A PHENOMENOLOGICAL LOOK AT ADOPTIVE NESTING TO PREPARE FOR ADOPTIVE MOTHERHOOD

By

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To all members of the adoption triad
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The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of adoptive nesting for adoptive mothers as they work to create a maternal identity and prepare for the arrival of a child by way of adoption. Adoptive nesting is defined as the emotional, psychological, relational, physical, practical, and spiritual process of preparing to bring a child into one’s home by way of adoption. Since the process of becoming a mother is not the same for adoptive mothers as for biological mothers, this acknowledged difference may inhibit adoptive parents from knowing how to or having permission to participate in the symbolic process of preparing for motherhood, and, in turn, developing a maternal identity. The goal of this study was to explore the lived experiences of adoptive mothers as they reflected on their preparation process of becoming an adoptive mother and the complexities they experienced as they participated in the nonnormative process of becoming a mother through adoption.

The phenomenon of adoptive nesting was explored as it related to the lived experiences of six adoptive mothers. Each participant engaged in two semi-structured interviews, and four of the participants also took part in a group interview. A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was used to analyze the transcripts and
memos. Findings from the study indicated that the process of preparing for motherhood for adoptive mothers is different from the process for biological mothers, but equally important. The concept of adoptive nesting provided a lens for the participants to make sense of their experience of preparing for adoptive motherhood and validated the importance of symbolically preparing for motherhood in a nonnormative way.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The existential yearning and uncertainty of motherhood is nuanced and complex for women desiring to become mothers, but it may be even more complicated for women who become mothers through adoption (Goldberg, 2010; Weir, 2003). Connected to the question “What does it mean to be a mother?” is another question that is crucial to maternal identity development: “How do I prepare for motherhood?” In her influential research on maternal identity, Reva Rubin (1984) discovered that the preparation process for many women begins at an early age. The fantasy of motherhood is initiated by pretending to mother dolls and imaginary babies, and then it moves on to assuming caretaking roles for younger children and continued role-playing activities. Informal steps toward building a maternal identity reinforce that a preparation process begins long before the transition to motherhood formally occurs (Rubin, 1984). This perspective leads to the conclusion that adoptive mothers and biological mothers participate in this informal, ongoing process of preparing for motherhood to varying degrees throughout their lives.

In addition to the psychosocial process of preparing for motherhood that can take place over the course of a woman’s life, there are physical processes that occur once a woman becomes pregnant that assist in preparing for the birth and arrival of the child. According to Workman, Barha, & Galea (2012), the hormonal variation that takes place during pregnancy spurs on the maternal processes of parturition, lactation, recognition of offspring, and maternal aggression. Essentially, the body readies itself to respond to the needs of the child, and this process extends throughout motherhood. Although many elements to the psychosocial process of preparing for motherhood may overlap
for biological and non-biological mothers, the physical and hormonal changes that occur during pregnancy provide a significant gap in experience between the two groups (Fontenot, 2007; Sandelowski, Harris, & Holditch-Davis, 1993).

Attending to both their physical and psychological needs is an important component of the preparation process for expecting mothers. Several studies highlight the significance of self-care and interpersonal support for expecting mothers in reducing depression, anxiety, and stress both during pregnancy and after the baby is born (Barnes, Pratt, Finlayson, Courtney, Pitt, & Knight, 2008; Doran & Hornibrook, 2012; Dunn, Hanich, Roberts, & Powrie, 2012; Milgrom, Schembri, Erickson, Ross, & Gemmill, 2011). Although these studies focus on pregnant mothers, these interventions may also be effective for prospective adoptive mothers. The recurring themes of support, connectedness, and relatedness suggest that one of the most impactful interventions for expecting parents is spending time with others who are going through or have gone through a similar process and can offer wisdom and shared experiences (Barnes et al., 2008; Doran & Hornibrook, 2012; Dunn et al., 2012; Milgrom et al., 2011). To date, research related to how adoptive mothers engage in self-care and interpersonal support is sparse, though the preparation for motherhood for this population is just as important (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Fontenot, 2007).

To more fully understand the psychosocial process of preparing for motherhood for adoptive mothers, the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting is used to make meaning of these symbolic processes. The act of nesting is a universal response of animals and humans alike. The definition comes from the nesting instinct of birds to gather materials for the nest where the female will lay her eggs and prepare for them to
hatch (Merriam Webster Online). This implies that the process of nesting is more than just preparing a physical place for one’s young, but also an instinctual process of preparing to become a parent. Thus, although the concept of nesting is widely understood as a process of preparing one’s house, or nest, for a new baby, it is informally used to refer to any act of preparation on the part of a parent before the arrival of a child.

There are more than 42 million results that come up in a Google search of the word nesting, linking interested readers to countless websites, articles, and references to this term. Some of these sites include nesting.com, thenest.com, thenester.com, blessednest.com, and thenestingjournal.com, which all cater to expecting and new mothers. The media and the public clearly identify this concept as an important part of the childbirth process, but the academic research on this phenomenon is minimal. Although there is substantial research on the process of preparation both physically and psychologically that takes place before the arrival of a child (Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005), the term nesting is rarely used in academic literature to describe this process. To date, only one article has been identified that directly applies the term nesting in a sociocultural context to parents preparing for the arrival of a child (Gameiro, Boivin, Canavarro, Moura-Ramos, & Soares, 2010). This represents a significant gap between academic research and the broader culture’s interest in nesting.

Although the term nesting is primarily used to describe the preparation process for biological mothers, adoptive mothers are weighing in on what it means to apply this concept to their own experience of becoming a mother and bringing a child home. A recent Google search for the term “adoptive nesting” pulled up several websites and
online articles addressing the complexity of this process. One article entitled “5 Nesting Tips for Adoptive Moms” (Angel Adoption Blog, March 24, 2016) addresses the importance of preparing the child’s room, as well as preparing emotionally for the child’s arrival. It recognizes experiences that make adoptive nesting different, such as the unknown timeline, the risk of a failed adoption, and the patience needed to wait. Families.com published a blog entitled “Do Adoptive Parents Nest?” that takes an empowerment stance, encouraging adoptive parents to view themselves as real parents and participate in the process that biological parents experience, including nesting. Similarly, a popular site for adoptive parents, Adoption.com, has several references to the concept of nesting in articles, blog posts, and online forums. Readers engage in dialogue about their process of getting things ready and the ambiguity and anxiety that can come with it. These are just a few examples of the prevalence of this term specifically related to adoption in the larger cultural context.

In light of the pervasiveness of the concept of nesting in the broader culture, it is necessary that adoptive mothers not only participate in a symbolic preparation process of nesting, but also have the freedom to experience this process from their own unique perspective. Though the phenomenon of nesting has not been studied in adoptive mothers, there is reason to believe their feelings of preparedness and sense of maternal identity are just as, if not more, important as they go through the process of becoming a mother in a nontraditional way (McKay, Ross, & Goldberg, 2010). As use of the term nesting gains more popularity, it will become even more vital for adoptive mothers to feel connected to the existential and practical journey of preparing for motherhood.
For the remainder of this paper, I will refer to the unique preparation process for adoptive mothers as adoptive nesting, which I define as the emotional, psychological, relational, physical, practical, and spiritual process of bringing a child into one’s home and becoming a mother through adoption.

**Theoretical Framework**

Since little research exists on the concept of nesting, a framework is needed to explore this phenomenon in the context of becoming a mother and developing a maternal identity. Rubin’s (1984) theory of Maternal Identity Development, particularly the process of binding-in, will be used to establish the connection between the preparation process and maternal identity development. In addition, a phenomenological framework will be applied to highlight the need for more research specifically exploring the phenomenon of adoptive nesting.

**Maternal Identity**

Rubin (1967, 1984), a pioneer researcher in the field of maternal identity development, believed that developing a maternal identity involves biology, socialization, experience, awareness, and most importantly, volition. According to Rubin (1984), there are two generally held beliefs about the origins of maternal behavior: (1) it is instinctive and genetic, which includes the physiological processes of female development, menstruation, and eventually pregnancy and procreation; and (2) it is psychosocial and developmental, which includes childhood play and other socialized processes that teach young girls and women how to be a mother. Although Rubin recognized both these beliefs, she emphasized the importance of not relying solely on the instinctual process of mothering and minimizing the significance of the volitional act of mothering. This is important for two reasons. First, not every woman who participates
in the physiological process of procreation wants to be a mother. Secondly, not every woman engages in the informal, psychosocial motherhood preparation process to the same degree throughout her life. Therefore, although the physiological process of becoming a mother is vital for the continuation of life, the act of choosing to mother is crucial in developing a maternal identity (Rubin, 1984).

Prior to the emergence of Rubin’s theory of maternal identity development (1984), Rubin (1967) created a framework based on her research that emphasized role-taking through modeling behaviors and completing tasks, culminating in the achievement of Maternal Role Attainment (Rubin, 1967), which defines maternal identity as “the end point in maternal role-taking, with a woman having a sense of being in her role, along with a sense of comfort about her past and future” (Mercer, 2004, p. 227). During the preparation process, expecting mothers are performing tasks to prepare for the arrival of their child. These include ensuring safe passage for self and baby; seeking acceptance of and support for self and baby; binding-in, or connecting to baby; and giving of oneself (Rubin, 1975, 1984). Under this model, the concept of binding-in represents one task in the preparation process, but in Rubin’s culminating work, this task takes on more weight and becomes the basis for maternal identity development.

Rubin conducted a naturalistic longitudinal study on the subjective experiences of more than six thousand pregnant women over the span of twenty years. There were no interview or observation schedules; rather, the primary question posed by the trained nurses conducting the study focused on how the women in the study felt about themselves in their situations at that time. From a naturalistic standpoint, the content of the data-collecting session was recorded after each session and averaged ten pages for
each observation hour. The results of this in-depth qualitative study led to the development of Rubin’s theory of maternal identity development (1984).

A substantial component to developing a maternal identity involves the solidifying of the relationship between mother and child. Rubin coined the term binding-in to replace the word attaching because she believed it better acknowledged the qualitative and mutual experience of connection and relationship between a mother and child. The child bonds with the mother in utero through complete dependence and constant physical interaction. The mother responds to the unborn child by caring for her, keeping her safe, and planning for her arrival (Mercer, 2004; Rubin, 1984). This process of mutual interaction and care begins the life-long relationship between parent and child. For the adoptive mother, binding-in in a similar way is difficult, if not impossible, since the mother is not acting as the physical protector of her child prior to placement. Without this physical connection, the adoptive mother must either find alternative ways of binding-in or postpone this meaningful process until the child is placed in her care (Goldberg, 2010; Levy-Shiff, Goldshmidt, & Har-Even, 1991; McKay & Ross, 2010).

There are numerous factors that are meaningful in the preparation process for becoming a mother. However, Rubin emphasizes that the motivating factor comes down to one thing: “the mother’s wish for a child” (Rubin, 1984, p.39), which is something that can be experienced by both biological and adoptive mothers alike. Once the wish—or the desire to mother—occurs, the process of binding-in can begin.

Rubin’s (1984) research breaks down the binding-in process into three modes: (1) Replication, which involves seeking out and studying the behaviors, attitudes, and roles of those who have come before and the trying-on of different components of
motherhood; (2) Fantasy, which incorporates the imagining and envisioning of a future child and one’s relationship to that child; and (3) Dedifferentiation, which refers to the importance of the mother maintaining a sense of self while incorporating the maternal role into one’s current self-image once the child arrives.

Although Rubin’s model is geared toward biological mothers, theoretically there are also ways adoptive mothers can participate in the binding-in process. The waiting mother can initially engage in Replication in a more logistical sense of filling out paperwork and attending classes (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003), and then she can bind-in more relationally and practically once a match occurs and a clearer timeline for bringing a child home is known. She can also engage in Fantasy by imagining what it will be like to have a child and be someone’s mother (Sandelowski et al., 1993). The timeline for adoptive parents is variable, so the preparation stage may last only a short time or it can last several years (Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg, 2010; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991).

Rubin’s concept of binding-in does incorporate some of the tangible processes of preparation, such as information-gathering and future planning, but it does not directly address the importance of symbolically creating space for a child in one’s home. This is where the concept of nesting adds an important dimension that the term binding-in does not fully address. Additionally, preparing for a child moves beyond practical and becomes instinctual, and this innate desire to build one’s nest is not exclusive to biological mothers.

**Phenomenology**

Since little formal research has been conducted on the connection between the preparation process of bringing a child home through adoption and the development of
maternal identity, a qualitative study is necessary to gain a deeper understanding and to lay the foundation for future research. The phenomenon of nesting has symbolically invited women to share in a collective experience and make meaning out of this personal and significant time in a woman’s life. Therefore, a phenomenological research study was conducted to develop insight and awareness about the experience of adoptive nesting. The phenomenological research begins with a description of “the thing itself,” which in this case is the experience of preparing for the arrival of an adopted child (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Only after the phenomenon is brought to light can new knowledge occur. Although the goal of phenomenological research is to understand the phenomenon through the point of view of the participant, the investigator’s “unit of analysis” is not the participant but his or her lived experience, or phenomenon (Vagle, 2014, p. 23).

Martin Heidegger expanded the phenomenological framework in his desire to study human existence and let the process speak for itself rather than coming to an objective reality about it (Guignon, 2012; Heidegger, 1962). According to Heidegger (1988), “Phenomenology is the name for the method of ontology, that is, of scientific philosophy. Rightly conceived, phenomenology is the concept of a method” (p. 20). To better describe human existence, Heidegger (1962) believed that one’s own experiences cannot be isolated from the larger context. Heidegger coined the term hermeneutic phenomenology to expound upon the early understanding of hermeneutics that posits that human phenomena are always meaning- and value-laden, and meanings are accessible to humans because of their meaning-making essence (Guignon, 2012; Heidegger, 1962).
Heidegger developed his understanding of human existence by stating that much of what people do in the “average everydayness” of life is shaped by the community they find themselves a part of (Guignon, 2012). Heidegger (1962; 1988) emphasized the significance of the term dasein, or “being-in-the-world,” to further underscore the significant influence the world has on the self and one’s experiences. This acknowledgment of the impact that other forces have on our experiences, both in our immediate community and the broader cultural context, makes Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology the most appropriate theoretical framework for the proposed study on the phenomenon of adoptive nesting.

Using a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the current study explored the phenomenon of adoptive nesting in connection to the phenomenon of nesting in the larger cultural context. By inviting adoptive mothers to describe their experiences related to adoptive nesting, I as the researcher participated with those individuals in an intersubjective, intentional process of deepening understanding and creating new knowledge (Vagle, 2014).

**Scope of the Problem**

According to Child Welfare Information Gateway (2011), the types of adoptions (open, closed, domestic, international, private, public) and the demographics of adoptees (race, age, disability level) have broadened significantly since the turn of the twenty-first century. Additionally, social acceptance of adoption has also increased, making it a more satisfactory and even desirable path toward motherhood for women (Esposito & Biafora, 2007). Yet despite these positive changes in the social fabric of adoption, the number of children adopted per year has remained relatively stable for the past fifty years at about 125,000, with adopted children making up about two percent of
all children residing in the United States (Biafora & Esposito, 2007; Fontenot, 2007; Porch, 2007; US Census Bureau, 2014). A consequence of the underrepresentation of adoptive parents in the general population is a lack of understanding and resources directed at parents-to-be during the adoption preparation process (Goldberg, 2010; Weir, 2003). This can lead to feelings of alienation and confusion for adoptive mothers, making it difficult to fully participate in the preparation process and to develop a maternal identity (Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg, 2010; McKay & Ross, 2010; Weir, 2003).

Approximately 6.7 million women struggle with infertility, defined as “the inability for twelve consecutive months to conceive or carry a baby to term” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Since most heterosexual couples pursuing adoption have experienced prolonged infertility (Bausch, 2006; McKay et al., 2010; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009), the link between infertility and adoption is an important issue to recognize in the existential journey toward motherhood. For many infertile women, it is difficult and painful to accept that motherhood cannot be achieved in the traditional way, alienating them from the normative process of becoming a mother. When a decision to pursue motherhood through adoption is made, expectant adoptive mothers are at risk of further alienation from the normative process (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Sandelowski et al., 1993; Wegar, 2000).

Becoming a mother is considered a significant rite of passage for women (Barnes et al., 2008; Mercer, 1981; Parry, 2005). Since there is a substantial connection between maternal identity and the preparation process (Mercer, 2004; Rubin, 1984), adoptive mothers may feel uncertain about how to prepare for the transition to adoptive motherhood due to the added complexities of adoption and not being able to participate
in the nesting process in a traditional way (Fontenot, 2007; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991; McKay & Ross, 2010; McKay et al., 2010). Scholars described the ambiguity of the preparation process for adoptive mothers as being “pregnant without a due date” (Goldberg, 2010; Sandelowski et al., 1993). This pre-adoptive period has been termed “childwaiting” as opposed to “childbearing” because of the lack of clear signs that a child is on the way (Sandelowski et al., 1993). Due to the lack of physical evidence, the variation in timeline for the arrival of a child through adoption, and the continued social stigma of becoming a parent in a nonnormative way, adoptive mothers need support and resources to help them maneuver this complex transition. Without support and resources, adoptive mothers may not feel prepared for motherhood (Goldberg, 2010; McKay et al., 2010).

Although few studies exist exploring the long-term impact of the lack of preparedness for adoptive mothers, the research on biological mothers suggests that feeling unprepared for motherhood can lead to a decline in mental, emotional, and relational health, which can have a negative impact on both the mother and the child (Barnes et al., 2008; Doran & Hornibrook, 2012; Dunn et al., 2012; Milgrom et al., 2011). Research on biological parents also identifies a strong association between parent and child mental health outcomes, making early identification and intervention crucial in ensuring positive long-term outcomes for the family system (Essex et al., 2006; Nomura, Wickramaratne, Warner, Muffson, & Weissman, 2002; Weissman et al., 2005). Given the added complexities for adoptive mothers, long-term negative outcomes are linked to attachment difficulties, behavior problems, and eventually adoption dissolution (McKay et al., 2010; Goldberg, 2010).
Need for the Study

Incorporating a child into one's identity and home is a significant transition for any parent, but more research is needed on the unique experience of adoptive parents during the transition to parenthood (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004; McKay et al., 2010). The thousands of online adoption websites, blogs, and forums make clear that adoptive mothers are looking for support and resources to guide them through this complex life transition. Due to lack of academic research on nesting, specifically adoptive nesting, adoptive mothers are looking to informal support and resources for answers (McKay & Ross, 2010). While social media can be extremely helpful, it is not a scientific basis for understanding adoptive families. Academic research is needed in this area to fill in gaps and provide a broader spectrum of understanding for women transitioning into the role of adoptive mothers. Without formal, academic research on adoptive nesting, it is impossible to develop a conceptual framework for what the preparation process looks like and the ways this process could be strengthened.

Despite noted progress in the way adoption is viewed today, adoptive parenting is still contrary to the position of cultural pronatalism and the idealization of parenting that permeates American society (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Porch, 2007). The continued cultural value placed on “blood ties” stigmatizes adoptive families in the broader cultural context (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Goldberg, 2010; Parry, 2005). Because of this reality, counselors and helping professionals need to be sensitive to their language and aware of their unintentional biases and lack of knowledge about the adoption process (Brodzinsky, 2013; Porch, 2007; Riley & Meeks, 2006). They must also cultivate empathy for the complexities and nuances of the adoption experience to effectively assist women in developing their identities as adoptive mothers (Goldberg,
2010). Helping professionals involved in the adoption process need to understand the differences between the process of becoming a mother biologically versus through adoption to assist adoptive mothers in the adoptive nesting process, including developing a maternal identity (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg, 2010).

Despite the long history of adoption in this country and the significant contributions of researchers across disciplines, there is a recurring theme throughout adoption-related research: there is not enough of it. The early pioneers in adoption research identified key needs and complexities for parents and families during the transition from infertility to the pursuit and eventual achievement of parenthood through adoption (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1994; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991; Sandelowski et al., 1993). Since then, however, most adoption research has moved away from preparation and transition for adoptive parents and has focused more on adoption outcomes. This outcome-oriented research focuses on the impact of adoption on the emotional and relational health of the adoptive family members (McKay et al., 2010), as well as the long-term impact of adoption and the prevalence of adoption disruption, an adoption stopped prior to finalization, and adoption dissolution, an adoption that fails after finalization (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012; Goldberg, 2010). While these studies are important and vital for the field of adoption research, they do not sufficiently identify the causes of these negative outcomes and ways to prevent them. To better understand these components and implement interventions to improve long-term outcomes, more research is needed about the transition process for adoptive parents (Goldberg, 2010; McKay et al., 2010).
Although research on adoptive nesting and binding-in for adoptive mothers is scarce, Fontenot (2007) took a conceptual look at the journey toward motherhood that adoptive mothers undergo. This research highlighted areas of uncertainty and confusion adoptive mothers experience by exploring the existing literature on the topic of preparation for adoptive mothers and comparing theories and frameworks for developing maternal identity for biological mothers to adoptive mothers. Despite a handful of studies that exist on the topic of the transition to parenthood for adoptive parents, Fontenot (2007) concluded that much more research is needed to be able to more thoroughly understand the complexities of this process and facilitate support for these parents. Also, although some similarities exist in maternal identity development for biological and adoptive mothers, more research is needed exploring maternal identity specifically for adoptive mothers (Fontenot, 2007).

Due to an acknowledgement in popular culture of the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting and the emphasis in conceptual literature on the importance of preparing for the arrival of a child to facilitate maternal identity development, it is crucial that adoptive mothers feel invited to participate in the symbolic process of adoptive nesting and to explore what this phenomenon looks like for adoptive parents. To better understand adoptive nesting from mothers' perspectives, a qualitative, phenomenological study is needed.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of adoptive nesting for adoptive mothers as they work to create a maternal identity and prepare for the arrival of a child by way of adoption. Since the process of becoming a mother is not the same for adoptive mothers as it is for biological mothers, there may be times where this
acknowledged difference may inhibit adoptive parents from knowing how to or having permission to participate in the symbolic process of preparing for motherhood, and, in turn, developing a maternal identity. Thus, the need for a study on adoptive nesting arose. The primary research question addressed by this study was how adoptive mothers experienced adoptive nesting as they prepared for adoption. To address this question, I conducted a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological research study to better understand this phenomenon from the point of view of adoptive mothers.

**Definition of Terms**

**Adoption Disruption**: The circumstance that occurs when an adoption process is stopped after the child is placed in an adoptive home but before the adoption is finalized legally (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012).

**Adoption Dissolution**: An adoption that ends after legal finalization (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012).

**Adoptive Nesting**: The emotional, psychological, physical, relational, practical, and spiritual preparation process of bringing a child into one’s home and becoming a mother through adoption.

**Binding-in**: The qualitative, mutual experience between a mother and child of connection and relationship that begins at conception and carries over after birth (Rubin, 1984).

**Emotional Nesting**: Honoring the tension of holding back from emotionally attaching to a specific child, while still emotionally engaging in the pre-adoptive process so that the adoptive mother can feel the freedom during post-adoptive nesting to begin emotionally attaching to her adopted child.
Infertility: The inability for twelve consecutive months to conceive or carry a baby to term (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).

Nest: A bed or receptacle prepared by an animal and especially a bird for its eggs and young (Merriam Webster Online).

Nesting: The process of preparing one’s home for the arrival of a child.

Phenomenology: The science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Physical Nesting: Preparing a physical space for the arrival of a child, including setting up a nursery and accumulating baby goods.

Practical Nesting: Participating in various tasks necessary to practically prepare for the arrival of an adopted child during pre-adoptive nesting, as well as the practical tasks related to the daily needs of caring for a child during post-adoptive nesting.

Psychological Nesting: Mentally managing daily life as a prospective adoptive mother during pre-adoptive nesting and an adoptive mother during post-adoptive nesting, as well as the broadening of one’s understanding of family and parenting through the lens of adoption.

Relational Nesting: Fostering healthy, communicative relationships with loved ones and friends throughout the adoptive nesting process.

Spiritual Nesting: Incorporating a personal philosophy or faith in a higher power throughout the adoptive nesting process, as well as a broader acknowledgment that certain things are not in one’s control and that things works out the way they are supposed to.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

In this chapter, I review literature related to maternal identity theory and the process of preparing for the arrival of a child both biologically and by way of adoption. Using Rubin’s (1984) theory of maternal identity development, I address existing research on the topics of transitioning to biological motherhood, transitioning from infertility to the concept of adoption, transitioning to adoptive parenthood, and the importance of developing a maternal identity for adoptive mothers. Throughout this chapter, I incorporate the concept of nesting and highlight the lack of existing academic research on this term to build a case for the need for the current study on adoptive nesting for adoptive mothers.

Maternal Identity Development

Rubin’s research on maternal identity is cited often in literature related to the transition to motherhood (Barnes et al., 2008; Fontenot, 2007; Mercer, 2004; Sandelowski et al., 1993). Also present in the research for biological mothers is the importance of feeling prepared for motherhood (Barnes et al., 2008; Dunn et al., 2012; Milgrom et al., 2010). The connection between maternal identity development and feelings of preparedness is highlighted during this transitioning. At each significant transition, there is needed preparation in all areas. This fits with the definition created for the phenomenon of adoptive nesting, which emphasizes the various nesting areas in which an adoptive mother can prepare. In the following sections, research related to the transitions to various stages of becoming a mother are addressed to emphasize the
connection between feeling prepared for the next stage and developing one’s maternal identity.

**Transition to Biological Motherhood**

This section explores research on the transition to biological motherhood and the needs that arise for this population. One article that incorporates Rubin’s (1967; 1984) research on the transition to biological motherhood is a study conducted by Barnes et al. (2008), which identifies the preparation and information needs of first-time mothers recruited from a community child health center in Brisbane, Australia. Telephone surveys were conducted with 151 participants three months after first receiving services through the center. Additionally, eight participants took part in focus group interviews seven to nine months after receiving services. The results indicate that few participants felt well-prepared for managing the physical or emotional experience of becoming a mother and the practical issues they faced. The authors also suggest that health professionals need to be more available to offer various types of support to increase expecting mothers’ overall feeling of preparedness and make the transition to parenthood smoother. This study reinforces that the transition to parenthood can be difficult and confusing and that more intervention is needed for expectant mothers to feel prepared for this symbolic life transition. Despite their feelings of lack of preparedness, the eight participants in the focus groups reported receiving support from other mothers through storytelling and shared experiences, reinforcing the importance of relational support from peers and mentors to ease the transition to motherhood. These findings support the Replication process in Rubin’s theory of maternal identity development with its emphasis on receiving both tangible and relational resources to increase the sense of preparedness for expecting mothers (Rubin, 1984). This study is
limited by its use of only one well-resourced location in a metropolitan area in Australia, but the similarities between these results and previous literature suggest that it is a viable study on the topic of maternal preparation (Barnes et al., 2008).

