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# "You were Adopted?!": An Exploratory Analysis of Microaggressions Experienced by Adolescent Adopted Individuals

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*“YOU were Adopted?!”: An Exploratory Analysis of Microaggressions Experienced By  
Adolescent Adopted Individuals*

A Thesis Presented

by

KARIN JONG-MEE GARBER, Ed.M., M.A.

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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Clinical Psychology

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## DEDICATION

To all 4 of my parents- adoptive and birth, and all adopted individuals.

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ABSTRACT

“YOU WERE ADOPTED?!”: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS  
EXPERIENCED BY ADOLESCENT ADOPTED INDIVIDUALS

FEBRUARY 2014

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Sue et al. (2007, p. 271) define a microaggression as: “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative...slights and insults towards [the marginalized group].” Microaggressions have not been used to analyze the experiences of adoptees in a bionormative society. A total of 156 interviews (males=75, females=81) and questionnaires of White adolescent adoptees in same-race families were analyzed using a mixed methods design. Study 1 used thematic analysis to discover 16 themes of microaggressions. Study 2 used the *microaggression* as the unit of analysis in chi squares to determine if themes were associated with levels of intensity, emotional reactions, initiators, gender, and age group. For nine themes, intensity was not equally distributed, with the most frequent level being medium. Emotion was not equally distributed across twelve themes, with the most frequent response being neutral. Initiator was not equally distributed across ten themes, with the most frequent initiators being peers/friends. Gender and age group were not equally distributed, with females most frequently experiencing three themes, and younger adolescents most frequently experiencing



two themes. In Study 3, analyses used the *individual person* as the unit of analysis to assess the experience of microaggressions across all adoptees related to gender, age, and adoptees' perceptions of their adoptions. Significant mean differences were found in average intensity level and number of microaggressions for males and females. Number of microaggressions and average intensity were negatively correlated with scores on the Positive Affect about adoption scale.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Although adoption is becoming more prominent and accepted in society as a means of building a family (Fisher, 2003), adoptive families and adopted persons may still feel stigmatized or nonnormative compared to the majority of individuals in the United States who are not in adoptive families (Wegar, 2000; March 1995; March & Miall, 2000). As overt discrimination towards many marginalized groups may be socially unacceptable today, more covert slights and indignities often manifest to communicate negative messages towards the marginalized group by the dominant group (Sue, 2010b). Microaggressions are a framework that conceptualizes the different types of “slights” that can occur to marginalized individuals (e.g., microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations) (Sue, 2010a; Sue, 2010b; Sue et al., 2007). Although the microaggression literature has previously been focused on the experiences of racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious minorities (Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010a; Sue, 2010b; Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010; Nadal et al., 2011; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011), it has never been investigated if the microaggression framework accurately describes adopted peoples’ experiences. Therefore, the current study hopes to merge and extend the microaggression literature with the adoption literature in order to discern and classify the specific types of microaggressions that are reported by adopted adolescents. These experiences may converge with the current microaggression literature in some aspects, as well as illuminate specific experiences unique to adoption.

The current study also aims to discover adolescent adopted individuals' emotional reactions to microaggressions. The microaggression literature focuses on various ways in which microaggressions and perceived discrimination are related to different emotional responses and coping styles (Liang, Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2007; Nadal et al., 2011; Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010). Stigmatized individuals make appraisals about whether a situation is threatening or not by using "group-relevant" information (e.g., negative stereotypes about a stigmatized group which may be at play in the situation), "personally-relevant" information (e.g., some personal characteristic becomes vulnerable in the situation), and contextual and cognitive cues. Appraisals can help the individual decide if one has the ability to effectively cope with the situation. Additionally, emotional expression and emotional regulation are factors that can help an individual cope with stigma and prejudice (Miller & Kalser, 2001). For example, if someone from a marginalized group can regulate an anxious emotion in a situation where s/he may confirm a negative stereotype about the collective group, the person may be able to perform more optimally. Thus, adopted individuals' thoughts and emotional reactions could be related to the way that they respond to and cope with microaggressions. Furthermore, emotional reactions and coping style may also be associated with important psychological or emotional outcomes (e.g., Sue, 2010b; Swim, Hyers, Cohen & Ferguson, 2001; de Castro, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2008; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Donaldson, 2011).

