belong. If she [the biological mother] wanted to meet me, I would not know what to do, I would consider

it. But I don't feel such a need today. I only know that she was young and that it was not a hasty decision."*

Late adolescence – level of broader social interaction

Alicja, 17 years old:
"When I was younger I told at school that I was adopted. Today I am proud of it. To this day teachers admire my parents […] My friends are also happy that they can have a different, adopted friend."

CONCLUSIONS

By analyzing the content of narratives we established that in the period of early and late adolescence other essential and important issues play a dominant role in shaping the adoptee's identity. This applies both to the content of the questions posed and the degree of involvement in the search for answers. In early adolescence an adopted person raises questions about the reasons behind their adoption, for example, "I wanted to know why I was…given away…"; "who are they…?". Adoptees put a lot of effort into trying to find answers to questions about their biological family. Usually they keep it a secret from their adoptive parents: "I thought about it all the time, I dreamed about it at night"; "I was looking for some photos or documents from the adoption center"; "I kept thinking, what would it have been like if she hadn't abandoned me and why [I was abandoned]"; "I promised my mom that if I wanted to learn something, I would ask them. But I didn't do this, I continued looking…". They might have put off their search: "But I don't know if I want to know them [...] when I am 18 years old, I then will try to find my biological parents." The fact of being adopted is concealed from their peers: "When I was in gymnasium, I didn't like talking about it, about the past. The fact that I was adopted for me was something strange, like a fairy tale"; "at school one classmate teased me because of it [...] Then, in gymnasium fewer people knew that I was adopted and it was better"; "I often talked with my parents how it was possible that previously it had not been clear to me [that I was adopted]…". The fact of being adopt-

ed contributed to some negative experiences in the participants' life: "It was a blow. At the beginning I denied it"; "I felt rejected. […] in the end she gave me away."

At the level of family relations early adolescence is dominated by questions concerning the biological mother: "Once, when I was younger, I thought a lot about my biological mother; I was curious, I wanted to know if I looked like my biological mother, what she looked like, what her name was, everything"; "In gymnasium I thought all the time about being adopted, about my biological mother, about my dad and stuff, where I came from, etc."

During late adolescence (17–18 years old) questions about the biological parents still occupy a significant place in participants' narratives. However, adolescents often give up searching for answers by then: "I wanted to, but today I don't know whether I would be able to do it, whether I would have the courage to just go and look for her"; "Now? Well, it crossed my mind, but I stated that I don't need it to be happy, because I found happiness in this family. I do not want to disrupt the rhythm that is in the family to which I belong"; "I grew up and so I stopped thinking about that all the time"; "But I don't feel such a need today". Only in one of the narratives was search for the biological parents mentioned: "My [adoptive] parents are against it. I don't want to hurt them. I love them, but they have to understand that I need this... It's hard…".

In summary, the process of identity formation in adopted adolescents revealed a lot of important issues they face. This is associated with the experience of being abandoned by their biological parents, but a central place in this process is occupied by narratives about the family. Their content, both in early and late adolescence, is similar, but in late adolescence themes concerning the adoptive family emerge. At this stage of development the concept of family more often means the adoptive family rather than the biological one. Adopted adolescents develop a new concept of family: "my present family", "the family to which I belong", "my adoptive parents". However, this process is not easy, as shown by this statement (Sandra, 17): "But sometimes it is hard to call the [adoptive] parents Mom and Dad…".

The topic undertaken by this study is complex and requires further research in the field of identity, as well as emotional relations in adoptive families. It is interesting that some adoptees look for their biological parents, while others give up. The conclusion that may be drawn from the narratives presented here is that adolescents often hide the need to seek information about their roots from their adoptive parents or forgo the search because they "…just do not want them [the adoptive parents] to be hurt."

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