Dunn et al. (2012) conducted a pilot study that explored the effects of an eight-week mindfulness-based cognitive therapy group for pregnant women. The research included an experimental group of ten expecting mothers that received the intervention and a control group of nine expecting mothers that received no intervention. Participants in both groups completed several scales to measure levels of depression, anxiety, stress, mindfulness, and self-compassion at the beginning of the study, end of treatment, and six weeks post-partum. After completing the study, participants in both groups were asked to describe their experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and transition to parenthood. The women in the therapy group reported a decline in depression, stress, and anxiety, and an increase in mindfulness and self-compassion over time, whereas there was very little change in outcome scores for the control group. This study highlights the importance of formal mental and emotional health interventions for expecting mothers to help prepare them for the arrival of their child, specifically in a group setting. While this study was limited due to its small sample size and high attrition rate, its findings support previous research on the effectiveness of mindfulness during pregnancy (Dunn et al., 2012).

In a similar study, Milgrom et al. (2011) evaluated the effectiveness of a prenatal intervention to reduce the prevalence of anxiety, depression, poor postnatal adjustment, and parenting difficulties in expecting and new mothers recruited from two hospitals in Melbourne, Australia. 143 women participated and each received information in the
form of a pamphlet called Community Networking that provided relevant support and
information services to expecting mothers. In addition to this pamphlet, half of the
women (n=72) also received a nine-unit self-help workbook called Towards Parenthood
and were instructed to read one unit per week and then discuss the readings with a
psychologist or psychology trainee over the phone each week. Results of the study
indicate that women in the intervention group who received both the general pamphlet
and the parenting curriculum reported lower levels of depression and parental
dysfunction than women who only received routine care and the pamphlet. This study
supports the importance of incorporating a formal parenting program during the prenatal
period to help parents feel more prepared for the transition, as well as regular contact
with a mental health professional to assist in the emotional and psychological process of
bringing a child home. Since the parenting workbook was always administered in
conjunction with a telephone discussion with a trained professional, it is impossible to
determine the degree of efficacy in either component individually, which is a limitation to
the study. However, the use of these components in conjunction with each other is
shown to be successful in increasing parent readiness and improving emotional and
relational functioning (Milgrom et al., 2011).

In a study by Doran & Hornibrook (2012), the authors conducted a qualitative
study with fifteen pregnant women who attended a prenatal and postnatal yoga group at
a community based feminist non-government women’s health center in Northern NSW
Australia. The purpose of the study was to explore women’s experiences of attending
this pregnancy and postnatal group. The women in the study who participated in the
yoga support group were then interviewed individually to discuss their participation in
this group and what impact, if any, it had on their prenatal and postnatal experience. Six themes were developed to describe the participants’ group experiences, including one theme entitled the pregnancy journey, with the subthemes of preparation for birth, connecting with the baby, and sharing birth stories (Doran & Hornibrook, 2012). These subthemes mirror Rubin’s (1984) theory of maternal identity development due to the emphasis on binding-in that is achieved by connecting with and preparing for the child prior to birth, as well as receiving internal and external support from others who are going through the process. This study and its findings reinforce the value of incorporating yoga into a prenatal routine, but the most significant results suggest that sharing stories, information, and resources, as well as simply being a part of a supportive group, contributed substantially to the women’s overall sense of emotional and physical preparedness. According to Doran & Hornibrook (2012), this study is limited in its use of a small sample size comprised of previously identified yoga-users, as well as the absence of follow-up data on birth outcomes and parental adjustment for the participants, indicating that more research is needed that accounts for these limitations.

Although these studies all incorporate components of Rubin’s (1984) theory of maternal identity development, particularly the importance of formal interventions and programs for expecting mothers to increase their sense of preparedness, they do not directly address the concept of maternal identity and the role it plays in a positive transition to motherhood. The research highlights the importance of social support and personal mindfulness as crucial to one’s overall health and sense of preparedness for the significant life transition of having a baby. These studies also suggest that regular
contact with a mental health professional is effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression and increasing overall preparedness in expecting mothers (Barnes et al., 2008; Dunn et al., 2012; Milgrom et al., 2011). While these interventions are effective in improving overall health, as well as creating more confidence in the expectant mothers’ sense of preparedness, the lack of follow-up data on long-term outcomes makes it difficult to determine if the effectiveness of these interventions remains after the transition to motherhood occurs. Thus, more postnatal research is needed on the impact of prenatal preparation on the adjustment to parenthood and the development of a maternal identity for biological mothers (Rubin, 1984; Mercer, 1981; 2004).

Due to the limited research on the transition to parenthood for adoptive parents, it can be helpful to present research on the transition process for biological parents to address possible similarities and differences between these two groups (Goldberg, 2010; McKay et al., 2010). However, the nuances of the adoption process and the lack of representation of adoptive parents in the broader culture emphasize the need for specific research on the transition to adoptive parenthood to more fully understand the needs of this population (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Goldberg, 2010; Porch, 2007). Since this research focuses only on the normative process of becoming a mother biologically, it is difficult to determine if the interventions would be as effective for waiting adoptive mothers, indicating that more research is needed that specifically addresses the needs for this population.

**Transition from Infertility to Adoption**

The link between infertility and adoption is well documented in literature (Bausch, 2006; McKay et al., 2010; Sandelowski et al., 1993). The process of infertility can be time-consuming, financially draining, socially alienating, relationally straining, and
emotionally depleting. For women who are unsuccessful at becoming pregnant through infertility treatments, a decision must be made: accept an identity that does not involve motherhood or be open to pursuing motherhood through non-biological channels, namely adoption (Goldberg, 2010; Sandelowski et al., 1993). If the decision to adopt is made, a symbolic process begins of shifting previously held expectations and expanding one’s view of what family and motherhood mean.

Goldberg et al. (2009) conducted a constructivist, grounded theory study exploring how lesbian and heterosexual pre-adoptive couples experience and construct the transition from infertility to adoption as a means of becoming parents. The participants were thirty heterosexual couples and thirty lesbian couples who participated in interviews conducted with the couple together. The interviews and subsequent analysis suggest that both heterosexual and lesbian couples expressed significant stress and strain on the relationship while trying to conceive biologically through assistive reproductive technology. Lesbian couples made the transition to adoption more easily than heterosexual couples due to the lack of biological relatedness one partner would experience through conception, their familiarity with nontraditional family structures, and the kinship norms of LGBTQ communities that prioritize relational/affective ties over biological ties. Although the heterosexual couples in the study saw the shift to adoption as more of a significant leap than simply a change of course like the lesbian participants, both groups expanded their view on how families form and embraced adoption as an alternative, yet viable way to create a family. This study reinforces the significance of honoring the shift from pursuing infertility treatments to pursuing adoption, as well as the importance of meaning-making for parents who
decide to pursue adoption as a way of expanding their families. Although this study includes a retrospective view of the transition from infertility to adoption, it does not include a retrospective view of the transition from the decision to adopt to the achievement of adoptive parenthood (Goldberg et al., 2009). The absence of this perspective prevents the authors from gathering information about the connection between deciding to adopt and preparing to bring a child home and the process of developing a maternal (parental) identity. This limitation supports the need for the current study, which focused on the retrospective process of becoming an adoptive mother, since the participants had already received children through adoption by the time the interviews took place.

Another study exploring the experiences of becoming parents through adoption after unsuccessful infertility treatments is a qualitative, phenomenological study by Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell (2003). The participants were thirty-nine infertile, heterosexual couples who, due to infertility, had adopted one or more children within the last five years. The couples were interviewed together in their homes using in-depth narrative interviews. After conducting the analysis, three themes emerged, which the authors categorized as Revisioning a Family (the decision to adopt), The Crucible (the adoption process), and Coming Full Circle (the experience of becoming parents through adoption). In Revisioning the Family, the infertile couple is grappling with the fear of raising someone else’s child, the social stigma it could bring, and the powerlessness they would likely feel. Ultimately, the couples in this study who chose to pursue adoption decided that family included children, and adoption was the way they could achieve that goal. Once the decision was made, the participants described the emotional, legal, and
social land mines of the adoption process, which the authors refer to as The Crucible. Several participants related some of the feelings during the adoptive waiting period to feelings they experienced during infertility, particularly the feelings of powerlessness and lack of control. Although many similarities were identified between these processes, the couples in this study reflected that they felt more united as a couple during the pre-adoptive period than they did while pursuing infertility treatments. As the participants described their journey to parenthood, or Coming Full Circle, a range of emotions were identified, including grief over the birth mother’s relinquishment, accomplishment for getting through the process, feelings of inadequacy and lack of preparedness for parenthood, and healing after a long road of both infertility and pre-adoptive waiting. A common theme among participants was the belief that things worked out the way things were meant to be (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003). This study highlights the importance of honoring the transition from infertility to adoption and the similarities that may exist between the processes of infertility and adoption. Also, although maternal (or parental) identity development was not the direct focus, the study addresses the correlation between making meaning of becoming an adoptive parent and feeling prepared to be an adoptive parent. This study identifies the lack of preparedness adoptive parents felt, despite an intense preparation process, stressing the need for more formal support by mental health professionals and adoption-specific resources for this population (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003). This study supports the need for the current adoptive nesting study because of its adherence to a phenomenological framework to understand the experience of creating a family through adoption for infertile couples. Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) acknowledged that meeting with the couple together and only once may
have limited the depth of feedback they received, but the findings lay some groundwork for future research on the topic.

Sandelowski et al. (1993) conducted a qualitative, grounded theory study with thirty-five white, middle-class couples from a larger study of couples waiting to adopt. The couples were interviewed every four months until placement occurred, which averaged between one and two years. The purpose of this study was to describe the claiming work done by infertile couples as they transition from infertility to adoption and cope with the pre-adoptive waiting period (Sandelowski et al., 1993). When processing the pre-adoptive period, the prospective adoptive parents found purpose in (1) constructing a “somewhere out there” child and (2) staking a claim, which involves unblooding, or moving on from the notion that blood ties must be present for love and bonding to occur. By doing this claiming work, the couples in this study not only moved on from a vision of biological parenting to a vision of adoptive parenting, but they also deepened their investment and strengthened their parental identities (Sandelowski et al., 1993). These steps of imagining a child and binding-in to that specific child despite the lack of biological connection reflects Rubin’s (1984) theory of maternal identity development, specifically the process of Fantasy—imagining what the child will be like and how the mother will relate to the child. The participants in this study acknowledged the additional complexities that come with becoming a parent through adoption, but the research indicates a stronger focus on the similarities between the two groups rather than the differences (Sandelowski et al., 1993). This study emphasizes the importance of meaning-making in the transition from infertility to adoption and the need for a symbolic transition during the pre-adoptive period to prepare parents for the identity shift.
that will occur. Although this article continues to be cited in adoption research over twenty years later (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg, 2010; McKay & Ross, 2010), the cultural perspectives on parenthood and adoption have evolved since it was written, highlighting the need to apply the research cautiously and in conjunction with more recent studies.

These articles on the transition from infertility to adoption highlight the importance of symbolically expanding one’s definition of family to include non-biological children (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Goldberg et al., 2009; Sandelowski et al., 1993). In doing so, adoptive parents are encouraged to imagine a future child and incorporate an adoption narrative into their lives. Although maternal (or parental) identity development is not explicitly mentioned, the internal process of transitioning from infertility to adoption reinforces the psychological and emotional experience of preparing for adoptive parenthood, not just the physical and tangible process. This supports Rubin’s (1984) theory of maternal identity development and the need for the current adoptive nesting study on the connection between the preparation process and maternal identity for adoptive mothers. Additionally, the emphasis in these studies is on both partners rather than just the prospective adoptive mother. While this is common in adoption research given the lack of a biological process for the mother and the increased similarities in experience for both partners prior to placement, the need is clear for more research directly exploring the process for adoptive mothers (Fontenot, 2007).

**Transition to Biological and Adoptive Parenthood: A Comparison**

Although the research is limited on the transition process for adoptive parents, some studies exist comparing the experience of becoming biological parents to becoming adoptive parents. Most of the studies took place over twenty years ago, but
they are included because they are foundational in the adoption field and all point to the need for more research in this area (Holditch-Davis, Sandelowski, & Harris, 1998; Koepke, Anglin, Austin, & Delesalle, 1991; Levy-Shiff, Bar, & Har-Even, 1990; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991).

Levy-Shiff et al. (1990) conducted a quantitative study to compare the psychological functioning of prospective adoptive parents to expecting biological parents during the pre-adoptive or prenatal period. The participants in the study were fifty-two first-time parents-to-be; half were waiting to adopt and half were preparing for the arrival of a child biologically. Six different scales were used to assess the psychological functioning and health of these couples, and the results were analyzed and compared. The results suggest that the expectancy period was different for both groups and that adoptive parents showed more positive adjustment attitudes than biological parents did, including higher marital satisfaction and social support during the waiting period. The authors noted that the stress of becoming a parent and incorporating a child into one’s life may have been overshadowed for adoptive parents by the joy of receiving a child after the complex road of the pre-adoptive process. They suggest that this long-awaited joy may reduce initial emotional distress, but that it could lead to tougher adjustment issues later (Levy-Shiff et al., 1990). Although this study lays important groundwork for assessing the similarities and differences between the expectancy phase for biological and adoptive parents, it is limited since it primarily evaluated psychological functioning and relational satisfaction. While these factors are important indicators of a successful transition to parenthood, the lack of research addressing parental readiness and identity development make it difficult to determine
the long-term outcomes for these families. Also, this study highlights the gap in literature on the topic of adoption preparation since the 1990s, with very little current literature on this topic.

Levy-Shiff et al. (1991) conducted another study exploring pre-adoption or prenatal expectations and post-adoption or postnatal experiences in first-time adoptive and biological parent couples, respectively. This short-term longitudinal, mixed-methods study included 104 Israeli, first-time adoptive and biological parent couples. The adoptive couples that participated had already been matched with an infant by the first interview. The couples were interviewed in their homes twice, once two to four months prior to the baby’s arrival and then again when the infants were four months old. Several scales and checklists also were administered at both times to more specifically assess for changes over time and differences between the two groups at two separate times. According to the findings, adoptive parents had more positive pre-adoption expectations and reported better coping and more overall satisfaction with their parental roles in their first few months of parenting. The authors pointed to the age and prior life stability of adoptive parents as contributors. They also stated that higher expectations overall seem to contribute to more positive outcomes for both groups, but that adoptive parents seemed to go into parenting with higher expectations than biological parents (Levy-Shiff et al., 1991). As in the earlier study (Levy-Shiff et al., 1990), Levy-Shiff et al. (1991) acknowledged that the higher satisfaction rates may be related to the significant relief experienced after a long road of infertility and pre-adoption and that follow-up studies are needed to determine the long-term outcomes for adoptive parents. The use of mixed-methodologies and the inclusion of a follow-up interview four months after
placement is a strength of this study; however, interviewing both parents together may have limited the adoptive parents from sharing negative feelings and experiences resulting from the difficulty in becoming parents through adoption due to their desire to reassure their partner that it was worth the wait and the struggle (Levy-Shiff et al., 1991).

Holditch-Davis et al. (1998) conducted a qualitative, naturalistic study comparing early parent–infant interactions of couples with a history of infertility who became adoptive or biological parents to interactions of couples with no history of infertility who became biological parents. Seventy couples participated in the study, including thirty infertile couples who eventually had biological children, twenty-one adoptive couples, and nineteen fertile couples. The study was conducted using parent–infant observation by naturalistic techniques derived from ethology, and behaviors were recorded and analyzed. According to the findings, adoption and infertility did not hinder early parent–infant interactions. Although the results in most categories were similar across groups, one significant difference was an increased division of responsibility between adoptive parents. This is likely due to not breastfeeding, but it could also be indicative of the cohesive and shared process adoptive parents undergo to become parents (Holditch-Davis et al., 1998). Although the emphasis on interactions and behaviors yielded helpful results about the observational similarities and differences between these groups, this study does not account for the participants’ existential or emotional processes. Also, since the observations were made in the participants’ homes, their interactions may have been influenced by the presence of a researcher, which is a possible limitation.
Ceballo et al. (2004) conducted a mixed-methods, longitudinal study on the different paths to parenthood and compared the experience of gaining a child through birth, adoption, or marriage to understand both the overall experience of gaining a child and the complexities of gaining a child through nonnormative means, such as adoption and the blending of families (Ceballo et al., 2004). Sixty-eight families of the 13,000 surveyed in the preliminary National Survey of Families and Households database acquired a child through adoption sometime between the initial interview and the second interview. The researchers used this sample and randomly selected an additional sixty-eight families that became parents biologically and sixty-eight families that became blended families during the time between the first and second interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at two different times approximately five years apart, and several scales and checklists were given and then compared for more tangible measurements. Among the variables being investigated were psychological well-being, marital quality, family relationships, and work roles in the three parental groups—biological, adoptive, and stepparent (Ceballo et al., 2004). Results suggested that the experience of becoming an adoptive parent or a stepparent may be less stressful than the adjustment to biological parenthood. Overall, however, the impact of gaining a child did not vary significantly across parental groups (Ceballo et al., 2004). Although this study suggests that the transition to parenthood may be similar for all three parental groups, it also emphasizes the importance of honoring the transition to parenthood and the nuances that may exist for nontraditional families. The use of a randomly selected, nationally representative sample and longitudinal data is a strength of this study. A limitation of this study is the absence of information about the
circumstances of the adoptions, which limits the generalizability of the results. As in the study by Levy-Shiff et al. (1990), Ceballo et al. (2004) focused on psychological well-being and relationship satisfaction as indicators of overall success in the transition to parenthood. While these are effective measures of short-term adjustment, more research focused on feelings of preparedness and parental identity development is needed to determine long-term outcomes for both biological and adoptive parents.

Using a mixed-methods approach, Koepke et al. (1991) compared the feelings and reactions of first-time adoptive mothers to biological mothers to better understand the transition to motherhood. Individual structured interviews were conducted, and a thirty-item questionnaire was given to first-time mothers of infants, including twenty-four adoptive mothers and twenty-four biological mothers. The results indicated that the feelings and experiences during the transition to becoming mothers were similar in both groups. One notable difference between groups involved emotional responses to fatigue. Adoptive mothers expressed more feelings of happiness, and biological mothers reported more feelings of being overwhelmed and weary. Another difference was that a higher percentage of adoptive mothers reported a positive effect on their marriage (Koepke at al., 1991). The results of this study are particularly meaningful for the current adoptive nesting study because of the emphasis on the transition to motherhood and the noted similarities in this process between biological and adoptive mothers. This study highlights the appropriateness of using existing theories and frameworks for biological maternal identity development for adoptive mothers due to the overlaps in experience, while also addressing the symbolic differences for adoptive mothers, both positive and negative, that need to be honored. Although a mixed
methodology can provide a broader array of data, it may be a limitation for this study because the use of structured interviews and questionnaires may not provide as rich of a description as other qualitative approaches could (Koepke et al., 1991). Additionally, this study is outdated, highlighting the need for current research on the topic of becoming an adoptive mother.

The above studies reinforce that, while similarities exist in the transition to parenthood for biological and adoptive parents, the processes are not the same and should be treated uniquely (Ceballo et al., 2004; Holditch-Davis et al., 1998; Koepke et al., 1991; Levy-Shiff et al., 1990; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991). The prevalence of research suggesting that the transition to adoptive parenthood may be smoother and have less negative outcomes than the transition to biological parenthood dating back over twenty years may have created an assumption that additional intervention for this nonnormative population is not needed (Goldberg, 2010). To the contrary, the frequency of family problems, behavior issues, and adoption disruption indicates that, despite positive expectations and higher levels of satisfaction in the early phases of adoptive parenthood, there are persistent unmet needs for adoptive families that must be addressed (Atkinson & Gonet, 2007; Brodzinsky, 2013; Porch, 2007). In the current study, the emphasis on the connection between feeling prepared and developing a maternal identity—based on Rubin’s (1984) foundational research and the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting—provided further support for the position that the more invested an adoptive mother feels, both to the specific child and to her identity as an adoptive mother, the better the long-term outcomes for these families.
In the next section, more recent research is presented on the transition to adoptive parenthood that shows that, despite some similarities and even advantages of becoming an adoptive parent to becoming a parent biologically, adoptive parents undergo complexities and challenges unique to their process that need to be honored and addressed, both in adoption literature and by professionals connected to the adoption process (Lobar & Phillips, 1996; McKay et al., 2010; McKay & Ross, 2010).

**Transition to Adoptive Parenthood**

Although the literature is lacking on recent research related to the transition to motherhood for adoptive mothers, some significant contributions have been made to the field of adoption research in recent years. McKay et al. (2010) reviewed existing research on the topic of adjustment to parenthood for adoptive parents. By searching six databases using a variety of keywords related to post-adoption, a systematic literature review—limited to those studies that addressed the immediate post-adoption period through three years post-placement—was conducted to examine individual and relational adjustment outcomes during the transition to adoptive parenthood. After thorough review of the literature focusing on the experiences of adoptive parents, only eleven relevant research studies were found addressing the overall health of adoptive parents (McKay et al., 2010). This is surprising considering the abundance of literature addressing the transition to parenthood for biological parents (Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005). Despite the sparse research addressing adoptive parents, this review of existing literature reinforces earlier research done on this topic that suggests that rates of mental and emotional distress in adoptive parents are lower than the rates for biological parents (Ceballo et al., 2004; Holditch-Davis et al., 1998; Levy-Shiff et al., 1990; Levy-Shiff et al.; 1991; Solchany, 1998). Although this seems like good news for adoptive
parents, much more research is needed to determine the causes for these initial differences in distress levels between biological and adoptive parents and whether adoptive parents continue to experience less distress over time. Also, these findings should not suggest that the road to adoption is easier and therefore that more formal support and comprehensive intervention are not necessary (McKay et al., 2010). As in previous studies exploring adoptive parent adjustment, the studies included in this literature review measured success and positive outcomes by focusing on mental and emotional distress rather than feelings of preparedness and parental identity development. Although less distress can be an indicator of a healthy transition, it is difficult to determine how the initial relief and joy of becoming parents following an often long and difficult road of infertility and pre-adoptive waiting affects the results for adoptive parents, which reinforces the need for both post-adoption studies and longitudinal studies to explore this further (McKay et al., 2010).

McKay & Ross (2010) conducted Grounded Theory research describing a pilot study from Ontario, Canada that explored the support needs of adoptive parents in the post-placement period. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine newly placed adoptive parents recruited through local agencies and adoption groups. Eligible participants had to have adopted a child within the past year or be in the process of adoption at the time of the study. Using Grounded Theory methodology to analyze the data, the investigators identified two meta-themes, (1) “Challenges” and (2) “Facilitators,” and then developed the findings into a conceptual framework. Under the meta-theme of Challenges, three sub-themes emerged: isolation and fear, parenting-related obstacles, and lack of support. Within the Facilitators theme, sub-themes were
classified as overcoming challenges, positive parenting experiences, and support. Participants in the study acknowledged the stress they experienced due to not having the needed knowledge about parenting and children, which they often attributed to the suddenness and unpredictability of their placements. According to McKay & Ross (2010), the adoptive parents in the study also acknowledged that they were hesitant or unwilling to participate in parenting groups for fear of being the only adoptive parents present. Adoptive mothers in this study avoided seeking support from biological mothers because they perceived that biological mothers would not be able to understand what they were going through. The participants also stated a hesitation in reaching out to family and friends out of fear of being misunderstood or being perceived as ungrateful. Although this presented as a hardship, most of the participants described seeking out support from other adoptive parents instead of their immediate family and friend networks, which provided comfort and connection for the participants. McKay & Ross (2010) concluded that preparing adoptive parents for the difficulties they may face could increase their feelings of preparedness during the transition to adoptive parenting. The authors highlighted the importance of developing both strong resources and solid support systems during the waiting period so that parents are better prepared to handle the transition once the child arrives. Though this study is limited due to its small sample size and heterogeneous sample, it is a useful framework for adoption workers and adoptive families to pull from during this important transition. McKay & Ross’s (2010) focus on the transition process to adoptive parenthood further supports the need for the current study on adoptive nesting because it connects the tangible preparation process to the emotional, relational, and psychological process that takes place concurrently.
Although somewhat dated, Lobar & Phillips (1996) conducted a qualitative, ethnographic study that still holds value for adoption research today. The study was designed to describe the feelings, experiences, and perceptions of parents pursuing adoption and their influences on the parent–child relationship. The participants in the study were five married couples who had no children prior to adopting and all received infants through private adoption agencies. After conducting open-ended interviews and analyzing the data, the authors identified seven phases of the waiting process: (1) choice to adopt, (2) the adoption path, (3) the call, (4) the pregnancy wait, (5) birth and receipt of the infant, (6) adaptation to parenthood, and (7) after the legal birth certificated. Out of these phases, several themes emerged, including uncertainty, unpreparedness, commitment to an unguaranteed investment, seeing selves as risk takers, isolation, competition, judgment, and ostracism (Lobar & Phillips, 1996). These themes highlight the confusion and loneliness that can exist during the transition to adoptive parenthood due to the ambiguity of the adoption process and the feelings of alienation that accompany a nonnormative lifestyle. While some of the themes are unique to the experience of private, domestic infant adoption, the overall themes and the feelings of the participants seem to fit with current research on the transition to adoptive parenthood and reinforce the need for formal support services for waiting parents, widespread education, and increased understanding of the complex needs that may be present for adoptive families (Goldberg et al., 2009; McKay et al., 2010; McKay & Ross, 2010). Although this study is dated and limited due to its small sample size, Lobar and Phillips’ (1996) use of a qualitative, ethnographic approach to understanding
the private adoption process demonstrated the importance of gaining insight and perspective on the topic through personal and in-depth contact with the participants.

Despite research indicating that some parts of the process of becoming an adoptive parent may be easier than becoming a biological parent, other studies that focus more on feelings of preparedness indicate that adoptive parents feel unprepared for adoptive parenthood and alienated from the normative process of becoming a parent (Lobar & Phillips, 1996; McKay & Ross, 2010). Lack of preparedness, feelings of isolation, and lack of formal support all signify that more understanding and research is needed on the experience of becoming an adoptive parent (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Lobar & Phillips, 1996; McKay & Ross, 2009). Additionally, Rubin’s (1984) research on biological mothers that links feelings of preparedness to the development of a maternal identity suggests that this connection also needs to be explored further for adoptive mothers.

**Maternal Identity Development for Adoptive Mothers**

For both biological and adoptive mothers, feeling invested in the process of becoming a mother and in mothering a specific child leads to a smoother and healthier transition for both mother and child (Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg, 2010; Rubin, 1984). Using Rubin’s definition of binding-in, a mutual attachment between an adoptive mother and child would not begin until the child is physically with the parent. To apply Rubin’s theory of maternal identity development to adoptive mothers, it is necessary to return to the precursor for binding-in: the wish. Rubin defines this as a woman’s awareness of her desire to mother a child (Rubin, 1984, p. 51). For adoptive mothers, that process starts with the intentional decision to pursue motherhood through adoption.
As in Rubin’s (1984) depiction of the wish, adoption literature also points to an underlying theme that permeates the research and seems to be a significant indicator of a successful and healthy adjustment to adoptive parenthood. For adoptive parents to fully invest in the adoption process—physically, psychologically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually—they must believe it is meant to be (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Lobar & Phillips, 1996; Sandelowski et al., 1993; Solchany, 1998).

Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) expound upon this notion of meant to be in their research with infertile couples who have adopted a child. Throughout the complicated process of becoming parents through adoption, the participants expressed an increase in philosophical understanding about life and meaning-making, stating that “somehow this was just the way it was supposed to be” (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003, p. 396). This idea of meant to be is not simply the natural outcome of child placement and maternal role attainment; rather, it is the result of a complex process of identity shifting that begins with the wish for a child and culminates in the attainment of the desired future. Although the concept of meant to be was applied to both adoptive mothers and adoptive fathers, it bears a certain significance in the process of maternal identity development. Once a prospective adoptive mother has the wish (Rubin, 1984) and then believes a certain child is meant to be (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003), she can begin readying herself, her home, and her life for the arrival of her child through adoptive nesting.

Like the concept of meant to be, Sandelowski et al. (1993) used the term parental claiming to describe the process prospective adoptive parents experience as they prepare to bring a child home. According to Sandelowski et al. (1993), there are
three important steps involved in this parental claiming process: (1) creating an object to claim, (2) undermining the importance of blood ties, and (3) transforming someone else’s child into the right child for them. By undergoing this process, the prospective parents buy into the belief that the child who comes to them is theirs and can begin preparing for parenthood and incorporating their child into their lives (Sandelowski et al., 1993). Both concepts of meant to be (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003) and parental claiming (Sandelowski et al., 1993) tie in to Rubin’s (1984) theory of maternal identity development in their recognition of the symbolic shift in role and identity necessary to ensure a successful transition from infertility to adoption.

Solchany (1998) also addressed this concept of meant to be in a qualitative, phenomenological study designed to develop a deeper understanding about the journey for women participating in the pre-adoptive experience and adoption process. The participants were three women who had each recently adopted a child internationally. The author conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews to explore the phenomenon of the pre-adoptive experience. After thorough analysis of the data, the author characterized the pre-adoptive period with seven themes: (1) taking control—deciding to adopt and preparing, (2) creating a family—believing this is the path they are meant to take, (3) anticipating, (4) celebrating the pictures—making the child and the future relationship more tangible, (5) honoring the child’s origins—valuing the part of their stories that precede them, (6) investing personally—spending of self, time, money and, resources, and (7) bonding—feeling connected to the unmet child as a result of all the other themes. Although there are components to the pre-adoptive experiences for the participants that may be unique to international adoptions, the findings can be
applied to other types of adoptions as well (Solchany, 1998). This research supports the use of a phenomenological study by identifying the pre-adoptive experience as a phenomenon. Additionally, this study highlights the significance of the pre-adoptive experience and the need for more research on this topic. This study touches on the importance of adoptive nesting without using the term by its emphasis on the emotional, psychological, and physical process of preparing for adoptive parenthood. This study is limited due to its small sample size, but since the focus was solely on international adoption, Solchany (1998) reported receiving a rich picture of this experience through these three participants.

Despite the lack of current research on both the transition to adoptive motherhood and the incorporation of the phenomenon of nesting, Fontenot (2007) made a significant contribution to these topics in a literature review conducted specifically on the adaptation and transition to motherhood for women who adopt children, with the goal of identifying implications for clinical practice. The author reviewed existing literature on the transition to biological motherhood to provide a comparison between the processes. Rubin’s framework for maternal role attainment (Rubin, 1967) and theory on maternal identity development (Rubin, 1984) as well Mercer’s (2004) subsequent research on Becoming a Mother are included, which highlights the significance for adoptive mothers of strengthening maternal identity and binding-in to their child even before that child is placed with them. The literature review was conducted by searching electronic databases for articles focusing on the early transitions to adoptive motherhood published after 1990. After an extensive search of several databases using many key terms, six articles were identified that met the criteria. After evaluating the
existing literature, the author concluded that the process of adaptation to motherhood is very similar for adoptive and biological mothers, but adoptive parents reported unique emotions and concerns during the transition that need to be addressed to better help them navigate this transition (Fontenot, 2007).

After thorough qualitative analysis, Fontenot (2007) applied Mercer’s (2004) four stages of Becoming a Mother to the process of becoming a mother through adoption to highlight the added complexities that adoptive mothers face in developing a maternal identity. By looking at the stages, there are clear areas of uncertainty and confusion for adoptive mothers in completing this process. The first stage—commitment, attachment, and preparation—which is identified as the pregnancy stage (Mercer, 2004), is risky for prospective adoptive mothers. Allowing oneself to fully commit is not wise considering the uncertainty of the adoption process prior to placement. In addition, biological mothers begin attaching to their baby in utero throughout pregnancy, with milestones such as ultrasounds and the baby kicking that make the process even more real (Rubin, 1984). This type of physical attachment is not present for adoptive mothers. Because commitment and attachment are difficult for adoptive mothers to participate in prior to the arrival of the child, it is a reasonable assertion that the next part of the first stage—preparation—would be difficult as well. By not being able to engage in Mercer’s (2004) pregnancy stage, the other stages of Becoming a Mother are not likely to occur in a similar manner for adoptive mothers as they do for biological mothers. By comparing the differences in process and experience for adoptive mothers to biological mothers in developing a maternal identity using Mercer’s (2004) framework, Fontenot (2007) stressed the need for the development of a maternal identity framework specific to
adoptive mothers. Additionally, although a handful of studies exist on the topic of the transition to parenthood for adoptive parents, much more research is needed to more thoroughly understand the complexities of this process and facilitate support for these parents (Fontenot, 2007). Although there is a gap in the literature regarding adoptive nesting, Fontenot (2007) touches on the complexity and beauty of this phenomenon without naming it. Also, the specific emphasis on maternal identity development and the use of Rubin’s and Mercer’s frameworks reinforce the need for further studies on the topic of maternal identity for adoptive mothers. After an extensive review of the literature, Fontenot (2007) noted that new theories on maternal identity and role transition are needed for helping professionals to better attend to the needs of adoptive mothers.

Research on maternal identity development for adoptive mothers is scarce, but the few studies that exist point to a meaningful connection between participation in a symbolic preparation process and the existential practice of shifting one’s identity to incorporate becoming a mother (Fontenot, 2007; Solchany, 1998). Due to the added complexities of becoming a mother through adoption, adoptive mothers have felt alienated from the broader sociocultural process of preparing for motherhood, leading to a lack of confidence in their maternal identities and feelings of unpreparedness prior to the arrival of a child (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; McKay & Ross, 2010). The following section explores the limited existing research on the phenomenon of nesting and points to future research that is needed to explore this phenomenon specifically for adoptive mothers.
Nesting and Adoptive Nesting

Although a substantial amount of research exists on the preparation process for expectant mothers, the academic literature has yet to recognize the significance of the cultural phenomenon of nesting and the symbolism of referring to the preparation process in this way. After an extensive review of the literature, only one article was identified that touches on the concept of nesting and expands it to incorporate more than just the physical process undertaken by birds. This article, entitled *Social Nesting: Changes in Social Network and Support Across the Transition to Parenthood in Couples That Conceived Spontaneously or Through Assisted Reproductive Technologies* by Gameiro et al. (2010), provides a starting point for future research in this area. These researchers studied social nesting, which they define as movement by the parents toward their nuclear family during the process of transitioning to parenthood, in spontaneously conceiving parents and parents who underwent Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART). This denotes the researchers’ awareness that the nesting process may vary depending on the complexity of experience a couple undergoes to become parents. Thirty-one women and twenty-two men that conceived through ART and twenty-eight women and twenty-four men that conceived spontaneously were interviewed twenty-four weeks into pregnancy and four months postpartum. The results indicated that, regardless of method of conception, new parents showed a strong social nesting movement toward their nuclear family during the transition to parenthood. Although results were similar for both groups, the ART group reported a decrease in perceived emotional support from extended family. Findings of this study highlight the importance of honoring the differences in spontaneously conceiving parents and ART parents in their pre-natal preparation process and their post-natal adjustment process.
Gameiro et al.’s (2010) study findings support the claim that the nesting process is more complicated for nontraditional parents than it is for spontaneously conceiving biological parents. The researchers concluded that future research is needed to better explain the social nesting phenomenon and how it impacts both traditional and nontraditional parents (Gameiro et al., 2010). Although this study used the term social nesting, it did not define nesting, making it difficult to fully understand where this term originated. Gameiro et al. (2010) also described the social nesting process as gender neutral, which assumes that the process would look similar for both fathers and mothers. This is acknowledged as a possible limitation in the study given that some differences arose between the mothers and fathers, particularly in the ART group, regarding the perceptions of emotional and instrumental support received from family members. This limitation points to the need for the current study on adoptive nesting because of its incorporation of the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting and the connection between the adoptive nesting process and maternal identity development for adoptive mothers.

Summary

After reviewing the research on the transition to biological parenthood, the transition from infertility to adoption, the transition to adoptive parenthood, and comparisons between different groups of parents, it is apparent that many similarities exist in the process of preparing for motherhood for biological and adoptive mothers (Holditch-Davis et al., 1998; Levy-Shiff et al., 1990; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991; Koepke et al., 1991). Despite the noted similarities, the research also highlights the significant differences and added complexities for adoptive mothers and the need for more research on the transition to motherhood and maternal identity development for this group (Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg et al., 2009; Lobar & Phillips, 1996; McKay & Ross,
2010; Solchany, 1998). Additionally, throughout the research on transitioning to motherhood, only one article address the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting directly (Gameiro et al., 2010), which is surprising given the prevalence of this concept in popular culture today. By conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study on adoptive nesting, the phenomenon of preparing for motherhood for adoptive mothers was explored in hopes of furthering the research and eventually developing a framework for adoptive nesting. In the next chapter, the methodology for the current adoptive nesting study is described.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the current study, including the methodology and data collection and analysis procedures that were used. The purpose statement and research question are reiterated to highlight the focus of the current study and the rationale for the chosen methodology and data collection and analysis procedures. This chapter also includes a subjectivity statement to account for possible bias and to explain the interest in this subject area.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The research method chosen for the current adoptive nesting study was phenomenology because of its emphasis on lived experience in investigating a certain phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology highlights the importance of dasein, or “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1962; 1988). At the core of dasein is the notion that no object or person exists outside of the world around it and that every object or person is influenced by its environment (Guignon, 2012; Heidegger, 1988). Miles, Chapman, Francis, & Taylor (2013) specifically connect Heidegger’s concept of sorge, or “care,” to studies focused on interpersonal relationships and the impact of the relationships on the phenomenon. Sorge is a fundamental component for being-in-the-world, as it is what connects people to others in the world in a meaningful way (Heidegger, 1962). This is important for the current study because of the interconnectedness that exists between the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting and a prospective adoptive mother’s lived experiences and relationships as she waits and prepares for the arrival of her child. Sorge is also
reflected in the current study because of the shared experience I as the researcher had with the participants in being an adoptive mother. This commitment to and investment in the phenomenon on the part of the researcher is a critical component of hermeneutic phenomenology (Vagle, 2014).

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of adoptive nesting for adoptive mothers as they work to create a maternal identity and prepare for the arrival of a child by way of adoption. Adoptive nesting is defined as the emotional, psychological, physical, relational, practical, and spiritual preparation process of bringing a child into one's home and becoming a mother through adoption.

The following research question guided the study: How did adoptive mothers experience adoptive nesting as they prepared for adoption?

**Participants and Sampling**

When selecting participants for a phenomenological study, they must meet the theoretical criteria, meaning they need experience with the phenomenon of interest, a desire to explore the meaning and nature of the phenomenon, and a willingness to participate in all aspects of the study (Moustakas, 1994). The selection criteria for this study consisted of first-time adoptive mothers who had finalized a domestic adoption of a child below the age of two within the last two years and who have no biological children. In phenomenological research, a homogenous sample is critical to the outcome of the analysis (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). To increase homogeneity, participation was limited for this study to adoptive mothers who were in heterosexual partnerships at the time of adoption. For the initial screening, a brief phone
meeting or email exchange was used to assess for both the theoretical criteria and the selection criteria.

Participants were recruited from local adoption agencies in and around North Florida. A flyer was emailed and distributed to local adoption entities and adoption professionals for recruitment. As a member of the adoption community, I also used my local contacts and word of mouth to recruit participants. No parameter was put on the age of participants since less than ten participants met criteria, which was a manageable number of participants for the study (Crist & Tanner, 2003). The average age of the women in the study was thirty-seven. One participant was in her late twenties, while the rest of the women ranged from their late thirties to early forties. This is congruent with the higher average maternal age of adoptive mothers compared to biological mothers in the United States (Goldberg, 2009; Vandivere et al., 2009).

Although there is no set number of participants needed for a phenomenological study (Vagle, 2014), six to eight participants, with a cap at ten participants, was sought out for the current study. If saturation had not been achieved with that number of participants, then more would have been recruited, as is congruent with phenomenological methodology (Vagle, 2014). The current study had six participants, which was an appropriate number theoretically and practically to conduct the research. Although no selection criteria was set on race of the adoptive mother, all six participants identified as white. Additionally, no parameter was put on education or income level, but all the participants in the current study are college-educated and could be considered middle to upper-class. This sample is congruent with national statistics indicating that the
majority of private, domestic, infant adoptions in the United States involve white, middle-class adoptive parents (Vandivere et al., 2009).

**IRB Protocol**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Florida. A thorough description and explanation for the study is found in the Study Protocol (see Appendix E). The IRB process is designed to ensure that the most ethical and appropriate standards and procedures are implemented in the study to ensure the safety and well-being of the human subjects. For a qualitative study about participants’ lived experiences, this began with ensuring confidentiality to the best of my ability at every stage of the research.

Each participant chose a pseudonym during the first interview that was used for the remainder of the study as the only identifying information for the participant. Each research participant was designated a confidential file that included the informed consent form, demographic information, interview transcriptions, and any memos, notes, or observations related to the participant. All hard copies were kept in a secure and locked file cabinet inside my home office. All electronic documents were stored on a password-protected computer under the participants’ pseudonyms. No identifying information was given to the participants about each other.

The participants were notified on the informed consent form (see Appendix D) that, although confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained throughout their participation in most of the research study, it could not be guaranteed during the group interview. The participants were informed that they could opt out of the group interview to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, or for any other reason at any point during the study. At the end of the second interviews, I reminded each participant about the
limitations to confidentiality and anonymity during the group interview and asked if they had any questions or concerns about the group interview process. I also informed them they could be referred to by their pseudonym or any name they preferred during the group interview.

**Data Collection**

For this study, each participant was asked to take part in two individual, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour each and a follow-up group interview lasting ninety minutes, with approximately two weeks between each interview. The purpose of the first interview was for the participants to provide relevant background information and share their stories and experiences with preparing for adoptive motherhood using the semi-structured Interview Guide 1 (See Appendix A) as a framework (Seidman, 1991). Although unstructured interviews are most commonly used in phenomenological research studies because they tend to be more dialogic and conversational (Vagle, 2014, p. 78), a semi-structured approach was selected for the current study to provide consistency in the interview format. The goal of phenomenological research is not to replicate the same interview with each participant; rather, the purpose is to find out as much as possible about the phenomenon of interest. Thus, the structure served as a guide and was modified if it interfered with pursuing the phenomenon fully (Vagle, 2014). After each first interview, researcher memos were recorded to make note of any reactions, observations and informal communication between the researcher and the participant before and after the recording (Crist & Tanner, 2003).

During the second interview, the focus was on reflecting meaning. This was done by sharing experiences since the first interview, providing any additional thoughts on the
phenomenon of interest, and presenting themes to the participants that emerged from the analysis of the first round of interviews (Seidman, 1991). Results were provided in the form of specific themes that emerged in each participant’s first interview, as well as general themes that emerged throughout all the participants’ first interviews. During the second interview, the phenomenon of nesting was discussed and the phenomenon of adoptive nesting was introduced and defined for the participants to develop a stronger connection between the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting and how it relates to adoptive mothers. (See Appendix B Interview Guide 2.) After each second interview, researcher memos were recorded again to ensure the incorporation of all relevant data into the data analysis process (Crist & Tanner, 2003).

To fully develop an understanding of the phenomenon of interest, Seidman (1991) recommends conducting at least three interviews. Similarly, Vagle (2014) urges phenomenological researchers to engage the participants as many times as necessary and in whatever formats are most useful to fully describe the phenomenon of interest. For the current study, a third interview was conducted in a group format in which the participants were gathered together to reflect, connect, summarize, review transcripts, and make individual and collective meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 1991). This component aligns with Heidegger’s emphasis on the reflective-interpretive process of exploring phenomenon (Gadamer; 1976; Moustakas, 1994). In response to Heidegger’s emphasis on hermeneutics, Gadamer (1984) reinforced the view that interpretation is not an isolated activity, but rather it is the basic structure of experience (p. 58). This process of interacting with the data both individually and collectively through a process
called the hermeneutic circle is discussed in more detail later in this chapter (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakas, 1994).

An additional goal of the group interview was to facilitate support and enhance community among adoptive mothers. The presence of the group component strengthened the interconnectedness of the participants to each other and to me as the group facilitator, which aligns with Heidegger’s concept of sorge (Miles et al., 2013). Although participation in the group interview was encouraged from all six participants, only four participants attended the group interview. The two women that did not attend lived in more rural areas about an hour away. Although they initially committed to the group interview and expressed interest in participating, both women had work conflicts precluding them from attending. These two participants were contacted separately to share any final thoughts and wrap up the study. A second group interview was considered, but since the participants who did not attend live nearly an hour away from the location where the interviews were conducted and in opposite directions from each other, it was decided that a second group interview would not occur at this point.

As the group interview began, the women greeted each other and sat down excitedly. In the room, there was a large white board with the emerging themes from the first two interviews displayed. This summary provided a background for the interview. The women were asked to look over the themes and provide any reactions or feedback. No new themes emerged from the group interview, indicating saturation, but through dialogue, some of the themes were renamed and reorganized under different nesting areas. As was the case for the first two interviews, researcher’s memos and field notes were recorded immediately following the group interview to document informal
conversations, observations, and interpersonal dynamics that may not have come across on the audio recording, in addition to the researcher’s reactions and reflections (Crist & Tanner, 2003). After the group interview, the memos also highlighted general reactions to the shared experience of adoptive nesting and how those dynamics differed from the interactions between the researcher and one participant.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (Flick, 2009). The transcribing and subsequent coding of the first interview took place closely following the interview and prior to the second interview. The same procedure was followed between the second interview and the group interview (Seidman, 1991). Thus, the data sources for the current study included interview transcripts as well as the memos, field notes, and observations recorded during and after each interaction with the participants.

Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis are difficult to separate in phenomenological research because they are intertwined throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014). To stay congruent with the theory and method, data should be analyzed based on the specific approach being used. One commitment that remains important across phenomenological approaches is utilizing a whole-parts-whole process, which comes from the idea that focal meanings, or moments, must be thought of in relation to the broader context, or the whole (Vagle, 2014).

For the current study, Van Manen’s (2001; 2014) Hermeneutic Phenomenology Thematic Analysis was used to analyze the data. This method involves approaching the data in three distinct ways: (1) “Wholistic,” which involves attending to the text as a whole; (2) Selective (highlighting), which involves reading through the text several times and identifying statements or phrases that are particularly revealing about the
phenomenon; and (3) Detailed (line-by-line), which involves looking at every sentence and asking what the line or sentence says about the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2001; 2014). Engaging the data in this manner increased the trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that the participants’ lived experiences were accurately represented throughout the data analysis and in the subsequent themes that emerged.

For this study, Van Manen’s (2001; 2014) approach to thematic analysis was first applied to each interview individually. Each interview and subsequent memo from the first round of interviews was read and re-read to capture the essence of the data as a whole and what the text conveyed about the phenomenon of adoptive nesting. Then, I returned to the data in portions, reading and re-reading paragraphs and sections to get a deeper sense of what each section was communicating about the phenomenon. Next, I returned to the data again, this time reading each sentence and line carefully and asking if and how each line connects to the adoptive nesting experience. This coding process resulted in the emergence of preliminary themes from the first interviews for each participant individually, as well as general themes throughout the interviews. This same process took place after the second interviews and the group interview as well, leading to richer descriptions of experiences and deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

Although there are some similarities in methodology across phenomenological approaches, Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology—which falls under the category of interpretive phenomenology—makes some important distinctions for how data analysis should and should not be conducted (Moustakas, 1994). “The interpretive phenomenological methodology aims to understand the subjective meaning of the
social experience, rather than measure, explain, or make predictions, and to locate this within a specific context” (MacDonald, 2016, p. 21). In both data collection and data analysis of interpretive phenomenological research, a balance is necessary between structure and freedom to provide a clear focus, while still leaving room to engage with and respond to the data (Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson, & Spence, 2008). To do this, the researcher participates in the discipline of reading, writing, talking, thinking, rereading, rewriting, and developing new insights (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1393). This process is known as the hermeneutic circle—interpretation through understanding is achieved through this circular process (Crotty, 1998; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013).

From a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, inviting others to participate in this circle can lead to richer and deeper interpretations (Gadamer, 1984; Tuohy et al., 2013; Vagle, 2014). As mentioned previously, I invited the participants to join the hermeneutic circle by sharing exemplars, or “significant excerpts that characterize specific common themes or meanings across participants” (Crist & Tanner, 2003, p. 204), as well as facilitating their reflection on the experience of participating in this research. The participants were incorporated into the hermeneutic circle during their individual interviews and the group interview through sharing emerging themes both from their own previous interviews and from the larger body of data collected. This provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect with me on the emerging themes and provide additional perspective and feedback in a collaborative setting. Memos and field notes were taken when dialoguing with anyone connected to the data as part of the audit trail.
After thorough engagement with the data by participating in the hermeneutic circle, I as the research investigator continued with interpretation through naming, which is the conceptualization and coding of central concerns and exemplars (Benner, Tanner, & Chesla, 1996). As themes emerged, I provided names that were congruent with the way the themes were represented in the individual stories of the participants. Some of the wording for the themes came directly from the participants, while other names were developed through careful engagement with the data using the three approaches in Van Manen’s (2001; 2014) Hermeneutic Phenomenology Thematic Analysis. When naming the emerging themes, I incorporated the phenomenological emphasis of discovering the life-world existential themes from the data that allow phenomenologists to reflect on how people experience the world (Tuohy et al., 2013; Van Manen, 2001). By using life-world existential themes as a framework for naming in the current study, the emerging themes carried both a personal and a universal significance that resonated across the data.

A key difference between Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology and Heidegger’s interpretive phenomenology is how to respond to the investigator’s assumptions (Vagle, 2014). While descriptive phenomenology promotes bracketing, or “putting aside past knowledge and assumptions to be fully present with the phenomenon as it is” (Vagle, 2014, p. 67), interpretive phenomenology sees the recognition of assumptions and past knowledge as the forward arc of the hermeneutic circle, making this awareness of personal connection to the phenomenon not only appropriate, but crucial to the interpretation process (Crist & Tanner, 2003). From a Heideggerian perspective, “Our understanding is always there and cannot, nor should it, be divorced from our thinking” (Smythe et al., 2007, p. 1392). With that in mind, it is still important in interpretive
phenomenological studies to be aware of any previous knowledge or assumptions that could influence both the conduct of the investigator and the interpretation of the data (Smythe et al., 2007; Vagle, 2014).

One approach to addressing the interpretive phenomenological researcher’s past assumptions and experience is by engaging in an alternative technique known as bridling (Dahlberg, 2006). Bridling incorporates the essence of bracketing, but rather than seeking to remove pre-understandings held by the researcher, the goal is to restrain such pre-understandings so they do not limit openness. This process emphasizes the researcher’s active role in continually seeking to understand the phenomenon as a whole throughout the study (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2014). Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom (2008) describe bridling as looking forward and bracketing as looking backward, emphasizing that the goal of bridling is to allow the researcher to construct some distance between self and the phenomenon to create an atmosphere of “actively waiting for the phenomenon, and its meaning(s), to show itself” (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 16).

As a fellow adoptive mother interviewing other adoptive mothers about their experiences, I was acutely aware of the possibility for bias and assumptions based on my own experiences. I incorporated bridling into my data collecting and data analysis to provide greater opportunity for the phenomenon to be understood more fully through the lived experiences of the participants. Immediately following each interview, I wrote memos specifically addressing my personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences with the participant and in response to her lived experiences. I also used bridling of my own perceptions while listening to the audio recordings of the interviews and reading through
the interview transcripts and memos. I also analyzed my responses during the interviews to identify if any themes emerged from me as opposed to the participants. Hearing my own reactions and experiences on the recordings and reading them on the transcripts provided the opportunity for me to continue to bridle my thoughts and reactions throughout the data collection and data analysis processes.

From a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, it is central for researchers to put aside any claim that their research will yield objective, simplified, scientific concepts of truth. This essential tenet does not remove phenomenological research from the scientific realm, but rather it strengthens the identification of phenomenology as a scientific philosophy (Heidegger, 1988). Instead of seeking repetition in results, the researcher must embrace the reality that each conversation and interaction is “uniquely itself” (Smythe et al., 2007, p. 1392). As a result, themes can emerge and interpretations can be made by honoring each narrative and acknowledging that there will always be more thinking and experiencing to be done, both individually and collectively (Smythe et al., 2007).

**Trustworthiness**

In phenomenological studies, researchers are less concerned with external realities than with how a person describes a situation and experience (Smythe et al., 2007). From a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, resonance, or “attunement with the phenomenon,” is the mark of trustworthiness (Smythe et al., 2007). Trustworthiness is obtained if the findings of a study “consider whether one’s concern has been answered” (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 279). To be trustworthy, the research must be thought-provoking and must engage participants in thinking and understanding their experiences in new ways (Smythe et al., 2007, p. 1396). For the current study,
trustworthiness involved determining if the phenomenon of adoptive nesting was appropriately described and understood through the lived experiences of the adoptive mothers who participated in the study.

One way to strengthen the trustworthiness of a phenomenological study is by utilizing an interpretive team to bounce ideas off of and engage the data (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Smythe et al., 2007). Although this can be done in many ways, the current study involved continual discussion with the participants about the emerging themes and the findings, which created a kind of interpretive team. Further, the group interview provided a culminating experience for this interpretive team to come together and engage the data again collectively. Providing an opportunity for the participants to be co-researchers based on their mutual investment in the study and the impact it could have in the field of adoption was congruent with phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994).

Inviting participants to be a part of the interpretive team also serves to member-check, or triangulate, as a way of ensuring that the findings that are being presented reflect the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants (Flick, 2009). Although the concept of triangulation is not stressed in Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, incorporating the participants into the data analysis process increases the possibility that the phenomenon of interest is fully and accurately addressed (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Additionally, inviting participants to reflect on themes from each interview and their overall experience adds to the trustworthiness of the study (Miles et al., 2013).

Another important aspect of establishing trustworthiness is by accounting for researcher bias. As mentioned previously, it is not appropriate in interpretive
phenomenology for the researcher to bracket out all past knowledge of and experience with the phenomenon of interest (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Vagle, 2014). However, it is necessary to be aware of possible bias resulting from assumptions based on the researcher’s own lived experiences. By incorporating bridling into my data analysis process, I established enough distance to see the phenomenon from a fresh lens, but I did not, nor could I, remove myself entirely from the research process or the subsequent findings (Vagle, 2014). Also, integrating my participants into my interpretive team provided many opportunities throughout the data collection and data analysis processes to bridle my own experiences while reflecting on the lived experiences of my participants.