The last aim of the study is to discern if there is an association between different types of microaggressions and the way that adopted people feel about their own adoptions. Although there may be other realms in which microaggressions are related to negative outcomes, the current study will begin by examining the psychological and emotional realms. The relation of stigma and microaggressions to psychological and emotional outcomes may have significant implications for how adopted people feel about and experience their adoptions. Microaggressions are an important link to investigate in the literature so that adoption professionals and adoptive parents are more educated about the ways in which prejudice towards adopted people may still exist. Although adoption may be more acceptable in society (Fisher 2003) compared to several decades ago, it is necessary that any assumptions regarding stigma and prejudice as being no longer relevant to adopted individuals is fully addressed and investigated. It is possible that similar to other marginalized groups, this prejudice has become subtler and more ambiguous though still remains insidious.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses how prejudice and discrimination have evolved over time such that the concept of a microaggression has become informative and significant in describing experiences of more covert stigma. The historical framing of adoption through its practices and attitudes is necessary to understand its stigmatization. These historical practices and attitudes constitute the blueprint for social norms that are then associated with adoption. Social norms and negative societal values about adoption then become instantiated and perpetuated in everyday language and behavior that can become more benign and “socially acceptable” over time. Norms become a part of how individuals behave with regard to adoption. These behaviors and comments are then expressed as microaggressions, which denigrate and slight marginalized groups.

#### **The Historical Context of Adoption**

Currently adoption is a mechanism for forming families wherein parental rights and responsibilities of the biological parents are annulled and legally transferred to new adoptive parents (Siegel & Smith, 2012). There are three components that constitute the “adoption triad:” the adopted person, the adoptive parent(s), and the biological parent(s). Adoption is continuing to become more popular as a means of building a family (Fisher, 2003), and thereby encompasses the possibility of shifting societal notions of what constitutes a “family.” However, various contexts shape the way that society perceives adoption today. Adoption has a complicated history punctuated by controversy, and therefore its practices have

shifted with the current of the sociopolitical times and cultural values. Examining the phenomenon of “openness” and matching of children with adoptive families can illuminate how secrecy and concerns about bionormativity, or, the idea that family and parenting are legitimate only through biological connections (Baker, 2007), created an environment in which stigma could proliferate.

Adoption in the U.S. first became a recognized legal and social practice in the late 1800s. Although adoption has informally existed for centuries, its specific legal practices and social forms have changed over the years (Carp, 1998). During this period, adoption was seen primarily as a pragmatic practice that could resolve social issues for children born out of wedlock (Zamostny, O’Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003). As adoption slowly became legalized and standardized, it was customary that once a child was placed with a family, s/he was to assimilate to the adoptive family in order for the family to operate and appear like other biological families (Zamostny et al., 2003). This practice often meant that adopted children were supposed to be phenotypically “matched” with their adoptive families. Adoption professionals also pushed for secrecy and confidentiality over the years; for example, closing the records of court proceedings and not allowing triad members to view them (Carp, 1998). This push by social workers was to prevent adoptive families from being shamed or blackmailed by a public that may not be accepting of adoption (Carp, 1998). While eventually adoptive parents were allowed access to adoption proceedings, information about these proceedings was extremely limited, and the decision to disclose to the child about his/her adoption remained with the adoptive parents (Carp, 1998).