**Subjectivity Statement**

The motivation for this research came from my own experience as an adoptive mother and my passion as a mental health professional to help people explore their identities and make meaning out of their experiences. When I began my doctoral work in 2011, I had no children. Shortly after starting the program, my husband and I underwent infertility treatments until eventually making the decision to pursue adoption wholeheartedly and whole-mindedly. In 2012, we welcomed our son into our family at the age of four by way of adoption. It was only two months from the day we first heard his name to the day he moved in to our home permanently, resulting in an expedited nesting process and a great deal of uncertainty and fear about my readiness for motherhood. It was at this point that my fascination with the phenomenon of nesting and maternal identity development took shape. My fascination began informally through talking to others I knew who had adopted children and looking at online resources for adoptive families. In my rushed process of readying my house and my heart for my
child, I thought about the term nesting often. It gave me the permission I desperately needed to prepare his room, to let others participate in the waiting period with me, and to begin feeling like a mother. Yet in my online searching, I noticed the discrepancy between the prevalence of the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting for biological mothers and the infrequent use of that term in the context of adoptive mothers. The lack of the term in the context of adoption made me feel alienated. I wanted to participate in this phenomenon in the same way as all the other women who became mothers biologically, but I knew my process was not the same.

As I began to see motherhood from the unique lens of an adoptive parent, my personal and professional worlds started colliding. As a mental health professional who meets with clients, my connection to the local adoption community began generating counseling referrals specifically related to adoption. Simultaneously, I had made the decision to focus my doctoral research on the nesting process for adoptive mothers. I was saturated in adoption, and it felt congruent and motivating, both personally and professionally.

In 2015, my husband and I welcomed two more children into our family by way of adoption. This time, I was more mindful and intentional about my nesting process. My identity as a mother was well-established, and I felt confident about expanding my maternal identity further as the mother of two daughters, ages five and three at the time of adoption. Although I felt more prepared, both physically and emotionally, there was still a great deal of uncertainty and a tremendous amount of tangible preparation to do. I realized that, although nesting in the broader sense was important, there were specific
ways I needed to prepare that were unique to my situation as an adoptive mother. This led to the development of the term adoptive nesting.

My interest in conducting a study on adoptive nesting with first-time adoptive mothers came out of my personal experience and the lived experiences of others I know. From a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, consistent and strong passion for the phenomenon of interest and its impact on people is necessary to remain fully committed to the process (Smythe et al., 2007). I used my insider position to build connection and trust, both at the recruiting stage and in working with the participants. As a mental health professional, I understand the importance of listening to the perspectives of others and using moments of connection and common ground to add to the experience rather than change or impede it.

My goal for this study was to explore the phenomenon of adoptive nesting in hopes of creating a framework for mental health professionals to use to help expectant adoptive mothers prepare emotionally, psychologically, physically, relationally, practically, and spiritually for the symbolic event of bringing a child into one’s home and becoming a mother through adoption. This goal was the driving force behind the current adoptive nesting study, has been a continued motivation in my clinical practice, and remains a significant part of my life as an adoptive mother.
### Study Participant Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Years of Infertility</th>
<th>Length of adoptive waiting</th>
<th>Child’s age at time of study</th>
<th>Type of Adoption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elle</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14 months</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>private, domestic, open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>18 months</td>
<td>private, domestic, semi-open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10 months</td>
<td>2 years, 8 months</td>
<td>private, domestic, semi-open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>11 months</td>
<td>private, domestic, open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17 months</td>
<td>18 months</td>
<td>private, domestic, semi-open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>2 years, 6 months</td>
<td>private, domestic, semi-open</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter includes findings based on the study procedures outlined in Chapter 3. An overview of the concept of adoptive nesting as experienced by each participant is provided, as well as visual representations of both pre-adoptive nesting and post-adoptive nesting (see Figures 4-1 and 4-2). Themes generated from the participants’ experiences of adoptive nesting are provided as composite descriptions of the phenomenon. Each theme is documented with participant quotes to depict each individual’s adoptive nesting experiences. Finally, an essence statement is included to provide an overarching view of how first-time adoptive mothers experience this phenomenon.

The presentation of the findings begins with vignettes about each participant’s experiences with the phenomenon of adoptive nesting. These vignettes construct familiarity with each participant, in addition to the phenomenon of interest, to add depth to the study and thoroughly represent the findings both personally and generally. After these introductions into the lived experiences of the participants, the emerging themes are presented for the two time periods of pre-adoptive nesting and post-adoptive nesting. Some themes are found in both pre-adoption and post-adoption categories. Even though there are categories related to the pre-adoption and post-adoption time periods, the entire process of pre-adoptive waiting, child placement, and post-adoption adjustment encompasses the phenomenon of adoptive nesting.
Adoptive Nesting Vignettes

Each participant was asked to describe her journey leading to pursuing adoption, her process of becoming an adoptive mother, and how she defines the sociocultural term of nesting. The participants were later given a definition of adoptive nesting and asked to comment on their experiences with the phenomenon.

Vignette 1: Elle

Elle is a forty-two-year-old Caucasian female who is the adoptive mother of an eight-month-old son. She described herself as being “very type A,” and she reported that the lack of control was the hardest part of her adoption journey. Elle experienced infertility for nine years prior to transitioning to adoption, undergoing intense medical interventions throughout that time. The length of time and the emotional and financial investment she and her husband put in to conceiving a child biologically played a key role in their adoption journey and her identity as a mother.

Elle’s definition of nesting focused on her struggle to relationally nest, sharing that she felt hurt by close people in her life throughout her fertility and adoption experiences, making it difficult to know who to trust and how much to share. Elle talked frequently about keeping expectations low, both about the placement and in what she expected from other people. Despite the tremendous fear of uncertainty and lack of control she experienced throughout the adoption process, Elle eventually believed things worked out the way they were supposed to. Although Elle expressed feeling unsure how to engage in the process of becoming a mother through adoption while she was in the middle of it, she acknowledged that, in hindsight, she wished she could have been more open to the adoption process and to other people in her life.
Vignette 2: Gloria

Gloria is a thirty-six-year-old Caucasian female who is the adoptive mother of an eighteen-month-old son. Gloria described her family as stable, religious, and intellectual. Gloria and her husband experienced infertility for eight years before pursuing adoption. She described it as a natural shift for them, acknowledging that adoption was something they were always open to but did not know much about. Gloria repeatedly emphasized that her belief in God gave her comfort during both her infertility journey and her adoption journey. She talked about how important it was for her to grieve the loss of a biological child and share her feelings with others so that she could fully embrace adoption as “the new plan A.”

At the beginning of their two-year pre-adoptive waiting period, Gloria did not talk about it with many people. After about six months, she had a significant interaction with a distant relative who was also an adoptive mother and who encouraged her to be more open. She stated, “So I started telling more people, and I realized that a lot of my colleagues had children through adoption. Like this circle of support just materialized. And not just women! Men! It was cool.” Gloria expressed that she does not see the adoptive nesting process as less than the biological process, but she recognizes and honors the differences. The one thing she would have told herself at the beginning of the process is to be more open from the very beginning. “Once I was [more open], everything got easier. It doesn’t cost anything; you don’t lose control.”

Vignette 3: Marie

Marie is a thirty-seven-year-old Caucasian female who is the adoptive mother of an eleven-month-old son. Marie described her life as different than what she envisioned, but better than she could have imagined. She stressed the importance of
being present and intentional, a philosophy she has incorporated into her parenting as well. Marie and her husband experienced infertility for six years and underwent various degrees of fertility interventions prior to making the transition to adoption. Marie stated that her husband was ready to make the shift to adoption sooner than she was, but after educating herself more and talking to others who had adopted, she felt fully invested in the adoption process.

Marie stated that she thinks she nested to some extent. Marie echoed a sentiment shared by the other mothers in this study regarding physically preparing for a child. “I couldn’t prepare a room or anything like that. I couldn’t get one single thing. I couldn’t.” Marie explained how holding back in this way did not keep her from preparing in other ways. She continued to talk to people connected to adoption during the waiting period, as well as reach out to family and friends for support.

Marie expressed the importance of being open with family and close friends about how she was doing and what she needed, both during infertility and throughout the adoptive waiting process. Marie stated, “I feel that being open is the only way I got through it.” This created an environment where loved ones had a role in her experience, deepening their investment in the adoption process and her future child. She acknowledged that her extroverted personality contributed to her desire to connect and her willingness to be open with others.

**Vignette 4: Ann**

Ann is a forty-three-year-old Caucasian female who is the adoptive mother of an eighteen-month-old daughter. Ann described herself as having a dominant personality, which strengthened her resolve and created opportunities for her throughout the infertility, adoptive waiting, and post-placement process. Ann and her husband
underwent fertility interventions for four years and experienced significant loss throughout their fertility process, leading them to reevaluate and redefine what it means to create a family.

Ann stressed the importance of being a team with her spouse, particularly when facing issues with family or any other problems that arose related to the adoption process. Ann acknowledged that the process of adopting a child was unfamiliar for them, and it was also new for others in their lives. Ann received meaningful support from other adoptive parents, as well as from her attorney and social worker. She was not afraid to ask for help and to seek out the support she needed.

Ann described nesting as getting the house ready and preparing for a child to come home. She immediately responded that she chose not to nest because she did not want to be disappointed. When asked about adoptive nesting, she said it resonated with her and seemed to fit her experience more closely. She specifically identified the importance of spiritual nesting during her waiting process, stating that faith is crucial for anyone going through this process. “You have to have faith. I don’t care what it is, you have to have it.” Ann stated that she wants to help others get to that place, too. “It’s not easy, but life isn’t easy. And in the end, you’ll have your son or your daughter, and then you’ll be comforting someone else who called you and wants to know about adoption. It will come full circle.”

Vignette 5: Ashley

Ashley is a twenty-eight-year-old Caucasian female who is the adoptive mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. Ashley perceived judgment from some people when she and her husband began pursuing adoption due to her younger age and the belief that she should not “give up yet” on a biological child. Although this experience
differs somewhat from the experience of the other mothers in the study, Ashley and her husband tried to conceive a baby for six years prior to beginning the adoption process, which was congruent with the other participants. When asked about her transition from fertility intervention to adoption, Ashley was candid about her emotions and her desperate need for hope. Ashley described the adoptive waiting process as very lonely and confusing. Although she received support from her spouse, she admitted that she did not know how to incorporate others and that it did not seem like anyone who had not also been through the adoption process could understand. She reported that she leaned heavily on the support of her social worker, both emotionally and practically.

Ashley described nesting as “mothers who are getting ready to have a child and setting up a nursery.” Ashley talked about her unwillingness to nest in the more normative sense, such as buying things and setting up a room. When presented with the term adoptive nesting, Ashley agreed it encompasses the many facets of the adoption waiting process, although she admitted she did not engage in some of the areas as much as she would have liked.

Ashley emphasized how important it is to her that other adoptive mothers do not feel as alone as she did. In a memo written immediately following her first individual interview, I recorded Ashley’s comment to me while standing by her car in the parking lot that she finds herself standing physically closer to people when she finds out they are adoptive parents. She described this pull toward other adoptive parents as the instant removal of an invisible barrier, which is energizing and comforting. She shared that she connects her desire to support other adoptive mothers to the loneliness she felt on her journey toward becoming a mother.
Vignette 6: Meghan

Meghan is a thirty-six-year-old Caucasian female who is the adoptive mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old son. She and her husband have been married for fifteen years and live in a small, rural town surrounded by extended family and close friends. They experienced infertility for nine years before pursuing adoption. Meghan talked about the desire she has had since she was a child to be a mother. Meghan described herself as an open person, which helped her maintain relationships and receive support during her long and hard journey toward motherhood.

Meghan did not buy many things prior to placement out of fear that the adoption would fall through. She stated that, although she wished she could nest more fully, she felt better waiting to physically nest until after placement occurred. She attributed some of her freedom of waiting to prepare physically for a child to the support she felt from her family and friends, stating that she knew they would help her in whatever ways she needed. Despite having a large support system around her, she admitted to not having many connections with other adoptive families. Overall, Meghan expressed tremendous gratitude for the way everything worked out.

Composite Themes: Pre-Adoptive Nesting

In this study, a hermeneutic phenomenological method was implemented to develop thematic representations from the combined experiences of the participants. The emerging themes fell into two distinct time periods, before placement and after placement. To honor the differences the participants experienced during each time frame under the larger phenomenon of adoptive nesting, the composite themes are also grouped into two separate sections with the headers, “Composite Themes: Pre-Adoptive Nesting,” representing the time period from first being open to pursuing
adoptive motherhood until the placement of the baby with the adoptive mother, and “Composite Themes: Post-Adoptive Nesting,” representing the time period after placement until the present study, which ranged from eight months to two-and-a-half years, depending on the participant.

The following section presents the emerging themes identified by participants during the pre-adoptive nesting period, which include Choosing Openness, I Want to Be a Mom, Grieving Infertility, Embracing the New Plan A, Honoring the Uncertainty, Redefining Family, Day-by-Day: Managing Expectations, Riding the Rollercoaster, We’re in This Together, It Takes a Village, The Learning Curve, The Importance of Formal Support, Adoption Tasks, The Adoption Club, Meant to Be: Letting Go of Control, Choosing Not to Nest, and Preparing for a Houseguest.

After these themes are addressed, the composite themes for the post-adoptive nesting period are described, which include I’m a Momma, I’m Your Momma, Going All In, Permission to Nest: Condensed Nesting, The Village Becomes the Extended Adoption Club, Maternal Tasks, We’re in This Together, Redefining Family, Honoring the Other Mother, The Adoption Club, and Meant to Be: Gratitude.

Choosing Openness

“Choosing Openness” was described by most of the mothers in the study as a way of life during both time periods of adoptive nesting. For the current study, Choosing Openness represents a philosophy of how to approach the adoption process by initially deciding to be open to adoption as a path toward motherhood and then continuing to be open to the adoption process psychologically, emotionally, physically, relationally, practically, and spiritually throughout the adoptive nesting process. Each participant in the study talked about choosing to be open during their journey through infertility and
pre-adoptive waiting and into their lives as adoptive mothers. Marie attributed her philosophy of being open to her ability to make it through the infertility and adoption process.

I think [being open] is unnatural for a lot of people, but I think when people show their vulnerabilities, which anybody can do, it makes you closer. I’ve always encouraged people to be open, especially the ones that it’s not in their personality to do so, and see how it feels. I bet you’ll like what the world gives you when you do share what you’re going through.

Elle acknowledged that her lack of openness made her pre-adoptive process lonelier than it needed to be.

I wish I would have allowed myself to get a little bit more excited. I just shut myself maybe a little more than I needed to because of those earlier experiences. But I think it’s important, even if it hurts, to let yourself get a little more excited about the idea. I find that some of the coolest things I have acquired in life come from times when I was a little bit more open-minded and exploring, you know?

Meghan stressed the importance of being vulnerable and not shutting herself off from others or the world.

I think with anything, the more open you are about something, I think the more people can understand you. And then through that, if you’ve got a good support system, you’re going to be able to be comforted. But I think it’s when you are like, oh, I can do this on my own, and then, you know, people just don’t know how to support you—that just backfires.

Gloria described her intentional shift toward choosing to be more open during her pre-adoptive process as low risk and high reward. “Once I was [more open], everything got easier. It doesn’t cost anything; you don’t lose control.” Because participants discussed Choosing Openness throughout every stage and all nesting time periods, the theme is situated in various places throughout the entire adoptive nesting process.
I Want to Be a Mom

According to the participants, the core desire driving the pre-adoptive waiting period is summed up in the theme, “I Want to Be a Mom.” For all the participants in this study, infertility played a key role in the decision to pursue motherhood through adoption. All six study participants tried to conceive biologically and underwent some level of fertility intervention for a period of time between four and nine years prior to transitioning to adoption. Their previous journeys with infertility and the various measures taken to conceive a child reinforced their desire to be a mother. Marie addressed this when responding to negative feedback she received about transitioning from fertility interventions to adoption. “I think when there is pushback, even with not being able to have biological children, you have to be like how bad do you want this? Here’s a road block. If you can get over it, your heart really wants this.” Gloria addressed negative feedback with a bit of rebellion. “I think [negative pushback] made me really strong in my resolve. It really made me out to prove that adoption was a valid way to make a family.” Meghan summed up the desire to be a mother throughout the infertility and adoptive processes.

We want it so much, and we want it so badly, and we just want to make the best out of it and be the best parents we can be. You think about it for so long, you go through the infertility, you go through the treatments, and you go through so many ups and downs. You get to the point where you’re just like, I just want to be a parent. I want to be able to raise a child. And you become so much more grateful for it when you receive that blessing.

Grieving Infertility

Being open to pursuing parenthood through a non-biological route led to the participants’ recognition of the necessity of grieving the loss of having a biological child. The theme of “Grieving Infertility” is a necessary part of moving forward with an
alternative path toward parenting. Some participants knowingly engaged in a grieving process, while others did not realize they had participated in it until later points in the adoptive nesting process. Marie spoke candidly about her grieving process and how important it was for her.

I cried a river of tears. I’m not sure if I made peace with it. Obviously it wasn’t overnight. But it was like, through all of this—through talking to people, being open about it, writing in my journal, crying to my mom—all through these different steps, I felt like I was ready.

Meghan spoke about how painful it was to see other people get pregnant when she couldn’t. “You know, the friends getting pregnant and the baby showers—it’s like you are so happy for them, but you are just sad for yourself.” Ashley had a similar response to the struggle of trying to be happy for others when her own grief from not being able to conceive was so palpable. She said, “I became jealous of other women. I wanted to be happy for other people, but you still, you’re brokenhearted.” In the group interview, the women commiserated about the pain and loneliness of infertility. Ann shared how defeating it felt for her to not be able to conceive a child. “You feel barren. You feel broken.” Gloria referenced the adoption class she attended through her agency as providing direction on the process of being ready to be open to adoption. “I learned through the adoption classes that first you have to let go of your own sadness and your own loss of fertility.” Marie also reflected on helpful feedback from her social worker. “Grieve the fact of your infertility. And once you do that, you can be free to be open.” Choosing to be open at this point involves not only being open to the grief of infertility, but also to adoption as a path to achieve the core desire to be a mother.
Embracing the New Plan A

According to the participants, Grieving Infertility prior to and even after choosing to pursue adoption is transitional to “Embracing the New Plan A” and seeing adoption as a viable path to motherhood. Some of the participants acknowledged how hard the transition was from trying to conceive a biological child to pursuing adoption. In the first interview, Elle shared her story of infertility and adoption. She stated, “It took us a long time to come to terms with not being able to start our own family, but once we made the transition from fertility interventions to adoption, I felt 150% invested.”

All the participants expressed an increase in hope that accompanied this transition from infertility to adoption. Meghan described the contrast in her feelings during infertility versus when she committed to pursuing adoption. “With infertility, I had such a hard time with hope. I just didn’t have the hope there. But then when I switched to the adoptive mindset, I had nothing but hope. I knew it was going to happen.” Ashley expressed a similar sentiment about the transition from infertility to adoption.

I will say going through infertility is like a big black hole where you’re looking in all these directions to find some type of light and there’s nothing. And you wanna be happy for other people. But you still—you’re brokenhearted. But when we actually went on the [adoption wait] list, this pressure lifted off of me. Eventually, I have something to look forward to. There’s that light.

In addition to coming to accept adoption as a viable path toward parenthood, several participants expressed a confidence that developed about adoption being the right path for their family. Gloria explained her process of making the transition to adoption and the value in being open with others about her infertility. “I felt like sharing my story [of infertility] helped me to take that step and to really embrace adoption as not a Plan B, but as a plan! Just a plan. The new Plan A.”
Honoring the Uncertainty

Some of the participants acknowledged embracing adoption early on but remaining hesitant about the adoption process given the variability in outcomes and timelines. This “learned reservation,” as Elle called it, was a crucial component to the adoptive waiting process for the participants, leading to the emergence of the theme “Honoring the Uncertainty.” Elle shared, “The first time I tried IVF, my expectations were through the roof. I was seeing things that weren’t there. I was excited. Then I was devastated. So, with adoption, I had already learned not to get my hopes up.” For the participants, fully investing and preparing did not feel healthy or appropriate given the variables in outcome, but Honoring the Uncertainty created an openness to the process that helped the participants prepare in ways that felt productive and meaningful to them.

Ann analyzed how back and forth the adoption process felt at times, and how she had to choose to step into it, despite the uncertainty. “I think we both knew it was gonna happen. But you don’t really know. We both just kind of got to the point of, okay, we are done talking about it, and if it’s gonna happen, it’s gonna happen.” This back and forth of wanting to believe it will happen and acknowledging the uncertainty of the process was present in all six participants in the study.

Despite the continued uncertainty, the participants chose to be open to the adoption process to varying degrees. Gloria described her shift to being more open as “just a different mode of being that made things easier but didn’t change the outcome.” Being open to adoption brought the hope of being a mom, which was the start of an adoptive nesting process for each participant.
Redefining Family

“Redefining Family” emerged as a theme for the participants, primarily in the area of psychological nesting. Redefining Family represents a cognitive shift in how the participants conceptualized family, putting less emphasis on blood ties while still honoring the biological connection that exists with the birth family. Marie stated that this was a smooth transition for her and her husband because they have very close friends that are like family. “It was not as big of a deal for us to adopt a child. I mean, none of our group of friends is biologically related, and we love each other.” For some, it felt harder to let go of the vision of a biological child. Ann described the first time she brought up the idea of adoption to her husband during their infertility. “I said, ‘you know, I would be remiss if I didn’t bring [adoption] up.’ And he was against it. He said ‘No, I want our own child.’” Participants discussed Redefining Family both pre- and post-adoption.

Day-by-Day: Managing Expectations

Once the decision was made to actively pursue adoption, the participants all expressed a need to take things as they come and not get preoccupied by the uncertainty and possible outcomes. The theme of “Day-by-Day: Managing Expectations” (referred to as “Day-by-Day”) emerged out of this psychological nesting process. Each participant expressed the importance of dealing with things as they come and keeping expectations low, while also remaining positive. Elle shared what this felt like for her. She stated, “With adoption, someone else is making that decision. It doesn’t matter how much you do, someone else is making that decision. And so, we just took it day-by-day.” Meghan had a similar philosophy about how she mentally dealt with the uncertainty. Meghan explained, “I just was like, you know, I’m gonna deal with it as it
comes. I guess it was always in the back of my mind. So I just went day-by-day. That’s all you can do.” Ann also reflected this mindset when she said, “I thought, you know what, it is what it is. And we will deal with it. And it is what it is.” Although this approach to the adoption process could seem detached, the participants stated that it felt important to maintain some psychological distance at times to keep them emotionally grounded during the waiting.

**Riding the Rollercoaster**

The participants all shared emotional ups and downs that occurred during the pre-adoptive waiting period, especially after being matched, resulting in the theme of “Riding the Rollercoaster.” Ann identified closely with this phrase, saying, “This is a rollercoaster that everyone says you get on. And it will be literally up and down in one day.” Gloria identified the complexity of emotionally preparing for adoptive motherhood. “Emotional nesting isn’t just like emotionally making all this room in your heart for this specific child as much as it is preparing emotionally for whatever’s going to happen.” Ashley tried to put to words what the waiting process felt like for her and the tension it created emotionally. “You’re excited, but you’re not at the same time. It’s like a blue excitement. I don’t even know how to explain it.”

To cope with the ups and downs, the participants expressed the importance of not putting too much emphasis on emotionally preparing for the arrival of a child out of fear that it will not happen. Ann connected the emotional ups and downs to the theme of Day-by-Day directly when she said, “I think the whole thing was emotionally and psychologically draining. You kind of go step-by-step. Then you go, ‘wow, this sucks, this is really hard.’ Then you wake up the next day, and it’s a new day.” A need to hold back as part of their preparation process was expressed by all six participants. Gloria
summed it up by saying, “Who would have thought that preparing not to be a mother is an important part of preparing to be a mother!” The participants all expressed the need for emotional distance to stay on the emotional rollercoaster of adoptive waiting.

**We’re in This Together**

Since all the participants in the current study were in committed partnerships at the time of the adoption, the theme of “We’re in This Together” emerged. This theme represents the importance of spousal or partner support during the waiting process. Several of the participants acknowledged a perceived distance between their experiences and the experiences of their spouses. Meghan shared about how supportive her husband was throughout the infertility and adoption process, but that it still felt lonely at times. “My husband kept saying, ‘you are my family, and I’m okay with just you forever. I chose you.’ But I’m not. I’m a woman, and we have these instinctual desires and needs. It’s different.” Ashley described her husband as being a support to her but not as invested in the adoption process as she was. “My husband would do whatever it took to make me happy. So, he was just kind of on for the ride.” Elle described her husband as being invested in the big picture but not as invested in the day-to-day tasks of preparing. “My husband was really on board with adopting, but he kind of let me take the reins on most of it.”

Although there are certain parts of the emotional process that created distance between spouses for some of the participants, all the participants highlighted the value in being a team and going through the process together. Ann talked about how reluctant her husband was to embrace adoption at first, but then he was the one who took the first step toward pursuing adoption after undergoing so much loss during infertility. Meghan described her marriage as very much a team, stating that they made decisions
together and leaned on each other throughout the process. “We had been praying about it together, and we just felt like this was what the Lord wanted us to do.” Marie described her husband as being solid and steady throughout the infertility and pre-adoptive period and stated that he was ready to transition to adoption sooner than she was. Gloria associated her relationship with her husband as having clear gender roles, but also as being very much partners.

Ann advocated for maintaining a strong partnership to ensure a more positive experience overall. Ann said, “You have to have a strong marriage. I mean, you don’t have to, but it would make it really hard if you don’t. Having a good team member is a big help.” Although each participant’s relationship with her spouse was unique, all the participants expressed the importance of both partners being open to and invested in the adoption process.

**It Takes a Village**

As important as spousal support was for the participants, they also acknowledged that they could not get all their relational needs met through that relationship. This recognition led to the emergence of the theme “It Takes a Village.” Participants’ discussion related to It Takes a Village recognized the need to be connected to others and the positive impact of moving toward family and friends during the pre-adoptive waiting period. Although Ashley reported not feeling much support during the pre-adoptive waiting period, she recognized in hindsight how much she desired it. She explained, “It’s all about support. We need it. We crave it as human beings, you know?” When asked what advice the participants would give to another mother waiting to adopt, Meghan responded, “I would just say get a good support
system. Lots and lots of support. And just make sure that you are going to have that throughout.”

Several participants acknowledged the complexities of helping loved ones know how to support them since adoption is not the normative process. Marie responded to this by saying, “I was open about what I needed. And then people respected that. Because we love each other.” Elle admitted that what she was craving from her parents throughout the adoption process was acceptance. She said, “I guess I was looking for a little bit of acceptance… because they’re my parents. I just wanted to make sure they were on board with it.”

For some participants, the pre-adoptive period also included setting boundaries with loved ones. Ann described a confrontation she and her husband had with close family members and how she responded to them about it. She told them, “Either you’re on the boat or you’re off the boat. Right now, you’re rocking the boat. Period. We have to jump in feet first and go with this, people. I mean, you haven’t walked our walk.” When their loved ones did not respond in appropriate or supportive ways, the adoptive mothers had to decide when to set boundaries and how best to educate people about adoption in hopes of increasing their support system.