The majority of major policy and cultural changes shaping the practice of adoption have occurred mostly in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Zamostny et al., 2003). Adoption is now considered another form of creating a family (Zamostny et al., 2003; Brodzinsky, Smith, & Brodzinsky, 1998.) Changes in more open communication about adoption were effected when researchers began delving into the psychological consequences of secrecy. For example, Kirk's early seminal study (1964) surveying families in Canada and the U.S. illuminated the fact that adoptive families felt that instead of trying to conceal dissimilarities in the family, they could cope with the stigmatization of adoption in a healthier way if they openly communicated with their children about their adoption and therefore shared the same "fate." Other studies conducted during this time found that adoptees were overrepresented in psychiatric care compared to the general population (Schechter, Carlson, Simmons, & Work, 1964). In the 1970s, adoption practices in the U.S. were advanced by social movements started by adoptees pushing for further openness in communication about adoption and increased awareness of adoptive issues (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998).

Even in the last few decades, confidentiality is still a concern in the adoption field as adoption professionals and policy makers debate about whether it is still necessary to protect all members of the adoption triad (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). More current justifications for maintaining confidentiality include: the interest of the birth mother so that she may fully grieve the loss of her child, the adoptive parents so they can independently raise their own child, and the adopted child so that he/she will not encounter serious identity issues (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998;

Kraft et al., 1985). However, others in the field argue that all adoption triad members can benefit from levels of openness and communication as this may lead to greater understanding and less confusion for the adoptee, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Neil, 2009). These findings can reorient the adoption field's conceptions of the "goodness" or "badness" of openness in adoption arrangements, which can aid in reducing the secrecy around adoption. Despite trends in openness, adoption still remains stigmatized due to its history of secrecy and shame, as well as current sociopolitical and cultural contexts (Zamostny et al., 2003; Wegar, 2000).

### **The Stigmatization of Adoption**

Historically, adoption has been shrouded in secrecy and shame, social stigma, and negative attitudes (Zamostny et al., 2003). This confidentiality has affected societal attitudes and awareness of adoption over time. Current societal perceptions of adoption are buttressed by stigmatizing historical narratives that communicate specific ideas about members of the adoption triad. These narratives include the single, morally impoverished birth mother who had an "illegitimate" child out of wedlock, or adoptive parents who could not build families of their own due to infertility or other perceived deficiencies, and adoptive children who were expected to have adjustment problems and developmental delays compared to biological children (Wegar, 2000).

Historically, birth mothers who had children out-of-wedlock and then placed children for adoption were seen as deviant. If a woman was unable to fulfill her social role as a mother, she was considered morally inadequate and socially abnormal

(Wegar, 1997). Furthermore, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, those in the adoption field and policy makers alike viewed these birth mothers to be helpless, neurotic, or sexualized women who needed to be controlled (Wegar, 1997). While before World War II women who had children out-of-wedlock were expected to keep their babies for religious or ethical reasons, after the war, birth mothers who had “sinned” could redeem themselves through terminating their parental rights (Wegar, 1997). Thus, patterns of sociopolitical and religious norms have all contributed to the stigmatization of birth mothers throughout the history of adoption.

The social norms of motherhood and parenthood in general also affected infertile couples that were disparaged by their communities and seen in a critical and unfavorable light. Childless married couples were rebuffed by society for violating social norms in either being “selfish” in choosing to not have children, or seen as defective and inadequate for not having the biological ability to conceive (Wegar, 2000; Miall, 1987). If a childless couple did decide to adopt a child, their status as parents was not seen as completely legitimate because their family still violated fertility and kinship norms (Miall, 1987). Miall (1987, p. 35) described a kinship system as one that “defines which individuals in a society are related to one another and how they should behave toward one another.” In the United States, the foundation of kinship systems is considered to be blood or biological ties (Miall, 1987). Because adoption violates kinship and fertility norms, adoptive parents have been stigmatized and viewed as deviant due to the lack of consanguinity (or sharing the same blood) in their ties with their child (Kressierer, 1996). Society’s belief in the importance of consanguinity is perpetuated and normalized in everyday language and

actions including when people express the notion that the adoptive parents are not the “real” parents of their adopted child, or that adoption is a secondary choice to having a biological child (Miall, 1987; Fisher, 2003).

Due to these historical narratives of kinship ties, children who were conceived out-of-wedlock were considered “illegitimate” and were perceived as coming from inferior backgrounds (Wegar, 2000; Kressierer, 1996; Zamostny et al., 2003).

Biological perspectives have emphasized the idea that adopted people come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are genetically inferior to those who have biological ties to parents (Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Wegar, 2000). Empirical studies in psychology have historically tended to look at adopted individuals in clinical contexts from a more psychopathological framework in looking for behavioral, psychosocial, substance abuse, and attentional/learning symptoms and disorders that differentiate adopted persons from their nonadopted peers (Brodzinsky, 1993, 2008).

Psychological frameworks of adoption have also concentrated heavily on the idea of loss as being inherent to adoption whether it is the adoptee losing a birth parent, the birth parent losing a child, or the adoptive parents’ physical or psychological loss of a birth child (Leon, 2002). However, Leon (2002) has argued that loss may not be quite as inherent to adoption as the field once suggested, and that feelings of loss may not apply to all adoptive situations (though the author does note that loss can be strongly exacerbated by societal stigmatization of adoption due to the lack of consanguinity.) Framing loss as inevitable to adoption may be informative for some adoptive experiences, but it may also maintain stigmatization or only provide a

unidimensional view of adoption; indeed, adoption can also include positive and meaningful gain of familial bonds.

While studies that look at the internal psychopathology of adopted children have been prominent over the years, studies investigating sociocultural values imparted to adopted people and adoptive families in the form of stigma and prejudice have been relatively scant. March's (1995) study on adult adopted individuals' perception of social stigma found that they were quite aware of their differences from biological families, and had even searched for their birth parents in order to be perceived as more socially acceptable after being reunited.

The media also transmit and perpetuate certain cultural values around adoption. Out of the 292 news stories related to adoption between 2001 and 2004, the media covered and portrayed more negative than positive depictions of adoption. Although there were positive stories about adoptive *families* reported, news about adopted *individuals* tended to propagate negative claims about their emotional issues such as feelings of loss, antisocial behaviors, and identity issues (Kline, Karel, & Chatterjee, 2006).

Research concerning the developmental trajectory of how stigma may affect an adopted individual is especially limited. It is possible that stigma could be particularly relevant to adolescent adopted persons in later development as adolescents spend increasing time with peers and may also place more of a premium on their peers' appraisals (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). Furthermore, older adolescent adopted persons could be navigating more complex adoptive identity issues as they mature

compared to younger adoptees (Miller, Fan, Christensen, Grotevant, & van Dulmen, 2000; Fisher, 2003). There are mixed findings concerning the growth of adoptive identity throughout development from childhood into emerging adulthood. Most of the literature on adoptive identity development has been conducted with transracial and transcultural adopted children as they evolve their adoptive and ethnic identities (Huh & Reid, 2000; Friedlander et al., 2000). However, research on transracial adoptive identity may not fully pertain to adopted individuals in same-race families, as these studies asserted that international adoptees that are racially dissimilar to their parents might experience race and ethnicity in a salient way that impacts the child's developing adoptive identity. Comparatively, emerging adults in same-race families have internally consistent and relatively stable adoptive identity scores over time (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). Situated between these pieces of the literature is the population of adolescent adopted individuals in same-race families. Although there are mixed findings in the literature about how adoptive identity may be stable or changing throughout development, it seems that generally as adopted individuals age, they may become more aware of their adoptive status until it is more stabilized in early adulthood. As an adopted person ages, perhaps the relevance or the salience of the adoptive identity will increase, which may be related to how the adolescent experiences adoptive identity and the stigma attached to this group identity. The research on the developmental trajectories of adoptive identity and stigma may be more relevant to older adolescents as they may have a potentially heightened awareness of their adoptive identity.