The Learning Curve

The participants admitted their lack of knowledge and awareness about adoption when they first began pursuing it. The theme “The Learning Curve” highlights the differences between the normative process of having a biological child and the nonnormative process of adopting a child for the participants. Ann talked candidly about how unprepared she felt for adoptive parenthood. She said, “It’s unchartered territory. And it was not easy. It’s not easy. And you just gotta figure it out. There’s no
instruction book.” Ashley expressed her jealousy resulting from having to do so many extra steps to become a parent that biological moms do not have to think about. “When you’re an adoptive mother, you’re not reading about what to expect when you’re expecting. You’re reading about genetic diseases, how to handle other people, what babies need, researching formulas.”

Other participants saw their engagement in the nonnormative process as something freeing, perceiving the lack of knowledge about adoption and the underrepresentation of adoption in society as permission to move toward adoptive parenting in whatever ways worked best for them. Gloria responded to the idea of not needing to fit her experience into a sociocultural mold of what it should be. “There’s no pressure. I can go against the grain. There’s no grain! I can build the grain. I can think more purposefully about how I want to do this.” By honoring the differences, the adoptive mothers in the study could embrace adoption as both a deviation from the norm and an equally valid way to become a mother.

Most of the participants shared the experience of being the first person in their immediate families to have adopted a child. Meghan described the distance this created at times. “You know, even my mom… we’re very close, but it was hard for her to be able to say the right thing and to understand. So I did, I felt like an island.” Although Elle felt hurt at times by the lack of understanding on the part of her loved ones, she recognized their naïveté also. “We can’t necessarily expect for people to understand if they’ve never either been through it or had the opportunity to learn more about it.” Ashley had a similar perspective on managing the hurt she experienced by loved ones due to their not understanding. “No one in my family has ever gone through this. I used to blame
them for not being supportive, but now it’s, they didn’t understand. They didn’t have those issues, so why would they?”

According to the participants, they were aware of their desire for support and how comforting it was to receive support from members of their village who were on board with their adoption path. Gloria spoke about her desire to help her loved ones better understand adoption and what she and her husband were going through. “So there’s my needs, and then that village has needs! And sometimes it was fun to be the teacher of people, but sometimes I didn’t want that.” Ann talked about the importance of both educating and setting boundaries with members of their village to prevent further harm and relational strain. “Everyone’s trying to figure it out, you know? Everyone’s like ‘Where do we start here and how do we get to the finish line?’ There’s just, it was really tough for everybody.”

When the participants felt pressure to be a model for and to educate their family and friends in a way that did not feel emotionally or relationally healthy for them, they often had to set boundaries or turn inward to focus on their process. Gloria’s experience with her family exemplified this. “I didn’t really worry too much about [educating loved ones] because I wanted to get our house in order, and I knew that the in-laws would come around.” Some participants encountered loved ones who were not on board with adoption. For these people, the participants did not feel like they could take on the burden of trying to help them understand, so they had to set boundaries. Elle shared the hurt she felt by her mom’s lack of understanding and the need to draw a line.

Before we adopted, my mom told me she was not sure if she was going to be able to love this child as much because he is adopted, and that was really hard to hear from your own mom. So I had to tell her, “This is not
acceptable and you’re not going to be in his life if this continues.” Because he’s not going to play second-fiddle to a biological grandson.

Ashley acknowledged that some of her loneliness during the pre-adoptive waiting period may have been caused by her struggle to set boundaries with her loved ones.

I might not have had a stern voice. And maybe that’s a way—teaching potential adoptive mothers to set boundaries with your family, even though they’re your family. Set boundaries, have a voice, be stronger. But I think that’s a very long process because you have to reteach how somebody thinks. And that’s hard.

Dealing with other people’s reactions to and naïveté about adoption was a source of frustration and pain for several participants.

**The Importance of Formal Support**

Because of the emotional toll the adoption process can take on waiting parents, “The Importance of Formal Support” emerged as a theme for both emotional and practical nesting. Some of the participants who struggled to receive emotional support from family members especially relied on the formal emotional support of their social workers and adoption professionals. Ann mentioned that she called her social worker or her attorney to process her emotions and receive support almost every day from when they were matched to when the baby was born. Ashley talked about the way her social worker helped her manage some of her fears.

She straight up said when we were going to the hospital, “I can’t prepare you for what’s [going to happen]. I cannot do that.” But even her saying that was preparing me. Like, okay, I’m prepared to go. My emotions are gonna be all over the place. I’m prepared for that.

Often the participants expressed that it was the practical advice and feedback from a professional that eased their emotional distress. Gloria remarked about the permission she felt to engage in the process and go through the steps after receiving helpful feedback from adoption professionals.
One thing our social workers told us a lot is they used the word practice. You know, we had a meeting with the birth mother who ended up not placing. And our social worker said, “Well, that’s just practice.” That word was really helpful because it lets you go far emotionally without placing expectations.

Ashley talked about how she felt discouraged when she tried to find books and comprehensive resources that related to what she was going through, and she expressed her gratitude for her social worker for filling in all the gaps and answering her questions and concerns. “Our social worker was kind of like that resource for me because she has seen so many adoptions. She was very helpful when I had questions about certain things. But without her, what would I have done?”

The Importance of Formal Support for the participants also connected to the need for resources for loved ones during the adoption process. Ann explained how she reached out to their social worker for resources on adoption-competent language after having an issue with something said by a family member. “I said, ‘I really need your help.’ So she sent me an email about good verbiage.” Elle described her relationship with her social worker during the adoptive waiting process as crucial, especially related to helping others understand adoption better. “I leaned pretty heavily on our social worker in terms of trying to just process everything and find out the best way to proceed with things.” Each participant’s experience highlighted the connection between practical nesting and the larger process of adoptive nesting.

Adoption Tasks

The logistical components of becoming an adoptive parent can create additional stress and confusion for waiting parents. The practical and tangible preparation process culminated in the theme “Adoption Tasks” because it captures the unique steps the adoptive mothers in the study had to take to become parents, including filling out
paperwork, getting fingerprinted, and attending parenting classes. Gloria talked about how practical nesting felt safer for her than emotional nesting. “The practical motherhood preparation was filling out the paperwork and talking about discipline techniques. And the emotional was the stuff I knowingly didn’t want to do. Because there’s no going back from that.”

Since all six participants met the birth mother prior to delivery, they also engaged in the task of being interviewed by the birth mom. Ashley described her experience with her daughter’s birth mom as “the most anxiety-ridden job interview.” Marie shared about how awkward the initial meeting with her son’s birth mom was. “I was biting the insides of my cheeks, like ‘don’t fall apart, don’t fall apart,’ because I knew it was a job interview. And it was so hard for me to be like ‘this is my reality.’” Another task involved creating an adoption book for prospective birth mothers. Ashley talked about completing this task. “I remember when I got the book done, I felt good. Like, okay, that’s part of it. That’s one thing down.”

The participants acknowledged that it would have been helpful and comforting during the waiting period to see these tasks as a purposeful part of adoptive nesting and as movement toward the goal of becoming a mother. The adoptive mothers in the study reached out to adoption professionals for practical and tangible support related to Adoption Tasks, as well as sought out both emotional and practical support from other adoptive parents for guidance and direction.

**The Adoption Club**

The emotional and practical support provided by those further along the adoption road proved to be invaluable for most of the participants, which led to the emergence of the theme “The Adoption Club.” Ann talked about how hearing that it is an emotional
rollercoaster from other adoptive parents was comforting. “If you know it’s gonna be a rollercoaster, then what happens is it still feels like ‘what the heck is going on?’ But you can think, ‘I knew this, and I’m going to get through this.’” Although Meghan admitted she did not have much connection to other adoptive mothers during her pre-adoptive waiting period, in hindsight, she recognized the value in that.

It’s like with any grief. You just want someone to listen and be a shoulder to cry on. And yes, be able to identify the exact same feelings because even our husbands can’t. So I think definitely just knowing that somebody else has been through it and walked down that road. It is so comforting.

Gloria identified the symbolic shift toward openness she experienced after talking with her distant relative who is an adoptive mother. Her willingness to be open and share her story led to a whole network of adoptive parents coming to the surface and providing comfort and encouragement. “All of a sudden it activates! It’s like you put on your goggles and see all the red around you for the first time. So many more people have a connection to adoption than I ever thought.” These people are examples of members of The Adoption Club.

Although all the participants acknowledged the importance of being open with family and loved ones during the adoption process, many also expressed how comforting it was to connect with people who already understood. The Adoption Club recognizes how isolating it can feel to participate in the nonnormative process of becoming an adoptive parent and how helpful it is to relate to people who have gone through it. Elle highlighted the connection between The Learning Curve and The Adoption Club.

Your learning curve wouldn’t be nearly as long if you were surrounding yourself with other people who are going through this. It’s very difficult to navigate adoption. Just having people around you [who have already
adopted] when you’re thinking about going down that road would dramatically reduce the learning curve.

Gloria shared in the group interview about how her decision to be more open about their adoption process led to unimaginable support. “There’s this total latent network that was there the whole time, but you never exchanged the secret handshake!” Other group participants agreed with this by sharing similar experiences, such as Marie’s experience about how she used social media to connect to people she knew had adopted and how she was received with warmth and encouragement. “I reached out to people I hadn’t talked to in twenty years and said, ‘I know you [adopted], what’s your story? Will you help?’ And immediately I’d get a response saying ‘Thank you for reaching out. Absolutely.’” In Ashley’s first individual interview, she recalled a meaningful conversation with a coworker who was an adoptive mother when she was trying to decide between undergoing further fertility intervention and pursuing adoption.

She told me, ‘I always say you have that feeling [about adoption] inside you for a reason. Don’t give up on it. Because you wouldn’t have that feeling if it wasn’t meant to be.’ That’s what made me really decide that adoption is what we were gonna do.

Even the participants who did not have much contact with adoptive families prior to placement stressed how it would have been helpful and that it is something they want and need now as adoptive parents. This will be discussed further under “Composite Themes: Post-Adoptive Nesting.”

**Meant to Be: Letting Go of Control**

All the participants expressed some value in holding on to a greater purpose and trusting that things will work out the way they are supposed to. The theme that emerged from the data representing this value is “Meant to Be: Letting Go of Control” (referred to as “Letting Go”). Letting Go provided comfort to the waiting mothers, especially after
being matched and dealing with the emotional rollercoaster of the pre-adoptive waiting period. Meghan relied on her faith in a higher power to comfort her during the waiting and uncertainty. “My faith in God just really got me through that, and just knowing that he had the perfect baby picked out for us from the get-go.” Marie expressed a similar philosophy from a broader context. “I think there is a letting go of, like, just a trust that you’re gonna get the right child for you.” Gloria reflected on the increased comfort she felt during the pre-adoptive waiting period as opposed to the infertility period where she perceived it was her responsibility to make a baby happen. “It was not in my hands. It was not up to me. It was with God. I do my part, and then I let it go.” For the participants in the study, this theme of Letting Go connected to the theme of Day-by-Day because both highlight the importance of taking things as they come and not trying to over-control a situation that felt essentially out of their hands. Incorporating a philosophy about a way to make sense of life and family seemed crucial to each participant in her own way, which is why this theme is primarily associated with the area of spiritual nesting.

**Choosing Not to Nest**

The participants all expressed an unwillingness to prepare a nursery or tangibly prepare for the arrival of a child beyond basic needs—a reluctance to physically nest. This theme is referred to as “Choosing Not to Nest.” Marie described why she chose not to nest, saying, “I couldn't prepare a room or anything like that. I couldn't get a single thing.” When asked what, if anything, she did to physically prepare after being matched, Ann replied, “Nothing. We did nothing. Nothing. And that was our defense mechanism and our coping mechanism.” Ashley described the pain of not knowing if she should physically nest like biological mothers could. “You’d walk through the department store
and go over to the baby aisle and just kind of look. And you’d feel like, well, I shouldn’t
even be here. Why am I over here?” Several of the participants were asked by loved
ones if they could throw them a shower, and the common response was to wait until the
baby was born and placed with them permanently.

For the participants, the reluctance to physically nest was closely tied to their
hesitation to emotionally nest. Marie expressed the emotional necessity of not physically
nesting even after being matched. “Even at that point of knowing we have a match
and, if all goes well, we will have a child, I could do nothing. I couldn’t go there out of
protection.” Elle also talked about her need to hold back, even though she wanted to do
more.

So he had swaddlers, a couple outfits, a bassinet, and a way to eat. And I
felt like that was pretty much all I could do. Because if she changed her
mind, that was all I could emotionally handle. So, I protected myself in that
way emotionally.

There were other things the participants were unwilling to do, such as set up a
crib and buy specific clothes and toys for a particular child. Gloria was offered some
baby things by a colleague, and she responded, “‘Well, you know, we’ll take them, and if
we don’t use them, we’ll give them away to your favorite charity.’ And so we had these
things in our attic.” Ann took a more defiant approach to nesting. “We chose not to nest
because we didn’t want to be disappointed if birth mom said ‘no.’ So it was a choice we
had not to nest.”

Preparing for a Houseguest

Although specific physical nesting felt too risky, many of the participants found
ways to more generally prepare their home for the arrival of a child. This theme is
referred to as “Preparing for a Houseguest.” Meghan shared that she and her husband
cleaned out the workout room and painted it brown when they officially started pursuing adoption. Elle talked about her urge to physically do something productive. “I needed some kind of physical outlet that I could put physical energy into—the house, the yard, just getting our little world just right.” Ann also spoke about her need for a physical outlet. “I was probably crazy cleaning and not even thinking about it.” For most of the participants, the urge to get things in order was not attributed directly to nesting, but in hindsight, several of the participants identified it in those terms. Gloria laughed in the group interview when she realized she had nested in ways she had not realized by repainting the dining room the month before her son’s due date. All the mothers in the study agreed that finding some way to generally prepare for the possibility of bringing a baby home was important to them.

Composite Themes: Post-Adoptive Nesting

In many cases, the emerging themes for the post-adoptive nesting period are related to the pre-adoptive nesting period. The themes were expanded and redefined by the participants as they reflected on the changes they experienced when the adoption was finalized. Choosing Openness remains an underlying theme throughout.

I’m a Momma

Beginning at placement and continuing into early parenthood, the adoptive mothers in the study expressed feeling the freedom to be a mother. Gloria expressed her excitement to finally feel like a part of the “motherhood club,” and she marked herself as a member in similar ways as biological mothers would, such as putting a picture of her son on the home screen of her work computer.

That’s the first thing I did when I came back to work. It’s his one-week photo. I put it on my background because I was like, “That’s just what you
do!” I want to see him all the time! But also, I want to mark myself as a mother.

Ann talked repeatedly about feeling like the “Mother Hen” and protecting her baby. Although this can be a positive component to developing a maternal identity, she admitted that she reacted out of fear and insecurity at times. Ann expounded on her protective instinct kicking in after becoming a mom and how it connected to motherhood in a broader sense. “As parents, you need to protect them and do whatever you can. I feel like that comes out when you become a mother. It comes out whether you delivered or adopted the child. It becomes something that’s in you.” All six participants emphasized the relief and joy they felt in finally feeling like a mother and being able to participate in motherhood like biological mothers can by caring for and protecting a child.

The participants also acknowledged the connection between having others identify them as mothers and embracing motherhood. Both Ashley and Meghan talked about how the hospital staff helped them feel like a mother by treating them like one. Gloria mentioned how encouraging it felt to receive so much validation that she is in fact a mother through gifts and words of support after placement.

Despite this freedom of finally being able to identify as a mother, some of the participants expressed feeling the distance between their process and the process for biological mothers. Ashley acknowledged feeling different than biological mothers and relating more seamlessly and deeply to other adoptive parents. “I feel like I can’t relate to [biological mothers]. Before it was ‘you can’t relate to me.’ Now, it’s ‘I can’t relate to you.’” Elle also expressed feeling a distance from biological mothers in some ways, and similarities in other ways. Ann attributed her willingness to throw herself into biological
mothering circles to her comfort with breaking rules and getting her needs met.

Regardless of what their processes looked like, all six participants acknowledged the need to reconcile their identity as a mother through adoption with the sociocultural norm of becoming a mother biologically.

**I’m Your Momma**

For adoptive mothers who do not share a biological connection to their child, there are additional complexities to identifying as a mother and perceiving herself as mother to this specific child. Fears such as “Can I love this child like my own?” became salient to the participants after placement. For some of the participants, the process of fully feeling like their child’s mother took time. Marie identified the moment she fully felt like her son’s mother, and she related it to a television show she had seen about a mother who is frantically trying to protect her son.

Do you watch Stranger Things? I kept noticing Wynona Ryder’s character where she was like insane to protect her child. And I thought about that a lot. Like could I? Would I ever do that? Would I ever go absolutely berserk if I knew my child was in danger and do everything, like claw at the walls, to protect him? And I was walking my son around the block, and this dog, like this pitbull, came up and it looked like he was coming up to me. And I flipped out. Like flipped out in this way that I never had before. I had so much adrenaline. I so had that momma bear reaction! And I was so happy. I was like, yeah, this has nothing to do with if this is my biological child. I will protect him no matter what. I think something shifted after that. I was like, yeah, I’m your momma.

Elle was the newest mother in the study, with her son being six months old at the time of the first interview, and she was honest about the gradual process of feeling fully like a mother and not quite being there. “I'm still kind of waiting for me to take on that role one hundred percent—like I'm a mom, and I’m your mom.” She did, however, state that on a practical and emotional level, she felt like her son’s mom as soon as she
realized that this child was depending on her for survival. “I think that came very early with the process of knowing without me, this child would not live! He would not survive!”

Some of the participants in the study described the process of becoming a mother to their child as happening quickly and naturally. When asked what it was like to be her son’s mother, Gloria referred to a conversation she had with a coworker. “[My coworker] said, ‘you’re just his mom.’ And that’s kind of how it felt, like I just became his mom. And it’s just really wonderful. And natural.” Meghan also expressed feeling an instant bond to her son and an ease at seeing herself as his mother early on. “I saw him and just when I started holding him, it was instant. It was an instant connection of love.”

**Going All In**

Emotional nesting during post-adoptive nesting can be summed up in the theme of “Going All In.” After riding the emotional rollercoaster and holding back from fully allowing themselves to emotionally attach during the pre-adoptive waiting period, the mothers described the overwhelming outflow of love they experienced for their child after permanent placement occurred. Marie reflected on how, despite the struggles that led up to her becoming a mother, incorporating her son into her life and her heart felt natural.

Loving a child is the easiest part of adoption. It’s so easy. It’s so natural. It’s so beautiful. I think I was a little bit nervous about that too. I always try to tell people who are thinking about adoption who are like ‘can I really do this?’ that loving is the easiest part.

Some participants acknowledged that despite feeling immediate love for the child, they still held back emotionally until the papers were signed. Ashley stated that she first felt like a mom when they put her daughter in her arms, but she still felt scared. “When [the birth mother] went to go and sign those papers, I still think about how my
heart was like beating outside my body." Gloria described her early experiences at the hospital prior to the papers being signed. “Even when we’re holding him, there’s 48 hours to terminate parental rights. So even right when I should be letting the emotions go, I’m still a little caged.”

Once the papers were signed and the participants realized they were taking their babies home, the mothers could finally go all in. Meghan said, “You just have so much love in your heart for this little being, and you never knew you could love something so much. It’s a wonderful thing.” Marie shared honestly about how her feelings for her child have grown over time.

It’s a bond that has to grow. And I think at first it was kind of infatuation. Now he’s 10 and a half months. I think it was like, I don’t know, probably four or five months into it, I realized I had switched from the infatuation to like full-blown being in love with him. Marie’s acknowledgement of the gradual process of coming in to her identity as her child’s mother seemed to alleviate the pressure to force the bond to happen immediately. As emotional nesting continued for the participants, they each expressed feeling more and more like a mother and like this child’s mother as time passed.

Permission to Nest: Condensed Nesting

The theme “Permission to Nest: Condensed Nesting” (referred to as “Condensed Nesting”) is used to describe the intense and exciting period immediately following the child’s birth and placement where both the adoptive parents and their village fill in the tangible gaps created by the limited general nesting done during the pre-adoptive period. The participants explained that without the emotional barriers used to protect against further heartbreak, the physical barriers were broken as well, allowing for physical nesting. Marie described how this played out for her. “I couldn’t [nest] until the
paperwork was signed. And then I was like, ‘nesting, yes!’ And it was this total shift of, like, my heart is open. I am ready for this. Bring on the baby stuff!” Ann also emphasized the intentional decision she made not to physically nest before placement, and then the “big nesting” she was able to do as soon as she brought her daughter home. Elle described it as being fun to go back and buy all the things she wanted to buy before. “When my son would take a nap, I’d be on Etsy. It was just like I had this free-for-all opportunity to do all the things I wanted to do beforehand but didn’t.”

The significant role the village played during Condensed Nesting seemed expected for some and out of the blue for others. Meghan talked about how supportive her community was leading up to placement and how she knew they would come through when she needed them.

We had lots of support from our families and friends and church, and it’s been amazing. I had three huge baby showers! I was like, we do not need all this stuff! But it was just the support, the love. Because it had been such a long time, you know? Because we had been trying for years.

Marie expressed her gratitude for her community and the various ways people supported them post-placement.

Our community just filled our home with baby stuff. We didn’t buy a thing. They dropped off countless dinners. My sister organized this online shower for us. And everything just arrived on our doorstep, including just like love and goodness from everyone. It was so beautiful.

Gloria expressed similar feelings of gratitude and noted how having so many people behind them gave her confidence.

In 24 hours, we had everything you could possibly need, including people who brought food over. We did not have time to feel unprepared, which was amazing; which I think contributed to the feeling that we can do this. I can do this.
Even those who struggled to feel connected to their village prior to becoming an adoptive mother reported feeling grateful and touched by the support they received when they brought their children home. Elle expressed her surprise when things just started arriving at her door and how moving it was for her to realize so many people were invested in her family. “Every day in the mail, oh my God! Support came in so many different ways, and it was like every day almost for the first month.” When asked why she thought this village materialized, especially since she and her husband are more private people, she answered, “I think our struggle up to this point made people so happy for us that they showered us with gifts and even just cards.”

The participants in the group interview agreed that the barriers to emotional and physical nesting that were lifted for them at placement also seemed to have lifted for their village, giving their loved ones permission to be excited and embrace this child as a member of the village through gifts and support.

**The Village Becomes the Extended Adoption Club**

By giving loved ones buy-in and allowing them to invest in their adoptive families, two powerful outcomes came about for the participants, which resulted in the theme of “The Village Becomes the Extended Adoption Club” (referred to as “Extended Adoption Club”). First, the adoptive families felt more loved and supported by their village. Ashley talked about how her struggle to feel understood by her loved ones shifted significantly in the post-adoptive period. “When she came home, I finally felt like ‘Congratulations, you’re a mother!’ Everyone was so completely supportive. Everyone fell in love with her. I felt like the attitude just completely changed.” Elle had a similar experience of feeling surprised at how supportive and encouraging people were after feeling isolated at times during the pre-adoptive waiting period. Her feelings are summed up in her reaction to
receiving both gifts and words of encouragement from unexpected people after their son was born. “I didn’t know I had a village! I had like a little camp. I didn’t know I had a village.”

Second, more people had a lived experience with adoption on a personal level, increasing familiarity with adoption on a broader scale. Marie told a story about how some good friends met someone who was adopted and felt a connection to that person through their experience of walking through the adoption process with Marie and her husband. “What’s so beautiful too is, by proxy, our community has had this connection with adoption. I like that it’s changed. Like through us, other people have broadened their knowledge and understanding and love of adoption as well.” When talking about The Learning Curve and how far her family had come, Ashley talked about how her mom’s investment in both her daughter and adoption had grown tremendously. As a result, her mom expressed willingness to share her experience with other grandparents of adoptive children. Ann talked about how being clear and setting boundaries with family during the waiting period led to improved relating and a better understanding of adoption over time. “It took me a while, and I knew it would. I told them that. We will get to a better place. And now it’s great. And I knew it would get there.”

During the group interview, the participants agreed that, although most of their loved ones did eventually get on board and have now joined the Extended Adoption Club, having more resources for their village during the pre-adoptive waiting period would have made the process smoother and taken some of the pressure off the adoptive parents. Marie talked with the other mothers about how a formal framework could be helpful, such as having “adoptive nesting for grandparents.” Ann commented,
“We’re gonna send you to camp for the weekend.” Gloria responded, “I’m okay with that!” And everyone laughed. They all recognized through that dialogue that, although things worked out well overall, more formal support for their village could have spared a great deal of hurt, confusion, and conflict for all involved, allowing the focus to be more on preparing for the arrival of the child and strengthening relationships.

Maternal Tasks

Practical nesting during the post-adoptive nesting process culminated for the participants in the theme of “Maternal Tasks.” These routine tasks, including feeding, changing diapers, and comforting a crying baby, served to both care for the child and connect the mother to the child through dependence. Although Elle struggled to fully feel like a mother early on, she identified feeling like a mother most acutely while performing Maternal Tasks.

I think that “aha” moment came very early on when I was getting up every few hours and I was not getting any sleep. Like within the first week, I was like, “Wow, I’m a mom. And this baby needs me. So I better get out of bed!”

Ashley shared a similar sentiment about her lack of sleep when she brought her daughter home.

I read all this stuff about when you bring the baby home, and they say the baby wakes up every two hours, but you don’t really understand that until you go a week without sleep! And that was probably a moment where you’re like, “Okay, I’m a mom.”

Ann described how helpless and insecure she felt at times and the comfort she found in just doing what she knew she was supposed to do.

They don’t come with an instruction book. I’m trying to figure this out. I don’t know what she needs. But I’m just gonna go change her diaper. I just need to hold her. And then it’s like, “Okay, you’re good. We can do this.”
We’re in This Together

The theme of We’re in This Together continued to be important as the couples brought their child home and learned how to parent together. Meghan discussed how she and her husband remained a team after bringing their son home by sharing more of the parenting tasks. “My husband is super supportive. Since I wasn’t breastfeeding, we did this like little tag-team deal. I mean, it was amazing.” Gloria also addressed the increase in shared responsibilities as adoptive parents. “Our gender roles are pretty stereotypical, even though we are both working. But, the childcare gender roles have been more even, which is nice. I think adoption helps with that actually.” Marie discussed how her husband took a month off work after their son came home, creating a lot of opportunity for them to bond as a family and share parental responsibilities. She commented on how, in some ways, she felt like her experience was more like that of a biological father than a biological mother. “I think my experience as a new adoptive mother is more like a dad of a biological child. Where it’s kind of hypothetical for a long time and then you get this child that you don’t know.” This common ground was a place of connection and shared experience between Marie and her husband, as well as between other mothers in the study and their spouses.

In addition to shared responsibilities, several of the participants noted that their spouses became more emotionally invested once their child was born. Ashley talked about how she knew that her husband was not as emotionally invested until their daughter was born. “My husband was supportive to me, but not to the situation. And then… after she was born, emotionally, he was all in.”
Redefining Family

Once the child was born and formally placed in the mother’s care, psychologically adjusting to this new family became daily life for the participants. They described a continuation of the theme Redefining Family during the post-adoptive nesting period. One way this adjustment occurred was in coming to terms with parenting a child who has no biological connection to them. In the group interview, the participants talked about how they find themselves pointing out similarities between a parent and the adopted child. Ann reported saying to her daughter, “You have crazy hair like Mommy!” She wondered if that was being honest or dishonest. Gloria responded, “Or is that part of the nesting process? Because we do that to our son, too. Like, ‘you have big feet like daddy!’” The participants agreed that making these connections feels good because it reinforces the child’s role in the family.