Although adopted persons may be presented with the possibility for unique challenges related to their adoptive status or loss of a birth parent (Fisher, 2003), other studies have demonstrated behavioral, social, and psychological outcomes for adopted people who are similar to that of their nonadopted peers (Fisher, 2003; Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000, Brodzinsky et al., 1998). Yet, as adoption seems to be gaining prevalence and acceptance in society, and many Americans report holding adoption in “high regard” (Fisher, 2003), some adoptive families continue to feel stigmatized (Wegar, 2000). These seemingly contradictory findings could possibly be explained by consulting the social psychological literature on implicit bias.

Implicit bias is where one may openly espouse anti-discrimination rhetoric and oppose stereotyping, but unconsciously hold negative connotations or associations of particular groups (e.g., Dasgupta, 2008). Thus, it becomes apparent that although people may express positive sentiments about a group, they may actually still hold negative prejudices.

Adoption researchers also acknowledge that stigmatizing historical attitudes about adoption are still present today (Wegar, 2000; Zamostny et al., 2003). They further assert that the public may still hold beliefs and thoughts about adoption as a family form in need of “rehabilitation” and “family reform” (March & Miall, 2000).

Historical, sociopolitical, cultural, religious, and academic contexts all shape the way society perceives adoption and adoptive families. While the studies that look at the internal dynamics or psychopathological aspects of adoption may inform psychological views of adoption, it is also important to understand the ways in which external forces and mechanisms such as stigma and prejudice can be related to the

way an adopted person views his/her own adoption. Peers are an external factor in an adopted person's environment that is often neglected in the literature that could possibly regularly affect an adoptee's perception of his/her own adoption. Indeed, relational aggression research has provided evidence for peers' abilities to have an impact on an array of self-esteem, psychosocial, and behavioral outcomes for children and adolescents who are the targets of teasing, gossiping, victimization, and exclusion (Werner & Crick, 1999; Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006; Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001).

### **Relational Aggression**

While more overt forms of prejudice and discrimination may have lessened over time as laws concerning adoption are modified and societal norms and values are shifting, aggression and negativity can still be conveyed in more subtle ways that have a deleterious impact on adolescent adopted people. The relational aggression literature elucidates the ways in which aggression between peers can have important implications. Crick and Grotpeter (1995 p. 710) conducted one of the earlier studies on relational aggression and defined aggression as "behaviors that are intended to hurt or harm others." They found that there were often gender differences in the ways in which boys and girls expressed aggression, such that young boys tended to harm others through more overt physical and verbal aggression, while girls tended to use aggression in a relational form (e.g., purposefully excluding others from the "in-group" or impairing relationships). Relational aggression research exemplifies how aggression may be subtler or can be expressed in different ways that are psychosocially harmful as opposed to physically dangerous. This literature revealed

that young children who are the victims of relational aggression exhibit outcomes related to depression, loneliness, feelings of distress, and issues with self-restraint (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).

Studies on relational aggression have also begun to address how this phenomenon unfolds emotionally in adolescent victims. Adolescent 15-year-old girls who were the victims of relational aggression reported that they tried to conceal the aggressive acts, and were left with psychological scars including feelings of hurt, lowered self-confidence, and fear about relational aggression in the future (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000b). Furthermore, although both males' and females' self-worth have been associated with relational aggression compared to overt physical aggression, females tended to report higher levels of hurt (Paquette & Underwood, 1999). In addition, adolescents who were victims of relational aggression also reported feeling unpopular, lower levels of peer acceptance, and less prosocial attention than relational aggressors (Leadbeater, Boone, Sangster, & Mathieson, 2006).

Adolescents who are victimized by relational aggression also have reported negative psychological symptoms including higher levels of internalizing symptoms such as depression symptoms, feelings of loneliness, and lower self-worth (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Female adolescents who were the victims of relational aggression by friends used more passive and avoidant coping strategies, especially when the individual perceived more hurt by the relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Thus, victims of relational aggression may internalize these negative aggressive acts and construe them as appraisals of self-worth leading to distress

(Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). The literature on relational aggression has stressed the role of more subtle and covert slights that occur in social transactions between individuals, while also highlighting deleterious associations with adjustment and psychosocial outcomes. If adopted adolescents are somehow being excluded, teased, or relationally aggressed due to their adoptive status, it is possible that they may exhibit some of these similar psychosocial issues. The idea of more subtle relational aggression is similar to the newer literature on microaggressions. The microaggression literature underscores how subtle instances of prejudice, discrimination, and stigma can be communicated to people in marginalized social groups.