Honoring the Other Mother

Another significant theme that emerged more directly during post-adoptive nesting is “Honoring the Other Mother.” This theme came up for all the participants as they reconciled what it means to be this child’s mother while still making room for the birth mother as a crucial part of their family’s story. This proved to be more difficult for some mothers in the study than others. Elle shared about how her continued interactions with her son’s birth family through their open adoption arrangement contributed to her struggle to fully feel like her son’s mother. “I look down, and I see his birth mom and I see his birth dad. I don’t see me.” Ashley spoke candidly about how she feels selfish sometimes when it comes to including her daughter’s birth mother in their lives.
Mothers who have their child naturally, they don’t have to share with another person who had this baby in their womb. So, it’s like a clash. But at the same time, it’s a bond. I care about her very, very deeply, but . . . there’s a space.

Ann shared in the group interview about the complications of keeping her promise to her daughter’s birth mother after the agency lost contact with her.

The one thing we promised our birth mother was that we would keep open email communication through pictures. And then she went dark after the birth. So I felt guilty. I promised you one thing. You gave us your daughter, and now I can’t even live up to it.

Some of the participants spoke more easily about their care for the birth mother, despite the other emotions. Meghan expressed feeling concern and care for her son’s birth mother who is very young, even though she has maintained clear boundaries for their relationship. “I am basically like a second mom to her. You know, I know she feels love from our family.” Marie spoke candidly about how she has come to love and care for her son’s birth mother, despite their differences. She attributed a lot of this to the birth mother’s support of her as their son’s mother.

I feel like I heal from her. She sent the sweetest email where she said, “I am so glad that we chose you guys to raise this kid. You are doing an amazing job.” It was so reassuring. I think I will forever continue to need her approval.

For most of the participants, being able to fully embrace their identity as this child’s mother involved leaving room for the birth mother rather than trying to cut her out of view. Elle addressed the reality that in adoption there are always other parents, whether they have a tangible presence in a child’s life or not. “You’re never gonna be the child’s one and only mom. Even in a closed adoption, you’re never gonna be the child’s one and only mom.” Instead of feeling threatened by her son’s birth mother,
Marie latched on to a philosophy that her social worker shared with her during the adoptive waiting period. “I remember our social worker saying, ‘why not have more people in your life, in your child’s life, who love them?’ And that always stuck with me.”

The Adoption Club

According to the participants, the theme of The Adoption Club increased in significance after placement. The importance of connecting with other adoptive families took on a new meaning once the adoptive mothers in the study officially joined the ranks. Elle expressed her desire to connect more with adoptive families because she recognizes the importance of supporting her son throughout his life.

I’m excited about meeting other adoptive families and parents because I just feel like there are going to be a lot of questions. There already are questions, and I feel a little insecure on how to proceed with, you know, making him feel like a whole complete person.

Ashley shared her perspective about how talking to people who have gone through something similar can lead to a greater sense of confidence as a mother, as well as her concern that the lack of resources for adoptive mothers may put them at a disadvantage.

I think sharing your story and somebody else being like, you know, I feel that same way. Let me hold your hand because we’re going through it together. Maybe a women’s support group. I’ve always said they have these Lamaze classes and breastfeeding classes and all these moms get to go. But if you’re an adoptive mother, sorry. There’s nothing. You’ve just got to figure it out.

All the adoptive mothers in the study referred to some sense of paying it forward and wanting to support other adoptive parents because it was either invaluable to their experience or missing from their experience, and they do not want the latter to be the case for others. Marie talked about how other people’s willingness to share their adoption stories led her to want to share hers. “I have to pay it forward, too. To be like,
okay, all these people gave me their stories, and it was so helpful. And hopefully I can share mine and help somebody.” Several of the participants expressed their willingness to speak at their adoption agency about their adoption experiences as a way of paying it forward. Ashley particularly valued this activity since she did not have much of an adoption support network herself. In the group interview, Gloria and Marie also talked about how helpful it was to hear from adoptive parents at the initial meeting when they were considering adoption and how nice it feels to go back to those meetings and be on the other side of it.

Regardless of whether they had support and help from The Adoption Club during the pre-adoptive period, the participants engaged with it more deeply and in different ways during the post-adoptive period. Ann sought out support from others who had adopted, stating it was comforting to talk to people who had gone through something similar. Because of the support she received and how encouraging it was to her, she has made it a point to reach out to others going through the adoption process and to make herself a resource whenever possible.

The people who we then helped and counseled when they reached out to us, then we were able to give them comfort. When I reached out to our mentors who adopted, they gave me comfort and that’s what you’re looking for.

Ashley, on the other hand, acknowledged how comforting it would have felt for her to hear how hard the adoption process is and to be reminded that others have made it through the process. “If I couldn’t help [adoptive mothers] in any other way but saying, ‘you know, you’re just gonna be a big ole mess…’ Just to say that, I feel like that would help.”
During the group interview, advocacy was highlighted more as the participants processed their experiences with adoption together. Their desire for others to be more educated about adoption and for people to be aware of the opportunities that exist through adoption became clear. Gloria expressed her desire for adoption to become more normative.

I say “adoption is love” because I don’t want people to think about Plan A’s and Plan B’s. I just want them to know that you’re on the plan. And it’s the love plan. And that it’s not different and it’s not less. And it’s certainly not a substitute. It is the plan.

Marie responded to the group topic of raising awareness by addressing the sociocultural trends in how the media portrays adoption. “I’m hoping that things are shifting with the media and so forth to show adoption as just the way some people make their families.” Elle added to the discussion by highlighting how adoption is much more prevalent than she first thought, especially if people are open to connecting with others about it. “But they’re everywhere, seriously. People who have adopted or want to adopt, they’re all over the place.” Connecting with others who are familiar with adoption, both personally and on a broader scale, was identified by all the participants as important for the health and well-being of their child throughout his or her life.

**Meant to Be: Gratitude**

Throughout adoptive nesting, the spiritual nesting process maintains its emphasis on trusting that things worked out the way they were supposed to. This mindset provided comfort and peace of mind prior to placement through the theme of Letting Go, and it led to appreciation and thankfulness after placement through the theme of “Meant to Be: Gratitude” (referred to as “Gratitude”).
All the participants expressed a sense of gratitude for their child and the way things turned out. Meghan was explicit about her gratitude, saying, “We are so grateful. We really do feel like God wanted us to have this child. He wouldn’t have opened the door otherwise.” Ashley expressed how she has made sense of all the hardships she has endured on her path toward becoming a mother. “You know how they say if you work really hard for something, it’s much more meaningful to you. I’m not judging any other mother, but I do feel like what we went through, we appreciate her so much.” In the group interview, Elle shared how, looking back on her experience, she had moments of intuition that led her down the right path. “Deep down, it seemed like there was this path that was meant to be, and when I got little nuggets of information that brought me to that path, it felt right, and I would go forward in that direction.” The other participants agreed and acknowledged the importance of each person’s experience feeling right for them.

Additionally, some of the participants used their experience to deepen their spiritual philosophy about life. When reflecting on her unexplained infertility, Meghan shared the way she made peace with it. “So that’s where we were. Two healthy people. And God just not allowing it to happen. And now we know why.” Marie used her experience to philosophize about how she sees things from a broader perspective because of everything she endured on her path toward motherhood.

Children who are adopted are part of this larger network, and they’re not just ours. And it got me thinking: I think that is healthier for all parents to try to put that in perspective because your children aren’t yours. They’re like a gift to the world.
The participants all found purpose through choosing to engage in spiritual and philosophical nesting to various degrees throughout the process of becoming a mother through adoption.

**Adoptive Nesting as a Comprehensive Process**

Though composite themes are presented in two categories, pre-adoptive nesting (see Figure 4-1) and post-adoptive nesting (see Figure 4-2), the comprehensive adoptive nesting process remains connected. During the second interviews, the definition of adoptive nesting was given to the participants, and their perspectives about this term in relation to their lived experiences are included. A description of the visual depictions of the adoptive nesting process is provided to better articulate the connection between the emerging themes and the phenomenon of adoption nesting.

**Lived Experience of Adoptive Nesting**

Participants were asked to describe their process of adoptive nesting, as well as to comment on their thoughts related to the term and what it means to them. Meghan shared how overwhelming it is to become a first-time parent, especially with the added complexities of becoming an adoptive parent. In her words, “In all realms, getting ready for this child—spiritually, intellectually, physically, all of that—it's so hard to wrap your brain around it, especially as a first-time parent.” Gloria expounded upon the definition of adoptive nesting to include her infertility journey.

I wonder if we could use the word nesting to also apply to infertility? And I found adoptive nesting way easier than infertility nesting because in infertility nesting, it was up to me. I had to fix it. I had to go to all the appointments and get the doctor to fix my body and argue with my insurance company and this and that. And what I love about adoptive nesting is it was not in my hands. It was not up to me. And I could just say if it’s supposed to happen, it'll happen. And it’s not on me to fix this problem and make my child real. I do my part, and then I let it be.
It became clear from the participants that an adoptive nesting framework needs to incorporate all the different ways adoptive parents prepare for and embrace the arrival of their children by way of adoption.

Through their engagement with the term and its meaning in their own journeys, the participants agreed that a framework for the adoptive nesting process is valuable and purposeful in a variety of ways. Ann expressed how having a process to refer to during the waiting period could normalize what an adoptive mother is going through. “I think it would have been good to hear, ‘This is normal.’ You might feel this and this and this. This is normal. So then you don’t feel like you’re going crazy or ‘What’s wrong with me?’” In hindsight, Ann stressed the value in participating in an adoptive nesting group.

I think having a support group would have helped. Like someone to connect with—someone, like one of us, to be able to say, not that we would have been able to give the answers, but hey, think about this, think about that.

Ashley explained how having a framework for the waiting period could be comforting given the variable timelines of adoption. Ashley said, “Giving adoptive mothers something to do, a support group during that time, it provides fluid movement. You feel like ‘I’m still a part of this; I’m still getting stuff done.’ Because you could be on that list for years.” Gloria acknowledged that having a more formal structure to refer to during the adoptive nesting process could provide direction during the ambiguity and uncertainty. “Maybe it would have been a place to hold on when there were times when I wasn’t sure what that right balance was of preparation and non-preparation.”

Even for the participants who actively engaged in the various types of nesting that comprise the adoptive nesting process, the participants all agreed that having a framework to know that they were productively preparing for their child would have been
useful. Marie acknowledged that, although she was doing most of the things that she would recommend for someone in the pre-adoptive waiting period, it was hard for her to feel like she was moving forward while she waited.

For me, I felt like I was spinning my wheels that whole time, and I think if I would have thought of [the pre-adoptive waiting period] as practice or as nesting, I don’t think it would have been so painful. [What I was doing] was total preparing and practice and nesting and good things . . . I wish I would have shifted my thinking more optimistically. It would have taken a weight off my shoulders.

All the mothers in the current study expressed that participating in attitudes and behaviors of adoptive nesting provided them with additional support, comfort, resources, and hope.

**Visual Depiction of Adoptive Nesting**

Emerging themes based on the lived experiences of the participants are represented in the visual images of the phenomenon of adoptive nesting, with Figure 4-1 representing pre-adoptive nesting and Figure 4-2 representing post-adoptive nesting. Although many of the themes overlap in pre- to post-adoption, the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon took on different meanings. The themes related to adoptive nesting that are most prominent for mothers in each time period are shown in larger font. For instance, in the pre-adoptive nesting period (Figure 4-1), physical nesting is less prominent because the participants all expressed a resistance to tangibly prepare for the arrival of a child prior to placement due to the uncertainty. However, in the post-adoptive nesting period (Figure 4-2), physical nesting is more prominent than other themes because of the participants’ emphasis on finally feeling permission to nest in a physical sense after permanent placement occurred. The double-sided arrows for the themes between the core of the model and each area of adoptive nesting represent
the fluid relationship between the inner and the outer components of the figure. Some of the themes are represented in more than one nesting area, indicating that there are overlapping processes involved in preparing to become an adoptive mother. These themes have been bolded for emphasis. The colors for each nesting area remain the same for both figures to show the congruence of themes throughout the adoptive nesting process.

As depicted in both Figures 4-1 and 4-2, some themes are situated inside what looks like a center, while the remaining themes fall under one or more of the adoptive nesting areas situated around the center. This illustration signifies the early processes of both pre-adoptive and post-adoptive nesting periods described by the participants of focusing on certain internal experiences before moving outward into adoptive nesting. In Figure 4-1, the theme Choosing Openness underlies the entire pre-adoptive nesting process, first appearing at the desire to become a mother (I Want to Be a Mom), then moving outward to grieving the loss of biological parenthood (Grieving Infertility) and being open to a different vision of family and parenting (Embracing the New Plan A and Honoring the Uncertainty). Choosing Openness then extends out to each of the adoptive nesting areas. In Figure 4-2, Choosing Openness is also at the center of the post-adoptive nesting process, beginning with the mothers' realization of finally becoming a parent (I'm a Momma) and connecting to their child (I'm Your Momma), and then extending out to each adoptive nesting area again. The central themes in both Figures 4-1 and 4-2 are rooted in the importance of maternal identity as a groundwork for preparing for the arrival of a child and assuming the role of mother.
Essence Statement

For first-time adoptive mothers, the essence of adoptive nesting—holistically preparing for the arrival of a child by way of adoption—is intricately related to the theme of Choosing Openness. Choosing to be open, for the mothers, emerges at various points in the process to the extent that it becomes an experience itself. At the beginning of the adoptive nesting process, the prospective adoptive mother chooses openness by symbolically pursuing motherhood through non-biological means. Embracing a nonnormative process involves grieving the loss of having a biological child and redefining motherhood to include having a non-biological child. Being open to an alternative perspective on motherhood provides the prospective adoptive mother the freedom to move toward adoption as a viable path for creating a family. Choosing to be open by embracing adoption also leads to an acceptance of the uncertainty of the process of becoming a mother through adoption.

Once the decision to adopt has been made and the prospective adoptive mother is waiting, she chooses to be open to exploring what this waiting period can look and feel like for her. She opens herself up to the emotional rollercoaster of the process. She takes it day-by-day and manages her expectations. She practices letting go of control and being open to whatever comes. She also decides what openness looks like from a relational standpoint. First-time adoptive mothers acknowledge the risk involved, but they also recognize the significant reward that comes from being open relationally and allowing others to participate in the pre- and post-adoption experiences with them to a healthy and appropriate degree.

Post-adoption, mothers’ uncertainty is replaced with excitement and freedom. The adoptive mother does not have to hold back anymore. She can go all in and choose
to be fully open emotionally and psychologically to this child and to her role as this 
child’s mother. She can finally nest in the physical sense by setting up her child’s room. 
She can reap the benefits of her choice to be open to her social supports (“village”) 
throughout the waiting process by receiving their support, gifts, and enthusiasm. During 
this post-adoption phase, the adoptive mother figures out what it means to be open to 
“the other mother” by allowing her mind and her heart to hold space for this person 
while still fully embracing her own identity as her child’s mother. She can experience 
gratitude for things working out the way they were meant to be. Finally, the new mother 
can choose to be open about the adoption narrative of her family’s story and use it to 
connect to others impacted by adoption.

Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of the study. The findings are 
organized into two main time periods, which are identified as pre-adoptive and post-
adoptive nesting. Although the findings are presented in this format, the entire process 
of preparing to become a mother through adoption, which includes both time periods, 
continues to be referred to as adoptive nesting. The findings are illustrated through 
Figures 4-1 and 4-2. In the next chapter, these findings are discussed and related to 
prior literature. Implications for theory, practice, and future research also are addressed.
Pre-Adoptive Nesting: Preparing to bring a child home and become a mother through adoption.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Overview

The following chapter summarizes the findings from the current study and connects the findings to the existing research literature. Emphasis is placed on the concept of adoptive nesting and the development of maternal identity for first-time adoptive mothers. Research literature in the areas of maternal identity, preparing for the arrival of an adopted child, and adoptive parenthood is related to the phenomenon of adoptive nesting and the findings of the current study. The chapter explores the theme of Choosing Openness as the essence of the current study. Maternal identity development for adoptive mothers is addressed within the larger sociocultural context of motherhood, and each of the study findings related to adoptive nesting is discussed. Limitations of the study are discussed, followed by implications for practice, theory, and future research.

Choosing Openness

The word openness felt significant for the adoptive mothers in the current study for many reasons. The word was first used to describe their type of adoption. Based on the common understanding of the term open adoption, the level of openness is contingent upon type (e.g., pictures, letters, face-to-face visits) and frequency (e.g., once per year, monthly, as desired) of communication between biological family members and the adopted child (Brodzinsky, 2006). In sharing their stories about how they came to motherhood, all the mothers in the study talked about their willingness to be open to the birth mother or birth family to some degree and how important that felt to
them. This willingness to be open and the value each mother placed on being open played a role throughout their entire adoptive nesting process.

The conversations with the adoptive mothers revealed that the first time the women in the study had to choose to be open was when they decided to pursue adoption as a path toward motherhood. The adoptive mothers in the study all underwent fertility interventions to various degrees prior to pursuing adoption, which is congruent with previous research findings reporting that most women who pursue adoption do so after prolonged infertility (Bausch, 2006; McKay et al., 2010). Once the decision was made to stop undergoing fertility treatments, the barrier to conception provided an opportunity to decide how much each woman wanted to be a mother. For the adoptive mothers in the study, the desire to be a mom triumphed over years of infertility that prevented them from having biological children. Although this desire elicited a painful grief at the loss resulting from an inability to welcome a child into their families in the traditional way, this same core desire to be a mom gave them the courage to pursue a nonnormative path toward motherhood, allowing them to fulfill their desire to be a mom through adoption.

For the adoptive mothers in this study, openness to adoption resulted in a candor about the uncertainty and fear that accompanied the adoption process. Adoption has been described in a previous study as an “unguaranteed investment,” with prospective adoptive parents described as “risk takers” (Lobar & Phillips, 1996). While these terms were not directly referenced, the risk and uncertainty of adoption were acknowledged by the mothers in the current study, which resulted in some of the mothers feeling frozen and alone and others turning outward and seeking resources and support. For the
mothers who shared their feelings with others and let people invest in their experience, the waiting period felt less lonely and more purposeful. In contrast, the women in the study who struggled to be open with others during pre-adoptive waiting wished they had been more open in hindsight. The level of openness to both the risks of adoption and the risks involved in being vulnerable with others about what they were going through were indicators of overall emotional and relational health for the adoptive mothers during the pre-adoptive waiting period as well as predictors for how smooth the transition to adoptive motherhood was during the post-adoptive period. Choosing to be more open yielded more positive results throughout the entire process—better emotional and relational health and a smoother transition to adoptive motherhood.

For the adoptive mothers in the current study, there was an awareness that the process of becoming an adoptive mother was different from that of becoming a biological mother, particularly for the period prior to bringing the child home. Despite the absence of physical connection in utero, the decision to hold back emotionally prior to placement, and other differences in their experiences, many of the adoptive mothers expressed that they did not feel like their process of becoming a mother was less than that of becoming a biological mother even though it was significantly different. These findings contradict past research that concluded that there are more similarities in experiences between adoptive and biological mothers than there are differences, which inappropriately led to the conclusion that a framework geared specifically toward transitioning to adoptive motherhood may not be needed (Holditch-Davis et al., 1998; Levy-Shiff et al., 1990; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991; Koepke et al., 1991). Unlike the more dated research, a more recent study of previous literature (Fontenot, 2007) resulted in a
similar conclusion as the current study, finding that the differences in processes for biological and adoptive mothers necessitates a framework specific to adoptive motherhood rather than trying to fit adoptive motherhood into existing biological frameworks. In the current study, the findings are focused on seeing biological and adoptive motherhood as equally meaningful and valid paths, while acknowledging their differences, instead of simply minimizing the differences between them.

Choosing openness influenced and informed every part of the current study and the adoptive nesting process, beginning with the decision to be open to motherhood through the nonnormative means of adoption. Being open to the adoption process and being open to others while going through the adoption process became the groundwork for the mothers to explore what it meant for them to become adoptive mothers and how to prepare for such an important identity and life transition.

**Maternal Identity Development**

Rubin’s (1984) theory of maternal identity development, specifically related to the wish to be a mother, is expanded by the current study’s finding that preparing to be a mother is a holistic, identity-shifting process for adoptive mothers. This finding became poignantly clear in the current study through the foundational desire to be a mom and the process of becoming a mom to a specific child. The current study expands on Rubin’s (1984) theory on maternal identity development by highlighting the phenomenon of two distinct experiences adoptive mothers undergo: (1) the initial wish to be a mother prior to actively trying to conceive a baby and (2) the second wish to be a mother after choosing to pursue motherhood through non-biological means.

In addition to the adoptive mothers’ initial and secondary wish to be a mom prior to their pre-adoptive waiting period, the process of adoption provided many other
opportunities for the adoptive mothers to decide how much they wanted to be mothers, which strengthened their resolve and volition. Based on Rubin’s (1984) theory for maternal identity development that emphasizes the volitional act of choosing to be a mother as paramount for developing maternal identity, the multiple crossroads adoptive mothers face in pursuing motherhood could be seen as opportunities to bolster their maternal identities. These intentional acts of choosing motherhood again and again further strengthened the adoptive mothers’ maternal identity during the pre-adoptive waiting period.

For many of the mothers in the current study, they were better able to see themselves as mothers when others viewed them as a mother and treated them as such, but they found it difficult to perceive themselves as mothers without external validation. The women who began viewing themselves as expectant mothers during the pre-adoptive waiting period reportedly made the transition to seeing themselves as mothers more quickly in the post-adoptive period. The emphasis on perceiving oneself as a mother is incorporated in previous research on developing a maternal identity for biological mothers (Mercer, 2005; Rubin, 1975; 1984), but it is not explained in previous literature related to maternal identity for adoptive mothers. By participating in adoptive nesting during the pre-adoptive waiting period, an adoptive mother can begin exploring how to create a maternal identity and prepare for motherhood emotionally, psychologically, relationally, practically, spiritually, and physically as a way of seeing herself as a mother and perceiving her actions as purposeful movement toward becoming a mother.
An added layer of maternal identity development for adoptive mothers is denoted in the current study through the acknowledged difference between the process of becoming a mother generally and becoming the mother to a specific child. Rubin’s (1984) theory of maternal identity development acknowledges the importance of binding-in to solidify attachment between mother and child, as well as to develop maternal identity. Adoptive mothers experience barriers to the biological mother’s process of binding-in, such as not having a physical connection in utero and the absence of a genetic link to the child. Additionally, the presence of biological connections between the child and the birth mother adds a layer of complexity that can make it difficult to feel like an adopted child’s mother. Since the binding-in process looks different from adoptive mothers’ experiences, the previous conceptualization of binding-in either needs to be modified to fit more congruently with the adoptive experience, or a new conceptualization is needed that more appropriately describes and connects to the process of becoming an adoptive mother. The current study begins to lay a foundation for what a new framework could look like by focusing on the areas of preparation and maternal identity development adoptive mothers can put their energy into during the pre-adoptive and post-adoptive periods.

Although the adoptive mothers began the study expressing mostly positive experiences with motherhood in general and adoptive motherhood specifically, which is congruent with previous adoption research (Ceballo et al., 2004; Holditch-Davis et al., 1998; Koepke et al., 1991; Levy-Shiff et al., 1990; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991), as the study continued, the adoptive mothers began acknowledging more of the struggles they experienced in becoming an adoptive mother, especially when my own adoptive mother
status was brought to the forefront. Although previous studies touched on the personal struggles adoptive mothers went through, the current study’s portrayal of both the joys and hardships of pursuing adoptive motherhood emerged out of the desire to know each woman’s story and understand their experiences in becoming an adoptive mother. As I reminded the adoptive mothers of my own membership in “the adoption club,” they expressed feeling more connected to me and feeling more freedom to be open about their experiences of becoming an adoptive mother. They revealed hurt they experienced by well-meaning loved ones and the loneliness they felt even from their husbands as they longed for a child. By asking about their lived experiences with pursuing motherhood, the pain and heartbreak of infertility, miscarriages, and surgeries came to the surface. As the mothers shared about pre-adoptive waiting, the fear that a match would never come and the uncertainty of incorporating adoption into their nuclear and extended families flowed freely in conversation. These shared experiences of the adoptive mothers revealed how set apart the adoptive mothers felt from biological mothers. As an adoptive mother who struggled with infertility and who does not have biological children, my insider status proved to be crucial in these dialogues because the participants perceived me to be someone who could relate.

By being open about both the positive and negative aspects of becoming an adoptive mother, the women in the current study reported feeling more connected to their child and the adoption process and more eager to share their experiences with other women pursuing adoptive motherhood. As a result, they strengthened their identities as mothers and solidified their specific roles as mothers to their adopted children.
Nesting

The adoptive mothers in the current study were asked to define the concept of nesting, and all the women’s definitions were similar to the sociocultural definition of preparing a nursery and readying one’s home for the arrival of a baby. The familiarity the mothers had with the term nesting substantiated the need for more research specifically related to nesting for adoptive mothers. Given the collective interpretation of the term, the adoptive mothers in the study were originally quick to distance themselves from the concept of nesting due to the possibility of the adoptive placement falling through and additional heartbreak that could result by nesting more tangibly. The mothers all confidently and clearly reported a resistance to participating in the nesting process. This conviction not to nest in the traditional sense demonstrated that adoptive mothers recognized the differences between their process and the process for biological mothers, but choosing not to nest in accordance with the sociocultural definition of the term did not make their journey toward motherhood less valid. By espousing the perspective that biological and adoptive processes of becoming a parent are not and should not be treated the same, adoptive mothers can embrace the unique characteristics of their nesting process instead of feeling like they are restricted from participating in nesting in any sense.

The decision not to physically prepare for bringing a child into one’s home proved to be a source of connection for the mothers in the group interview. Although the reluctance to nest could be perceived as a limitation for adoptive mothers, the women in the study saw the decision not to nest as simply part of the adoption experience. Most of the mothers conveyed feeling purpose in encouraging prospective adoptive mothers to engage in ways of preparing other than nesting in the traditional sense, such as
completing adoption tasks, building relational networks, and deepening one’s understanding about adoption and adoptive parenting. This holding back in certain areas of the preparation process further highlights the differences in experience between biological and adoptive mothers and the need for adoptive mothers to reframe the nesting process through the lens of adoptive nesting as opposed to the societally defined nesting process geared toward biological motherhood. An adoptive nesting framework would allow adoptive mothers to both generally prepare for the arrival of an adopted child and specifically prepare for adoptive motherhood, which could result in an increased sense of preparedness and a stronger maternal identity once the child is placed with the adoptive mother.

**Adoptive Nesting**

Given the familiarity the women in the study had with the concept of nesting and the scarcity of research on the topic of adoptive nesting, the current study provided significant groundwork for future exploration of the impact of incorporating an adoptive nesting framework into the adoption preparation process for prospective adoptive mothers. By providing adoptive mothers with a more expansive and holistic definition of adoptive nesting, they realized that many of their actions and experiences during their pre-adoptive waiting period were moving them toward adoptive motherhood and readying them for the arrival of a child, though they did not realize that at the time. Although a previous study involves examining nesting beyond the traditional physical preparation by incorporating the concept of social nesting (Gamiero et al. 2010), the current study’s findings on the nesting process for adoptive mothers broaden the concept of social nesting and incorporate additional nesting areas as a way of defining a
holistic preparation process for adoptive parents. These nesting areas include emotional, psychological, spiritual, relational, practical, and physical nesting.

Creation of the term adoptive nesting and the current study findings on adoptive nesting have generated a symbolic starting point for expanding the conversation on the connection between holistically preparing for the arrival of an adoptive child and developing a maternal identity for adoptive mothers. Although there was frequent overlap between the emerging themes and the various nesting areas throughout the study, each nesting area provided opportunities for the mothers to intentionally and symbolically prepare for adoptive motherhood. The six nesting areas included in the definition of adoptive nesting are explored and related to the current study’s finding and previous research on preparing for motherhood.

**Emotional Nesting**

During the pre-adoptive period, emotional nesting addresses the tension between emotionally holding back from attaching to a specific child and still emotionally engaging in the pre-adoptive process. Once the pre-adoptive period begins, emotional nesting evolves into finally feeling the freedom to begin emotionally attaching to the adopted child.

The adoptive mothers described their decision to postpone emotionally attaching to the baby they were matched with as a necessary and appropriate part of their pre-adoptive waiting process. In contrast to the experience of the adoptive mothers, Rubin’s (1984) theory for maternal identity development stresses the importance of participating in binding-in before the baby is born, then continuing the process once the baby arrives. Since a significant component to binding-in involves the mother envisioning the unborn baby as already her own child (Rubin, 1984), participating in this aspect of binding-in felt
emotionally inappropriate for the adoptive mothers in the study given the uncertainty of outcome. Additionally, some of the women in the current study acknowledged the inability as adoptive mothers to physically attach to a baby they were not carrying in their womb, thus reinforcing the difficulty of binding-in for adoptive mothers prior to placement. Holding back emotionally was a necessary part of pre-adoptive waiting for the mothers due to the possibility of a failed placement, but the decision to hold back in this way did not mean that the mothers were not emotionally engaged in the pre-adoptive nesting process in other ways, such as by addressing both the positive and negative emotions that they experienced and by taking comfort in the general vision of becoming a mother.

The mothers in the study acknowledged the emotional ups and downs created by the uncertainty of the adoption process. Because the adoption process caused the adoptive mothers to feel unstable, they had to find ways to control some of their other emotions to prevent feeling completely overwhelmed. The adoptive mothers stressed that not emotionally attaching to the child they were matched with prior to placement helped them stay engaged in the adoption process while still maintaining some emotional distance to help them manage the weight of the uncertainty of the process more effectively. In hindsight, some of the mothers acknowledged wishing they had allowed themselves to emotionally engage more throughout the pre-adoptive process. One way some of the adoptive mothers in the study did this was by emotionally connecting to the vision of being a mother generally. By doing this, rather than emotionally connecting to the vision of being a mother to a specific child which they felt unable to do, the adoptive mothers began forming their maternal identities prior to the
birth and placement of their adopted child. The mothers who made it a priority to stay emotionally engaged during the pre-adoptive waiting period by addressing their positive and negative emotions and by holding on to the vision of motherhood reported feeling more connected to the possibility of being a mother and, subsequently, more prepared. This finding highlights that implementing an adoptive nesting framework would facilitate deeper awareness about the steps prospective adoptive mothers are taking to become mothers and the ways they can begin the process of developing a maternal identity as an adoptive mother prior to placement of a child.

Emotionally preparing for motherhood is necessary for both waiting adoptive mothers and expecting biological mothers in terms of cultivating maternal identity prior to the arrival of the child, but the way emotional nesting is experienced for both groups of women differs significantly. Once placement was solidified, the adoptive mothers all reported experiencing overwhelming feelings of relief and excitement. The uncertainty that led to holding back from emotionally attaching prior to placement was lifted, and the mothers described feeling permission to love their child. Despite not being able to and not allowing themselves to emotionally invest in a specific child prior to placement, the mothers in the study did not express feeling at a disadvantage compared to biological mothers as far as attaching and connecting to their child. For the current study, emotional nesting provided mothers the freedom to honor their journey toward motherhood and allowed them to go all in once the emotional guardrails were no longer needed and placement was secured.

**Psychological Nesting**

The area of psychological nesting for adoptive mothers incorporates the mental processing of daily life as both a prospective adoptive mother during pre-adoptive
nesting and an adoptive mother during post-adoptive nesting, as well as the broadening of one’s understanding of family and parenting through the lens of adoption. In addition to the psychological uncertainty of adjusting to a nonnormative path toward motherhood, the adoptive mothers also emphasized the importance of taking things day-by-day when it came to the adoption process and maneuvering the various components of adoptive nesting. The mothers in the current study stressed the importance during pre-adoptive nesting of not getting too bogged down by all the details or the uncertainty of adoption, but instead trying to stay focused on what was in front of them and dealing with things as they came.

Since adoptive parenthood is not the normative means for creating a family, the adoptive mothers acknowledged a steep psychological shift as they began pursuing adoptive motherhood. The notion of having to learn about adoption as a nonnormative path toward parenthood is represented in previous literature (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Lobar & Phillips, 1996; McKay & Ross, 2010; Wegar, 2000). For the adoptive mothers in the current study, the “learning curve” encompassed both the education and awareness of creating a family in a nonnormative way and the differences between the biological and adoptive processes of preparing for motherhood. Recognizing the differences between preparing for biological and adoptive motherhood felt alienating for the adoptive mothers in the current study, making it difficult at times for them to know what they needed and how to ask for what they needed during the pre-adoptive waiting period. This finding also occurred in a study by McKay & Ross (2010) that identified “lack of support” as a theme for the couples in their study during their transition to adoptive parenthood. The learning curve experienced by adoptive mothers due to the
underrepresentation of adoption and lack of awareness about adoption on a societal level contributed to the alienation adoptive mothers felt from others who have never been through the adoption process (McKay & Ross, 2010; Porch, 2007; Wegar, 2000). Despite feeling alienated at times, adoptive mothers recognized the value in making this mental shift toward a nonnormative family and helping others understand the differences between biological and adoptive preparation as well.

Adoptive mothers recognized the added complexities that existed for them in how they both created and defined family, which led to redefining the idea of family. This difference in how family was defined generated a distance between their experiences and the normative process biological mothers undergo to create and define family. Sandelowski et al. (1993) referred to this act of reframing what family means from a non-biological lens as “unblooding.” This term does not seem consistent with the sentiments of most of the participants in the current study when it came to making sense of adoption because the adoptive mothers described their process of redefining family as being more focused on expanding one’s definition of family rather than on minimizing the importance of blood ties. The discrepancy between how the process was described over twenty years ago (Sandelowski et al., 1993) and how redefining family was described in the current study may be attributed to the shifting perspective on open adoptions and the value in incorporating biological family into a child’s adoption narrative to promote better long-term outcomes and healthier identity development (Brodzinsky, 2013; Goldberg, 2010; MacDonald, 2016; McRoy, Grotevant, Ayers-Lopez, & Henney, 2007).
Another way family was redefined by the mothers was by honoring their child’s birth mother, or incorporating the role of the birth mother and biological family into both their child’s story and their own maternal identities. One mother shared how she struggles to feel like her son’s mother because she sees his birth mother every time she looks at his face. Despite the complexities and discomfort of acknowledging another woman as their child’s biological mother, the adoptive mothers maintained a perspective that there needs to be room for both mothers in their child’s lives. The mothers recognized that, even though their children are still very young, incorporating their child’s birth mother or birth family into their lives has already led to uncertainty and confusion for them about what it means to share the maternal role and how to establish healthy interactions and communication patterns. However, despite the added complexities, all the mothers expressed commitment to honoring the child’s other mother and promoting openness about the adoption narrative in their family.

Although some previous adoption research addresses the significance of the psychological presence of an adopted child’s biological family members, most of this research is somewhat dated (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Sandelowski et al., 1993; Solchany, 1998) and does not account for the increase in prevalence of open adoptions today (Brodzinsky, 2006; MacDonald, 2016; McRoy et al., 2007). Since the level of openness of the adoption was not part of participation criteria for the current study, yet all six adoptive mothers who participated qualified their adoptions as either open or semi-open, there may be a connection between choosing to be open at various points throughout the adoption process, including level of interaction with the birth mother, and willingness to participate in a study about adoptive motherhood. Some of the mothers
reinforced this by acknowledging that it may be more important for them to be connected to an adoption community as they maneuver the complexities of open adoption throughout their children’s lives. Other mothers reflected on a life philosophy of being open about adoption in their lives as a way of promoting healthy dialogue with their adopted children and setting a tone that adoption is not something they are trying to hide. For the mothers in the current study, psychologically preparing for both the internal and relational complexities of forming an adoptive family increased confidence in both their participation in a nonnormative family structure and their identity as an adoptive mother.

**Spiritual Nesting**

The area of spiritual nesting encompasses both an adoptive mother’s personal philosophy or faith in a higher power, as well as a broader acknowledgment that certain things are not in one’s control and that things works out the way they are supposed to. Throughout the current study, the adoptive mothers continued to stress the importance of believing things worked out the way they were meant to be. This philosophy provided comfort for them during pre-adoptive waiting, as well as gratitude post-placement and into adoptive motherhood as they reflected on their process of becoming adoptive mothers. This theme of “meant to be” came up in previous literature about transitioning from infertility to adoption (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Sandelowski et al., 1993). Some of the mothers in the current study related this directly to a belief in a specific higher power, whereas other mothers spoke more generally about forces beyond their control.

When reflecting on their experiences during the pre-adoptive waiting period, the adoptive mothers expressed their desire to have some sense of control, despite feeling
out of control in various ways, which resulted in mothers deciding to let go of control. The mothers who recognized their need to let go of control during the emotional rollercoaster of the pre-adoptive waiting period explained how holding on to that philosophy allowed them to stop trying to control every variable and to instead shift their focus toward doing what they could do and letting go of the rest. One mother explained how difficult it was for her to let go of control, pointing out that she could fill out all the paperwork and send her family profile to multiple agencies, but she could not make a birth mom choose them. Although the women had different ways of making sense of life during the waiting period, they all seemed to circle back to this idea of trusting that things will work out as they are meant to be.

Some of the adoptive mothers in the study reflected that, although they did recognize they were making meaning of their experiences during the waiting period, their awareness of their spiritual philosophies became more solidified after placement and into motherhood through the feeling gratitude. Once placement was secured, the mothers reported feeling grateful for their journey that led them to this place with this child. The hardships the adoptive mothers faced leading up to that moment felt worth it, and they identified feeling stronger as a person because of their struggles. This is highlighted in McKay & Ross’ (2010) study by connecting a theme of “parenting-related obstacles” prior to placement with a theme of “overcoming challenges” post-placement. Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) refer to this as “coming full circle.” Since all the adoptive mothers in the study experienced infertility, the feeling of gratitude about things working out the way they were supposed to also served to provide healing for the loss and pain they experienced prior to transitioning to adoption.
Making meaning out of one’s journey toward becoming an adoptive mother is not new to adoption research (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Sandelowski et al., 1993). However, the current study adds a motivational component to the adoptive mother’s meaning-making process by highlighting the active step during pre-adoptive nesting of letting go of control as movement toward their desired goal of becoming a mother. In retrospect, the adoptive mothers in the study recalled unhealthy and unproductive ways in which they tried to grasp for control as a reaction to how out of control the pre-adoptive waiting period felt for them. One mother talked about her obsession with checking her online adoption profile. Another mother described her fear of putting her phone down in case her social worker called about a possible match. Putting an emphasis on spiritual nesting as a part of the preparation process for adoptive mothers provides opportunity for them to more clearly identify what their spiritual beliefs or life philosophies are so that they have a meaningful way to cope with hardships that are likely to occur during pre-adoptive waiting. Additionally, since adoptive nesting is a holistic process, spiritual nesting does not occur in isolation from the other areas. By engaging in the other areas of adoptive nesting when hardships occur, an adoptive mother can find comfort through reaching out to a friend; she can feel purposeful by reading a book about adoptive parenting; she can feel accomplished by cleaning out the closet in the guest bedroom in general preparation for a future houseguest. There are many ways for adoptive mothers to make meaning out of the circumstances, which reinforces the need for incorporating an adoptive nesting framework for adoptive mothers during all stages of the adoption process.

**Relational Nesting**

Relational nesting signifies the importance of fostering healthy, communicative
relationships with loved ones and friends throughout the adoptive nesting process. During the pre-adoptive waiting period, mothers who were waiting identified with the phrase, “it takes a village,” which signifies the necessity for adoptive mothers to receive support from loved ones and connect with people during the uncertainty of pre-adoptive nesting. For some of the adoptive mothers in the study, their community of friends and family, or their “village,” was eager to have a role and be a support to them. For other mothers in the study, investing in their village felt hard and painful because they were met with resistance and even judgment about their chosen path of adoption. The mothers who felt less supported admitted to pulling away and isolating further. This resulted in increased hurt, as well as fear about what it would be like once the baby came and placement was secured.

The current study highlights that in addition to being open to their village for relational support, the adoptive mothers also took on the role of helping loved ones develop a deeper understanding of adoption and expand their perspectives on adoption and adoptive parenting. The mothers’ experience of a learning curve in both areas of relational and psychological nesting further promotes the holistic, overlapping process of adoptive nesting. Being the teacher was difficult for adoptive mothers in the current study because they all expressed feeling like trailblazers in their family by being the first person or one of only a few extended family members who have adopted a child. This reinforces previous research highlighting that adoption is a nonnormative path to parenthood, resulting in less understanding, resources, and awareness on a societal level (Biafora & Esposito, 2007; Brodzinsky, 2013; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; MacDonald, 2016; Wegar, 2000). The mothers in the study felt both a pressure and
responsibility at times to educate and inform their loved ones, coworkers, and even strangers about adoption. This lack of support led to feelings of alienation and resentment in some situations, as well as feelings of connection and investment in others. Having the support of both adoption professionals and other adoptive parents proved to be invaluable for the adoptive mothers in the study as they maneuvered through relational nesting.

The adoptive mothers expressed feeling encouraged by the amount of support they received from their village post-placement. The mothers who struggled to reach out to family during the pre-adoptive period expressed regret in not trying harder to incorporate their loved ones prior to placement and giving them more of a chance to get on board. This reinforces the importance of including one’s village into the pre-adoptive waiting period in symbolic and meaningful ways to both strengthen relationships and deepen investment in one’s family. The emphasis on helping extended family and loved ones increase their understanding of adoption as a way of facilitating connection post-placement, referred to as an “extended adoption club” in the current study, is not found directly in previous literature. The mothers who made it a priority during pre-adoptive nesting to include their village into their pre-adoptive experience and help their loved ones understand the complexities of adoption and adoptive parenthood reported an increase in emotional, relational, and physical support during post-adoptive nesting. The current study findings suggest that by facilitating healthy and open communication with loved ones during pre-adoptive nesting, the transition to adoptive motherhood is smoother and more supportive for adoptive mothers, which lays crucial groundwork for
developing an adoptive nesting framework for loved ones of adoptive parents to better prepare them for embracing an adopted child into the extended family network.

Although adoptive mothers expressed a desire for their village to be significant contributors to their preparation and adjustment processes, it was also clear to the mothers that certain components to adoptive nesting seemed difficult for people to understand who had not been through it directly. During the pre-adoptive waiting period, several of the adoptive mothers in the current study received both emotional and practical support from other adoptive parents. This included specific advice on adoption-related tasks, as well as emotional support during moments of uncertainty and doubt. Connecting with other adoptive parents also provided models for the adoptive mothers in the study to look to, as well as a sense of hope that adoption is a viable path toward creating a family.

The adoptive mothers stressed their desire for more of a formal group setting where adoptive parents can receive support from each other with the presence of a helping professional to facilitate both practical and emotional nesting. During the group interview, the adoptive mothers expressed feeling energized by connecting with each other and eager to keep connecting with other adoptive families as their children get older. Inside the circle of adoptive motherhood, we laughed with each other about having a secret handshake and compared stories about times when loved ones did not understand some nuance of adoption or adoptive parenting. Findings related to the women’s interactions with each other during the group interview solidified the relevance of incorporating this component into the current study and the need for this type of resource to be available to adoptive mothers throughout the adoptive nesting process.
Several of the mothers in the study stressed how helpful it would have been to participate in a support group with other waiting parents during the pre-adoptive period.

**Practical Nesting**

Practical nesting describes the various tasks that need to be completed to practically prepare for the arrival of an adopted child during pre-adoptive nesting, and the practical tasks related to the daily needs of caring for a child during post-adoptive nesting. Although completing forms and running frequent errands does not feel like meaningful preparation for many adoptive mothers during the pre-adoptive waiting period, resolve to be a mom is tested and strengthened through participation in adoption tasks. The adoptive mothers in the study shared about how tedious and stressful it was to pursue adoption because of all the paperwork, legal aspects, and details to maneuver, which is similar to the description of the adoption preparation process as “the crucible” in a study by Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell (2003). Although all the mothers in the study identified closely with this aspect of adoption preparation, none of the mothers connected these logistical and legal components to their adoptive nesting process until presented with the definition for the phenomenon.

Upon receiving the definition for adoptive nesting, the adoptive mothers expressed a sense of purpose that, in hindsight, they wished they had seen during the pre-adoptive nesting process. Seeing adoption tasks not only as necessary steps of the journey toward adoptive parenthood, but also as meaningful movement toward their vision of becoming a mother provided a shift in perspective for the adoptive mothers in the study. Solchany (1998) identified the themes of “taking control” and “investing personally” in a similar way as seeing them as part of the adoptive nesting process in the current study. By viewing these tasks as part of the larger process of adoptive
nesting, the adoptive mothers in the current study acknowledged they would have felt more invested in the preparation process prior to placement, providing them more room to begin cultivating a maternal identity prior to the child being born. This finding reinforces the value in having an adoptive nesting framework to provide adoptive mothers with clear areas to focus on as a way of preparing for an adopted child.

Although much of the practical nesting process during pre-adoptive nesting involved performing logistical tasks, the responsibilities shifted for the adoptive mothers in the study post-placement to the daily tasks of caring for an infant. The mothers in the study described these routine childcare duties, or “maternal tasks” (Rubin, 1975, 1984) as purposeful and fulfilling after desiring to be a mother for so long. Through performing these daily tasks of feeding, changing, bathing, and generally attending to their child’s needs, adoptive mothers expressed feeling similar in some ways to biological mothers with infants. Accomplishing maternal tasks felt like inclusion in a motherhood club, which helped to solidify maternal identity for adoptive mothers during post-adoptive nesting. These maternal tasks were the closest connection made between biological and adoptive motherhood made by the women in the study. The area of practical nesting seeks to create meaning out of cumbersome, mundane, tedious, and exhausting tasks during both pre-adoptive and post-adoptive nesting by viewing them as crucial components to adoptive nesting and maternal identity development for adoptive mothers.

**Physical Nesting**

Physical nesting involves preparing a physical space for the arrival of child, including setting up a nursery and accumulating baby goods. Although all the adoptive mothers in the current study expressed an unwillingness to prepare a nursery prior to
placement, they did participate to various degrees in more general readying, which mothers likened to preparing for a houseguest during the pre-adoptive nesting process. When this emerging theme was shared with the adoptive mothers during the second interviews and group interview, many of the women expressed feeling validated about an urge they had not been able to identify, namely their desire to nest and their uncertainty and fear about how to do this. By generally preparing for a child, the mothers felt a sense of purpose without putting themselves at too great of an emotional risk. Some of the mothers in the study were aware of this desire they had to nest in a general sense, while others did not realize they were doing it. During the group interview, the adoptive mothers shared stories about painting rooms, doing yardwork and obsessively cleaning the house as a way of physically doing something to prepare. When reflecting on their pre-adoptive experiences, the mothers expressed that if they had viewed these small, but significant actions as part of the adoptive nesting process, they may have felt more permission to generally nest instead of avoiding any physical actions of readying their home for the possibility of a child. This finding further stresses the need for the incorporation of an adoptive nesting framework into the pre-adoptive waiting period.

Once the baby was born and placement was secured, the adoptive mothers in the study reported feeling an immediate relief, followed by a readiness to nest. The mothers felt permission to engage in physical nesting and recognized an impetus they felt due to their decision not to more tangibly prepare prior to placement, resulting in a preparation process referred to as condensed nesting. The mothers did not report feeling stressed by the abbreviated timeline or by the physical presence of their child
while they nested; rather they expressed excitement about finally being able to prepare a room and buy the clothes, toys, and decorations they had avoided buying prior to placement. Some of the mothers also acknowledged a shift in their perspective about the sociocultural definition of nesting after undergoing the nonnormative process of pre-adoptive waiting, expressing that by waiting to nest until the baby was home, they could simply get the things their baby needed instead of trying to predict what a baby may need prior to being born. This finding addresses the importance of not only expanding the definition of nesting, but also challenging the societal definition of nesting and redefining the term in a way that is fitting for individual mothers.

Another reason provided as to why the adoptive mothers did not feel overwhelmed about a condensed nesting process was due to the abundance of support they received from their village post-placement. The adoptive mothers in the study all reported feeling amazed by the gifts and tangible support they received from their village, even from people they did not know well and people who had not been outwardly supportive during the pre-adoptive waiting period. This generosity was a welcome contribution to the mothers in the study since they all waited to physically nest until placement was secure. The adoptive mothers acknowledged how meaningful and profound being showered with so much love and support felt like to them. Some of the mothers in the study reflected that it made them feel more like a real mother to be received as a mother so immediately and fully by their village. Additionally, most of the mothers in the study attended baby showers in their honor after the baby was born. For most of the women in the study, this act was a welcome induction to the broader motherhood club, as well as a way for their loved ones to show their support of their
adopted child and their new family. By investing in relationships with their village prior to placement, loved ones desired to invest, both relationally and tangibly, after placement occurred. Thus, preparing in one nesting area, such as relational nesting, during pre-adoptive nesting, has a positive impact on another nesting area, such as physical nesting, during post-adoptive nesting. This reinforces the interconnectedness of adoptive nesting and the importance of including adoptive nesting into the adoption preparation process.

**Study Limitations**

I focused recruitment efforts toward word of mouth and advertising to local adoption entities. As a result, five out of the six adoptive mothers in the current study came from the same adoption agency and interacted with same adoption social worker. This overlap in experience is a strength in some ways due to the homogeneity of the sample, but also a limitation given the lack of representation among the women in the study. The adoptive mothers who worked with the same social worker all reported feeling supported by her, and they described their overall adoption experience as very positive. While the current study findings help to provide a foundation for what a positive experience with an adoption professional can look like, it also highlights a limitation since this is not the experience of all women who adopt through private agencies. These study findings suggest the need for more research with adoptive mothers who did not feel informed and supported by adoption professionals to more fully address the discrepancies between adoption-related services.

Additionally, all six adoptive mothers in the study were white, heterosexual, married women, and all but one mother in the study adopted a white child. This highlights the homogeneity of the sample, which is seen as a strength in a
phenomenological research study, but it also points to the need for more research that incorporates diverse populations. Also, none of the adoptive mothers in the study experienced a failed placement, or a match that does not end in permanent placement of the child with the prospective adoptive parents, which could be another limitation of the study. Further research is needed on the lived experience of mothers who experience failed placement and the impact the experience has on participating in adoptive nesting and developing a maternal identity prior to placement.

The women in the current study were provided with a definition of adoptive nesting at the start of the second interview. Offering a definition to the participants could have informed the way they conceptualized their pre-adoptive experiences. Since this definition was not provided in the first interview, adoptive mothers’ lived experiences of adoptive nesting were described prior to hearing this term, which reduced the potential for bias.

The current study initially had seven participants, but one mother was excluded from data analysis and the group interview after participating in two individual interviews. She did not meet the initial selection criteria because her adoption was not finalized by the time of the interviews, but she passed the initial screening due to the overlap of experiences in several areas and her strong desire to participate. I was forthright with this mother about the possibility that she may be excluded from this study, and she stated she would still be willing to participate in the interviews. Her interviews may be included in follow-up studies with her permission.

Two of the six participants were unable to attend the group interview. These participants each lived about an hour away from the interview location in more rural
areas, while the other four participants lived within the city where the interviews took place. Although the perspectives of the two more rural participants were congruent with the perspectives of the other participants throughout the first and second interviews, it may be a limitation that their perspectives were missing from the group interview for several reasons. First, the absence of two participants in the group interview changed the dynamics and prohibited their feedback from being shared in a group setting. Additionally, one of the two participants who did not attend the group interview was the only participant in her late twenties, as compared to the other participants who were all in their late thirties or early-mid forties. Although her perspectives were similar to the themes of the other participants during her first and second interviews, her presence in the group interview may have generated more discussion about age and life experience for the adoptive mothers. Lastly, the other participant who did not attend the group interview was the only participant in the study who did not interact with the same adoption social worker at some point throughout their adoption process. Since the four women who attended the group interview bonded over their shared experience with their social worker, having the participant in attendance who did not share that experience could have provided a more diverse perspective on the pre-adoptive waiting process and the role of adoption professionals.

Another possible limitation of the current study is researcher bias and social desirability. Based on hermeneutic phenomenological theory, it was necessary and valuable for me to share that I am an adoptive mother to the other mothers in the study (Vagle, 2014). Although this likely led to more openness on the part of the adoptive mothers in the study because of my insider status, it could also have produced some
bias on my part, as well as a social desirability concern, resulting in the participants telling me what they think I want to hear. I took lengths to ensure that I was aware of my bias by bridling and member checking with the participants about the findings (Vagle, 2014). A subjectivity statement is included in this paper to acknowledge my personal investment and potential biases going in to conducting this study.

**Implications for Practice**

Findings of the current study stressed the importance of formal support to increase the adoptive mother’s sense of preparedness for adoptive motherhood and facilitate maternal identity development. The primary formal support for the adoptive mothers in the current study was received through contact with their adoption social worker through their adoption agency. This supports previous research concluding that both expectant biological and adoptive mothers could benefit from interacting with helping professionals who understand the connection between feeling prepared for motherhood and developing maternal identity (Barnes et al., 2008; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Doran & Hornibrook, 2012; Dunn et al., 2012; Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg, 2010; Milgrom et al., 2011). Most of the interactions the mothers in the current study had with their social worker were casual and as needed rather than structured therapeutic sessions, but the accessibility of the social worker led to increased feelings of support and comfort for the adoptive mothers. The adoptive mothers reported repeatedly seeking out their adoption social worker for feedback and information about adoption, adoptive parenting, resources for educating loved ones, and the logistical and legal aspects of the adoption process. The current study emphasizes the need for adoption professionals to have the necessary knowledge and experience about all
aspects of adoption to ensure they are providing ethical and appropriate mental health services to adoptive families.