### **Microaggressions and Their Predecessors**

Microaggression research is a newer framework in the psychological literature that describes the ways in which individuals in marginalized or nonnormative groups are subtly oppressed. Microaggressions, as defined by Sue et al. (2007, p. 271), are “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative...slights and insults towards [the marginalized group].” Although psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce was the first person to coin and define the term “microaggression” in 1977 as it pertained to instances of discrimination towards African Americans (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1977), Derald Wing Sue has brought this term into prominence more recently with a variety of racial groups (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007). Sue et al. (2007) explained that microaggressions can be organized into three different forms including:

microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. He posited that *microassaults* are the most overt form of microaggressions and are the most likely to be consciously motivated by the initiator. Microassaults are often enacted with the intention to be harmful through using racial epithets, avoiding marginalized groups, or using discriminatory behaviors. Examples of microassaults provided by Sue et al. (2007) include serving a White customer before a person of color, wearing an anti-Semitic symbol such as a swastika, or calling someone by an outdated and pejorative term such as “Oriental” or “colored”. *Microinsults* are comments that denigrate or convey ignorance about a marginalized person’s heritage or sociodemographic group (Sue et al., 2007). Although the initiator may not be aware that s/he is communicating a negative message towards the recipient, the message still contains a negative slight. An example is if a White individual stated to an Asian American, “All you people are good at math.” Although the White person may be trying to compliment the Asian American person, this message stereotypes Asian Americans, treating them as a monolithic group with no individual variation in this area, and conveys the idea that Asian Americans are often expected to be proficient at math, regardless of the person’s own experiences and talents. Lastly, *microinvalidations* are often considered the subtlest form of microaggressions that invalidate or negate the experiences of people of color. A prime example of this is the notion of color blindness, which is the idea that race cannot be seen or perceived, or that it does not matter in daily life. If a White person expresses an ideology of color blindness, then this can obfuscate the reality of racism and negate the lived experience of a person of color who may experience the world through the lens of race (Sue et al., 2007).

Though the microaggression framework is relatively new, there have been many predecessors to this concept in the psychological literature. While there have historically been some studies that investigate covert discrimination against other marginalized population, such as gay men (Aberson, Swan, & Emerson, 1999), the majority of literature on covert discrimination has focused on race and racism. There have been many terms theorized to describe subtler forms of more “modern” racism. Although there are some divergences in how each term is theorized, the basic underlying idea that racism has morphed over time is present in all the concepts. The terms “covert racism” and “symbolic racism” have been used to describe a more “abstract” and “moralistic” way of conveying racism (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Grant, 1990). Researchers have also used the term “modern racism” in order to distinguish between “old-fashioned racism” and more subtle beliefs about Black Americans (McConahay, 1986). In addition, “aversive racism” occurs when well-intentioned liberal White people support egalitarian values due to cultural socialization, while at the same time feel ambivalent about race and hold prejudiced views of people of color (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

The current psychological literature provides examples of various forms of subtle racism. White Americans’ self-reported prejudicial attitudes are still not always quite aligned with their behaviors. Although White Americans expressed lower levels of prejudiced beliefs about Black Americans compared to previous decades, in ambiguous hiring situations when one candidate was not obviously more qualified for a job than the other, they tended to choose White candidates over Black candidates (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Although both overt and covert forms of

racism are still prominent in society today, they are associated with different patterns of attitudes and behaviors about people of color (Tougas et al., 2004). The more overt form of racism is based on the idea that there are biological differences between races, while “neoracism,” is belied by the idea that changes in racial equity in institutions are unjust (e.g. affirmative action) (Tougas et al., 2004). Other researchers theorize about the ways in which “political correctness” and newer liberal ideals such as color blindness work to conceal the reality of racism and reify systems of power (Coates, 2008). These forms of covert racism all inform today’s conceptualization of microaggressions and the present research on microaggressions.

### **Research on Microaggressions against Marginalized Groups**

The extant microaggression research has been studied most frequently with racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, gender, and religious minorities. As discussions of the metamorphosis of racism have developed, studies with microaggressions have often focused on the experiences of people of color. Sue (2010a; 2010b) has written extensively on different microaggressive themes that emerge for some of the major racial groups in the United States including African/Black Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians, and Latino Americans. Generally, Sue (2010b) hypothesized that each racial group will often experience certain themes of microaggressions specific to that group’s historical narrative in the U.S. and societal perceptions of that particular race. However, there are also some convergences in themes. For example, Latino and Asian Americans may experience more microaggressions related to the theme “Alien in One’s Own Land” where Asians and Latinos are often viewed as foreigners and their status as Americans is often

questioned. However, African/Black Americans may have to contend more with “Assumptions of criminality,” wherein others hold prejudiced views that African/Black Americans are dangerous and suspicious. American Indians may also have unique microaggressive experiences such as having others “Advocating sociopolitical dominance” and “Expressing adoration” (Clark et al., 2011). Studies have also examined the microaggressive experiences of multiracial individuals who may share similar experiences with monoracial individuals, yet also have unique experiences related to their multiracial heritage such as feeling excluded or isolated from both of the racial groups in which they are members (Nadal, Wong, Sriken, Wideman, & Kolawole, 2011; Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Although microaggressions are often conceptualized and described as verbal communications, they can also come in behavioral and environmental form. Behaviorally, microaggressions could be communicated if someone follows a Black American around a store, manifesting in actions their belief that Black Americans are criminals who may steal. Environmentally, physical surroundings can transmit denigrating messages to people of color including omitting the histories of people of color in classroom textbooks (Sue, 2010b).

Microaggressions have also been used as a framework to analyze the marginalizing experiences that sexual orientation, gender, and religious minorities face. These groups are also thought to experience specific microaggressive themes related to historical and societal narratives about sexuality, gender, and religion. For example, members of the LGBTQ group may experience microaggressions that convey messages about “Sinfulness,” “Oversexualization,” and “Denial of individual



heterosexism” (Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010). Women, however, may be antagonized with themes of “Sexual objectification,” “Use of sexist language,” and “Restrictive gender roles” (Capodilupo et al., 2010). Religious minorities such as Muslim Americans report more numerous microassaults followed by microinsults and microinvalidations in relation to their religion (Edwards, 2010). Therefore, the current microaggression literature has been extended to include a wide array of social groups with nonnormative experiences compared to privileged groups. Studies that focus on other marginalized groups have built on Sue’s (2010b) initial conceptualization of microaggression themes, and thus extend this work while also shaping new theories and themes for other populations according to their specific narratives and experiences. The current study on adoption expands this work to a new population that may share certain aspects of microaggressive experiences with other groups, while also having their own unique experiences to contribute to the literature. Although adopted people may, for example, have their reality negated by others who assume everyone is part of a biological family, they may also experience microaggressions in different ways compared to other groups such as women and people of color who have more obvious socially constructed phenotypical markers that more readily identify them.

While the microaggression literature is ever-expanding in its scope of the experiences of marginalized groups, there is a growing literature on how the intersectionality of identities may influence the way that microaggressions are experienced. Some studies have found that those who are in multiple marginalized groups seemed to experience discrimination and microaggressions through the

multiple lenses of their identities (Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008; Camacho & Lord, 2011; Daley, Solomon, Newman, & Mishna, 2007). This seemed to be particularly true when participants were in contexts that made the marginalized identities more salient. For example, Asian and Latina women in engineering programs, which are often dominated by men, reported experiences wherein their gender was experienced through the lens of their race/ethnicity (Camacho & Lord, 2011). However, in another study that examined microaggressions against women of color in higher education, women's experiences of microaggressions were more salient through the racial/ethnic lens compared to their gender lens (Shah, 2008). With these studies in mind, it is possible that females who are adopted may experience or perceive more microaggressions compared to males due to the intersectionality of their adoptive and gender identities, though this may only be in contexts or situations where both identities become salient.