Although the percentage of children in the U.S. who are adopted remains very small at around two percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), most mental health professionals are likely to work with members of the adoption triad on a regular basis and encounter people impacted by adoption to some degree even more frequently (Porch, 2007; Post, 2000). Therefore, it is crucial that a standardized measure for adoption competence be developed (Brodzinsky, 2013). The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) (2009) developed a task force to identify crucial elements that constituted adoption-related competence. After reviewing multiple sources and interdisciplinary perspectives, they selected fourteen elements of adoption competence that are as follows:

- Separation and loss;
- Developmental challenges;
- Development of multiple service systems;
- Family formation and differences;
- Abuse, neglect and trauma;
- Experience with adoptive families and adopted persons;
- Cultural competence;
- Success in supporting strengths;
- Range of therapies for healing;
- Family/strengths/evidence-based approaches to treatment;
- Advocacy;
- Therapies to strengthen parenting;
- Therapies for parent entitlement;

To date, the adoption field is still lacking a broad, standardized consensus about what constitutes adoption clinical competence (Brodzinsky, 2013), but the creation of this task force in 2009 and the subsequent findings and research that has been done on the need for this type of classification is encouraging for the field of adoption. These broad expectations for helping professionals who come in contact with adoptive families must be present in order to provide the highest quality of care to all parties involved in the complex process of adoption.
Once a standard for adoption competence is established, training in adoption competence needs to be required for mental health professionals already in practice, as well as incorporating the fourteen elements of adoption competence into the curriculum of counselor education programs to ensure that comprehensive and effective emotional, psychological, and relational care is provided to members of the adoption triad (Brodzinsky, 2013; Porch, 2007; Post, 2000). The need for competent adoption professionals is not a new finding (Brodzinsky, 2013; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg, 2010; Porch, 2007); however, the current study highlights the importance of both a competent and consistent adoption professional that can provide both practical and emotional support throughout the adoption process.

In addition to the need for adoption competence for adoption professionals, the mothers in the current study expressed how valuable their adoption social worker was in helping them prepare for adoptive motherhood. After reading them the definition of adoptive nesting, many of the adoptive mothers expressed feeling like they engaged in many aspects of adoptive nesting without knowing they were doing it, and they attributed this largely to their social worker. Overall, the mothers in the study had very positive adoption experiences and have adjusted well to adoptive motherhood, but they acknowledged that other women going through the adoption process may not have had positive experiences like they did. Therefore, the current study findings may provide a framework for adoptive nesting for adoption professionals that they can share with prospective mothers to increase their sense of preparedness for the arrival of an adopted child and strengthen their maternal identity both prior to after adoptive placement.
In the current study, four of the six adoptive mothers met for a group interview with me, an adoption researcher and a mental health professional, as the facilitator. They all stressed how meaningful it felt to connect with other adoptive mothers and how they wished there was a group they could attend regularly. Although informal group support is helpful, the importance of formal group support facilitated by a trained mental health professional could provide a safe space for adoptive mothers to be open and vulnerable about the struggles of pursuing motherhood in a nonnormative way, as well as the added complexities of adoptive motherhood. Due to the complex nature of becoming a mother through adoption and the grief and fear that accompanies the waiting period, the mothers articulated the value of participating in a therapeutic support group to address the uncertainty of adoption and have space to connect with others who are going through something similar. Additionally, a therapeutic support group could provide opportunities for prospective adoptive mothers to engage in all aspects of adoptive nesting to facilitate a stronger sense of preparedness and the development of maternal identity.

The adoptive mothers in the current study all emphasized the need for resources and support for their loved ones, as well as for them. Although several of the adoptive mothers in the study expressed feeling comfortable with the teacher role at times, all six women emphasized that the priority had to be on their own nuclear family, and they had to trust that everyone else would get on board eventually. This points to the need for more formal resources for loved ones during the pre-adoptive period so that the burden is not solely on the adoptive parents to educate their families and loved ones about adoption. When the adoptive mothers in the group interview were asked what resources
for family and friends should look like, they shared ideas such as a support group for adoptive grandparents and other loved ones, a book about adoptive nesting for both adoptive parents and others connected to the adoption process, and one-on-one peer support carried out by pairing up a waiting adoptive grandparent or family member with a current adoptive grandparents and other family members to provide a place to share fears and concerns about having an adopted child in the family. Since helping professionals are positioned as resources for adoptive families at various stages of the adoption process, it is important for them to know what services are needed and facilitate those services as appropriate. Additionally, providing specific resources about adoptive nesting to family and friends impacted by adoption could alleviate some of the pressure felt by the prospective parents to educate others while undergoing the confusing and uncertain process of the pre-adoptive waiting period.

**Implications for Theory**

Rubin’s (1967, 1975, 1984) research on motherhood and maternal identity has provided a foundation for decades of research related to the transition to motherhood. The significance of the wish to be a mother and the volition to embrace one’s maternal identity provide a basic framework for further exploration into the experiences of becoming a mother in a nontraditional way (Rubin, 1984). Despite some areas of overlap for biological and adoptive mothers as they transition to motherhood, the current study emphasizes that the experiences for biological and adoptive mothers both prior to the arrival of a child and after bringing a child home permanently, are, in fact, substantially different. To address the differences in experiences between biological and adoptive mothers, specifically during the pregnancy and pre-adoptive period, it is no longer appropriate to apply biological frameworks to adoptive mothers without
significantly modifying the model to address the specific experiences of adoptive mothers. Although modifying existing theories and frameworks can be useful in some ways, Fontenot (2007) recommends focusing future research on the development of new theories on maternal identity and preparedness for adoptive mothers. Out of findings like those in the current study, new theoretical frameworks specifically geared toward adoptive mothers can be developed. The need for new theories on preparing for adoption and transitioning to adoptive motherhood is reinforced in the current study. Creating a formal theory of adoptive nesting and an adoptive nesting framework could increase understanding about the transition to adoptive motherhood, as well as incorporate adoptive nesting into the larger sociocultural phenomenon of nesting for biological mothers.

The current study and its findings support the notion that prospective adoptive parents risk alienation and lack of support simply because it is not clear what support should look like or how to increase understanding about the complex process of transitioning to adoptive parenthood (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; McKay & Ross, 2009; Wegar, 2000). Rather than further alienate adoptive mothers from biological mothers, understanding the differences between the biological and adoptive processes for becoming a mother has the potential to create more awareness and empathy among different types of mothers and provide more opportunities to find common ground. This can help adoptive mothers both appreciate the complexity of their process and normalize their transition into the broader motherhood club. Creating a framework for adoptive nesting allows adoptive mothers to embrace their own process of being open to adoption as a valid path toward motherhood and participating in a symbolic
preparation process that addresses the complexities of preparing for the arrival of an adopted child and coming into one’s maternal identity as an adoptive mother.

**Implications for Future Research**

A phenomenological theoretical approach was used due to the lack of research on the topic of nesting and adoptive nesting (Guignon, 2012). Now that some insight into the experiences of adoptive mothers is gained, there could be a benefit in exploring a grounded theory methodology to develop a theory and framework for adoptive nesting (Flick, 2009). Also, quantitative research could be conducted in the form of surveys directed toward adoptive mothers addressing their adoption preparation process and assessing for degree of confidence in their maternal identity development before and after placement of a child. Lastly, qualitative and quantitative research could be combined through conducting program evaluations for adoption agencies to assess for competence for adoption professionals, and a needs analysis could be conducted to assess what areas prospective adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptive families feel supported and what areas are lacking in support for these adoption stakeholders (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2007).

The current study explored the phenomenon of adoptive nesting for first-time adoptive mothers in heterosexual partnerships who went through a private, domestic agency or law firm. These specific inclusion criteria helped to achieve saturation and develop a depth of understanding about the phenomenon for the adoptive mothers in the study, but the narrowness of the sample provides limitations to applying the findings of the current study to other populations without additional research. Additionally, although race was not included in the selection criteria, all the participants in the current study identified as white. It is important that future research be conducted on diverse
adoptive parents to more comprehensively understand their needs as they transition to adoptive parenthood. Some of those populations include heterosexual fathers, LGBT parents, minority adoptive parents, and single adoptive parents. In addition to exploring specific populations of adoptive parents, this study also provides a foundation for expanding the type of adoption from domestic, private, infant adoptions to other categories of adoptions, such as international adoption, adoption through foster care, and older children and special needs adoptions. Moreover, race and cultural components should also be investigated through formal research, including transracial adoption and transcultural adoption. Although previous adoption research exists on all the above-listed populations, more research is needed that directly explores the adoptive nesting process for these nonnormative parents.

Another important finding from the current study highlights the need for further research on adoptive nesting for extended family members. Further research in this area could identify what resources are needed to help adoptive parents educate and model adoption-appropriate language and behaviors for their loved ones, as well as facilitate positive relationships between their adopted child and members of the larger family system.

Despite some significant research on the connection between infertility and adoption (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Goldberg et al., 2009; Sandelowski et al., 1993), more research is needed that directly connects earlier infertility experiences with maternal identity and adoptive nesting. This goal seems relevant given the role that infertility played in the experiences of all six adoptive mothers in this study.
Lastly, because much of the existing research is dated, and open adoptions have become more prevalent in recent years, more research is needed to further understand open adoption and its effect on those involved (Brodzinsky, 2006; MacDonald, 2016; McRoy et al., 2007). Specifically, more research is needed on the connection between being open to the process of adoption and choosing to participate in an open adoption both before and after adoption finalization.

**Summary**

In conclusion, the findings from the current study expand upon previous literature related to maternal identity and becoming an adoptive mother. While there are many parallels between the present data analyzed from the adoptive mothers to existing research related to first-time mothers, the study reveals new areas of research in the field of adoption. The research question for the current study was addressed, but the conversation about adoptive nesting and the effect it has on the transition to adoptive motherhood is just beginning. By incorporating the term adoptive nesting into the vocabulary of stakeholders in adoption and adoption professionals, a deeper understanding of becoming a parent through adoption can be developed.
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW 1 GUIDE

Background

1) Tell me about yourself.
2) How would you describe your family?
3) What is an average day like for you?

Preparing for Motherhood

1) Can you tell me about your journey in getting to the place of pursuing motherhood through adoption?
2) How would you summarize the preadoptive waiting period for you?
3) Did it feel like your waiting process was different from your partner’s process? How so?
4) Tell me about your experience of preparing to become a mother.
4) In what ways did you feel supported during the preadoptive waiting period? In what ways did you not feel supported?
5) Looking back, is there a moment that stands out to where you first felt like a mother?
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW 2 GUIDE

1) I would like to go over some of the themes that emerged from our first interview to see if they seem appropriate and fitting for you.

2) We talked a bit in the first interview about your personal experience with adoption and becoming a mother. Now I would like to talk some about how your experience fits into the larger experience of motherhood. I want to start out by asking you about the term nesting. Are you familiar with this term? What does this term mean to you?

3) Did your experience feel different from the experiences of other new moms you know? How so?

4) Thinking about what nesting means, I have come up with a definition for the term adoptive nesting, which I have shared with you before. Read definition. Using this term, can you tell me what your adoptive nesting experience was like? Do you feel like you had one at all?

5) Based on the definition of adoptive nesting, in which areas did you feel prepared? In which areas did you not feel prepared?

6) What was your experience like of becoming a mother? What was the process like of incorporating the role of mother into your identity?

7) What would you tell someone in your situation when she is first deciding to pursue motherhood through adoption to make the experience feel meaningful and purposeful for her?

8) Describe what motherhood means to you now.
APPENDIX C
GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

1) Introductions

2) Open the floor to comments and feedback about participating in this study on adoptive nesting.

3) Share themes and exemplars from the data and ask for feedback.

4) Read definition of adoptive nesting. Looking back, what was missing from your adoptive nesting experience that you wish you had experienced more? What was met?

5) What does support look like for you as an adoptive mother?

6) What role could helping professionals play in helping you participate in adoptive nesting?

7) How might your experience look and feel different if you decide to pursue adoption again?
APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Information and Purpose: The interviews you are being asked to participate in are part of a research study on the preparation process for first-time adoptive mothers. The researcher is interested in the impact of feeling prepared for motherhood on the development of a maternal identity for adoptive mothers. The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of adoptive nesting for adoptive mothers as they work to create a maternal identity and prepare for the arrival of a child by way of adoption.

Your Participation: Your participation in this study will consist of two individual interviews lasting approximately one hour each and spaced approximately 2-3 weeks apart. You will also be asked to participate in a third group interview that will occur 4-6 weeks after the initial interview. The group interview, which will be approximately 90 minutes, will include the researcher and the other research participants. If you do not want to participate in the group interview for confidentiality reasons, you will be asked to participate in a 30-minute individual interview to wrap up the study. Throughout the interviews, you will be asked to share your experiences of becoming a mother through adoption. You are not required to answer the questions. At any time, you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop the interview and your participation in the study. There is no penalty for discontinuing participation. This study is in no way affiliated with any adoption organization or entity, so your participation or lack of participation will not impact any ongoing services you may be receiving or any future adoption-related activities you may participate in.

Benefits and Risks: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. The indirect benefit of your participation is to contribute to the field of adoption research. By doing so, the hope is that more resources and support will be made available to all parties involved in adoption and more knowledge can be disseminated about the unique and complex process of creating a family by way of adoption. There are no risks associated with participating in the study.

Confidentiality: The interview will be audio recorded, but your name will not be recorded on the tape. All of your information and interview responses will remain anonymous. Your interviews will be transcribed, but all identifying information will be removed from all written documentation. All recordings will be destroyed and all transcriptions will be erased after research on this data is concluded. The researcher cannot guarantee that all group participants will keep the discussion during the group interview confidential.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher, Karin Fields, at kgrace@ufl.edu, or her supervisor, Dr. Sondra Smith, at smith85@coe.ufl.edu. For information regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the IRB office at (352) 392-0433.

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I am aware that I can discontinue my participation in the study at any time.

Signature____________________________________________ Date________

IRB201700057
APPENDIX E
STUDY PROTOCOL FOR IRB201700057

1. Background:

Maternal identity has been studied for decades for biological mothers. In Rubin’s (1984) foundational research on maternal identity, the connection between feeling prepared and maternal identity development was explored and has continued to be referenced to this day. Despite the presence of some current research on the transition to motherhood for biological mothers (Barnes et al., 2008; Doran & Hornibrook, 2012; Dunn, Hanich, Roberts, & Powrie, 2012; Milgrom et al., 2011), the research is sparse on the transition to motherhood for adoptive mothers (Goldberg, 2010; McKay et al., 2010). The majority of the existing research on the connection between parental identity and feelings of preparedness is dated (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Sandelowski, Harris, & Holditch-Mitchell, 1993), but the few current studies that exist reinforce the significance of preparing for adoptive parenthood and the positive impact this has on the transition overall, as well as pointing to the need for further research specifically on this connection (Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg, 2010; McKay & Ross, 2010). Building on the early research on the transition to motherhood (Rubin, 1984) and the lack of research that exists on this transition for adoptive mothers (Fontenot, 2007; McKay & Ross, 2010), the proposed study on adoptive nesting, which combines the preparation process for waiting adoptive mothers with the development of maternal identity, is the logical next step in the research.

2. Specific Aims:

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of adoptive nesting for adoptive mothers as they work to create a maternal identity and prepare for the arrival of a child by way of adoption. Since it is a qualitative, phenomenological research study, the goal of the research is to develop a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of interest from the point of view of the participants’ lived experiences (Vagle, 2014). To achieve this, the researcher must approach the data without hypotheses in order to remain open to the phenomenon as it is (Moustakis, 1994). By conducting this research, the goal is to lay groundwork for future research by creating a foundational framework for adoptive mothers transitioning to adoptive parenthood.

3. Research Plan / Study Description:

The selection criteria for this study will consist of first-time adoptive mothers who have finalized a domestic adoption within the last two years of a child below the age of two at the time of adoption and who have no biological children. In phenomenological research, a homogenous sample is critical to the outcome of the analysis (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakis, 1994). To increase homogeneity, I will limit participation for this study to adoptive mothers who were in heterosexual partnerships at the time of adoption. For the initial screening, I will assess for both the theoretical criteria and the selection criteria in a brief phone meeting.
Participants will be recruited from local public and private adoption agencies and organizations in and around North Florida. As a member of the local adoption community, I will use my local contacts and word of mouth to recruit participants. Recruitment will be conducted by way of a flyer that will be emailed and distributed to local adoption entities. No parameter will be put on age of participants unless more than 10 participants meet criteria and it is appropriate to narrow the inclusion criteria (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Although there is no set number of participants needed for a phenomenological study (Vagle, 2014), four to eight participants will be sought out for the proposed study. More participants will be recruited if saturation is not achieved, as is congruent with phenomenological methodology (Vagle, 2014).

When a possible participant contacts the PI via email or over the phone, the PI will read or email the inclusion criteria, as listed in the IRB study as the Screening Transcript. If the participant confirms that she meets criteria, the informed consent will be sent via email or a hard copy will be delivered. If the participant chooses to participate, she will sign the form and the first interview will be coordinated.

For the purpose of this study, each participant will take part in two individual semi-structured interviews and a follow-up group interview. The interviews will take place in a secure office room within a private counseling office in Gainesville, Florida with a private entrance so that confidentiality can be maintained. No interviews will take place at the PI’s home office. The purpose of the first interview is for the participants to choose their pseudonyms, provide relevant background information, and tell their stories and experiences around preparing for adoptive motherhood using the semi-structured Interview Guide 1 (See Appendix A) as a framework (Seidman, 1991). Although unstructured interviews are most commonly used in phenomenological research studies because they tend to be more dialogic and conversational (Vagle, 2014, p. 78), a semi-structured approach has been selected to provide consistency in the interview format.

During the second interview, the focus is on reflecting meaning. This will be done by sharing experiences since the first interview, providing any additional thoughts on the phenomenon of interest, and presenting themes to the participants that emerged from the analysis of the first round of interviews (Seidman, 1991). In this interview, the phenomenon of nesting will be addressed more fully in order to develop a stronger connection between the sociocultural phenomenon of nesting and how this relates to adoptive mothers. (See Appendix B, Interview Guide 2).

To fully develop an understanding for the phenomenon of interest, Seidman (1991) recommends conducting at least three interviews. For the proposed study, I have decided to conduct the third interview in a group format in which the researcher and all of the participants will gather together to reflect, connect, summarize, review transcripts and make individual and collective meaning of their experiences (See Appendix C Interview Guide 3). This dialogue and conversational process aligns with the hermeneutic circle in that it adds a layer of richness and depth to the phenomenon (Crist & Tanner, 2003). It also strengthens the interconnectedness of the participants to each other and the researcher, which aligns with Heidegger’s concept of sorge (Miles, Chapman, Francis, & Taylor, 2013). The hope for this group process is to facilitate support and enhance community among adoptive mothers.
Following each interview, the researcher will keep field notes and memos about the experience (Crist & Tanner, 2003). These memos may include nonverbal communication and general reactions to the shared experience. Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcribing and subsequent coding of the first interview will take place closely following the interview and prior to the second interview. The same procedure will be followed between the second interview and the group interview (Seidman, 1991). Thus, the data sources for the proposed study will include interview transcripts, as well memos and observations recorded during and after each interaction with the participants.

Each research participant will be designated a confidential file by the researcher that will include demographic information, interview transcriptions, and any memos, notes, or observations related to the particular participant. Each participant will be assigned a numerical code that includes her birthdate and the month and day of her child’s birthday (e.g. MMDDYY-MMDD). They will also be asked to choose their own pseudonym in the first interview that will be used throughout the research process and the final paper. Participant identities will not be recorded on the audio recording and will not be transcribed or used in any subsequent papers or reports. All recordings and hard copies of any transcripts or memos will also be kept in a secure and locked file cabinet at the PI’s home office. All digital transcripts will be erased and all audio recordings of participants will be destroyed after research on this topic has been completed.

Data analysis will begin with a holistic reading of the entire text without writing anything down to simply get acquainted with the data (Vagle, 2014). Both in data collection and data analysis of interpretive phenomenological research, a balance needs to be maintained between structure and freedom to provide a clear focus while still leaving room to engage with and respond to the data (Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson, & Spence, 2008). To do this, the researcher participates in the discipline of reading, writing, talking, thinking, re-reading, re-writing, and developing new insights (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1393). This process is known as the hermeneutic circle, in which interpretation through understanding is achieved through this circular process (Crotty, 1998; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). From a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, inviting others to participate in this circle can lead to richer and deeper interpretations. For the purpose of this study, I will invite the participants to join the hermeneutic circle by sharing ‘exemplars’, or significant excerpts that characterize specific common themes or meanings across participants (Crist & Tanner, 2003, p. 204), as well as inviting them to reflect on their experience of participating in this research. I will take minutes when dialoguing with anyone connected to the data as part of the audit trail. This process is congruent with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to data analysis.

While descriptive phenomenology promotes bracketing, or putting aside past knowledge and assumptions in order to be fully present with the phenomenon as it is (Vagle, 2014, p. 67), interpretive phenomenology sees the recognition of assumptions and past knowledge as the forward arc of the hermeneutic circle, making it not only appropriate but actually crucial to the interpretation process (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Although bracketing is considered inappropriate for interpretive phenomenology, it remains important that the investigator be aware of any previous knowledge or
assumptions that could influence both the conduct of the researcher and the interpretation of the data (Smythe et al., 2007).

After thorough engagement with the data by participating in the hermeneutic circle, the researcher then continues with interpretation through “naming”, which is the conceptualization and coding of central concerns and exemplars (Benner, Tanner, & Chesla, 1996). As themes emerge, the researcher provides a name that seems congruent with the way it is represented in the individual stories of the participants. These themes are formed out of the life-world existential themes that allow phenomenologists to reflect on how people experience the world (Tuohy et al., 2013; Van Manen, 1990). By using themes as a framework for naming, the themes carry an existential significance that resonates across the data.

Possible Discomforts and Risks:

Since participation is voluntary and no physical or medical interventions are involved, there is no risk to the safety and wellbeing of the participants. Although individual interviews are designed to collect information and experiences of the participants, and participants are free to disclose as much or as little they want to, there is minimal risk that questions about personal experiences may create emotional and/or psychological distress for the participants. If this occurs, the researcher will check in with the participant and provide an option to stop the interview at any time. Also, the participant is free to withdraw participation at any point in the study without any penalty or consequence, which helps to address this minimal risk for emotional/psychological distress.

As in most qualitative studies, the biggest risk is the possibility of a breach of confidentiality. For this particular study, disclosure of identifiable information about the participants does not present any additional risks to them since the criteria of the study is simply being an adoptive mother, which is something that is likely to be a public identifier about the participant prior to participation in the study. The third interview, which will take place in a group setting with the other participants, will involve disclosing the identities of the participants, but only among the other participants. In order to be forthcoming about possible limitations to confidentiality, the informed consent states that the PI cannot guarantee confidentiality in the group interview. Since each participant is able to opt out of this group interview with no pressure or penalty, full anonymity can be maintained by any participant who desires that. Also, since the group component is addressed in the informed consent, each participant will have full knowledge of this disclosure of identity among participants and can opt out of the study or the group component prior to beginning the study.

Possible Benefits:

There is no direct benefit to the participants in this study, as stated in the informed consent. Since little research exists on the transition to motherhood for adoptive mothers, the participants, who will all be adoptive mothers, may benefit indirectly from the proposed research by gaining insight on the shared experiences of other women, as well as the possible contribution this research could have on the field
of adoption. This research will serve to create new knowledge in the hopes that more research will follow. This is a possible benefit to adoptive mothers because it increases adoption awareness and also normalizes this non-normative family structure.

The group interview will also serve to directly connect adoptive mothers to others who have experienced the transition to adoptive motherhood. This is seen as a possible benefit because the research that exists on transitioning to both biological and adoptive parenthood stresses the importance of social support both during and after the transition to parenthood occurs (Barnes et al., 2008; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Doran & Hornibrook, 2012; Dunn et al., 2012; McKay & Ross, 2010; Milgrom et al., 2011).

4. Conflict of Interest:

As an adoptive mother myself, there is a potential for a conflict of interest because of my direct connection to this topic and my investment in the results of this study and any subsequent research on this topic. I will address this possible conflict of interest by letting all my participants know about my personal connection to the data. I will also reduce the potential for conflict of interest in my criteria for inclusion. I adopted all my children at the age of three or above. This study is designed to mirror the biological process of becoming a mother as closely as possible, thus limiting the criteria to first-time mothers who adopted a child under the age of two. This similar, yet different, experience will provide appropriate distance between my experience and the experiences of the participants. Also, I have chosen Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology for my methodology, which recognizes the value in a shared commitment to the research by both researcher and participant (Vagle, 2014). This can be strengthened by personal investment as long as the researcher is aware of her invested position and brings it to the conversation as appropriate.

As an adoptive mother and a mental health professional in the community, I do have a history of professional and personal relationships with some of the entities that will be used for recruiting. However, the conflict of interest is minimal since I am not directly engaged in any professional or personal relationship with any of these entities or their employees at this time. I will maintain that personal and professional distance as appropriate and necessary throughout the course of the study.

Given my professional affiliations to local adoption agencies and organizations, it is possible that I may have some professional relationship with recruited participants. If this happens, I will exclude them from the study to avoid any possibility for unintended pressure for participation or hesitation in being honest and forthcoming during the interview process. Also, given my personal ties to the local adoption community as an adoptive mother, I may encounter participants that I have informal relationships with as co-members of the adoption community. If this happens, I will not exclude them from the study since Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology promotes shared passion and investment in the topic and views it as a strength of the research process. However, I will remind these participants, like all the participants, that their participation is voluntary and there is no pressure to participate and no consequence for ending participation at any time.
Apart from my personal interest in the research topic and my personal and professional connection to local adoption entities, there are no additional conflicts of interest in this study that need to be addressed.
APPENDIX F
RECRUITMENT FLYER

Department of Counselor Education
University of Florida

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH IN ADOPTION PREPARATION FOR FIRST-TIME
ADOPTIVE MOTHERS

Seeking volunteers to take part in a study on the impact of feeling prepared for motherhood on the development of a maternal identity for adoptive mothers.

Looking for first-time adoptive mothers in heterosexual partnerships who finalized a domestic adoption within the last 2 years of a child below the age of 2 at finalization.

Participation in this study will consist of two individual interviews lasting approximately 1 hour each and a third group interview lasting approximately 90 minutes.

Your involvement will contribute to the field of adoption research with the hope that more resources and support will be made available to all parties in the adoption process.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:
Karin Fields
Department of Counselor Education
at
(352) 871-5876
Email: kgrace@ufl.edu

The study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board, University of Florida

IRB201700057
LIST OF REFERENCES


Center for Adoption Support and Education (2009). *Adoption competency: Definition and competencies.* Burtonsville, MD: C.A.S.E.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Karin Fields received a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology and a Bachelor of Science degree in family, youth, and community sciences from the University of Florida in 2005. She later attained a Master of Health Science degree in rehabilitation counseling with a specialization in mental health counseling from the University of Florida in 2007. Karin received her Ph.D. in counseling and counselor education with a concentration in mental health counseling at the University of Florida in August 2017. She has worked as a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Licensed Supervisor, and Vice President of a group counseling practice in Gainesville, Florida for 10 years, specializing in children and adolescents, adoption, and counselor supervision and training. Karin is passionate about increasing awareness and advocacy for vulnerable children populations, particularly children in the foster care system. She looks forward to expanding her clinical and academic pursuits to help vulnerable children receive support and achieve success.