Despite possible thematic differences between racial groups in experiencing microaggressions, Sue (2010b) believes that responding to microaggressions results in a "catch-22" wherein deciding to confront or not confront the initiator can often be psychologically taxing and emotionally confusing. While confrontation could lead to denial or open hostility on the part of the initiator, remaining silent may mean that one is not adequately protecting oneself. Due to the nebulous and ambiguous nature of microaggressions, the risks involved in responding, and the impotency that is often felt on the part of the victim in responding, Sue (2010b) declared that the most common reaction to microaggressions is "doing nothing." Victims of microaggressions may do nothing as they feel it will be a hopeless situation to

respond as s/he could be labeled as overly sensitive or as looking for instances to complain about discrimination. Another reason for doing nothing could be to preserve energy. Sue (2010b) provided some potential responses to microaggressions such as employing self-deception in order to dispel resulting psychological tension from the microaggressive communication. Examples of such may include “rescuing the offender” by justifying a microaggressive comment by saying “I know you didn’t mean anything by that.” Other reactions that marginalized groups may use for race-related stress or microaggressions include seeking out social support from another member of the marginalized group, passively coping by use of ignoring or distraction, utilizing more active forms of coping such as empowerment, using anger and frustration, working harder than the dominant group to gain credibility, internalizing the microaggressions, utilizing spiritual or religious methods of coping, or changing or denying aspects of the self in order to appear more suitable to the majority group (Liang et al., 2007; Nadal et al., 2011; Constantine et al., 2008; Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010).

It is apparent from the literature that microaggressions can occur in many different forms that may have an underlying framework of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. At the same time, there are also very group-specific experiences that have been expounded upon in later studies. In addition, there is a diverse array of coping mechanisms and reactions that marginalized individuals may use in order to deal with microaggressions. In order to utilize specific coping skills, the stigmatized individual may use emotional or cognitive cues to make an appraisal of the seriousness of the threat in a given situation, as well as if the threat

is self-relevant or group-relevant, and if one has the proper coping skills to deal with the situation (Miller & Kalser, 2001). Thus, emotional reactions of adoptees are important to inquire about as they may affect the way that adoptees can eventually respond to microaggressions, cope with them, and may be related to important psychological or emotional outcomes.

### **The Relationship of Microaggressions and Psychological/Emotional Outcomes**

The psychological impact of oppression, whether the system of power is sexism, heterosexism, or racism, is related to physical, psychological and emotional, and behavioral effects (Sue, 2010b). Though microaggressions may seem relatively innocuous compared to overt racism or physical acts of violence, Sue (2010b) asserted that stressors do not need to reach a traumatic level in order for an individual to feel distress; rather, even “daily life hassles” can be stressful. Although many studies have examined the injurious and detrimental effects of these oppressions, only a few will be discussed here as they pertain to everyday discrimination and its relation to psychological and emotional outcomes. Perceived discrimination is often measured in a self-report assessment, and thus objective or more confirmatory methods of evaluating discrimination are often not utilized in these types of studies. However, authors who study perceived discrimination often assert that they are less concerned with the *actual incident of discrimination* and more on how *discriminatory experiences affect the individual* (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Psychologically and emotionally, microaggressions or daily experiences with sexism have been associated with poorer psychological and emotional functioning. In

one study, women's daily diaries were analyzed in regards to how many sexist incidents they experienced. These incidents were related to feelings of discomfort, higher levels of anger and depression, and a decrease in self-esteem (Swim et al., 2001). African American college students who reported everyday experiences with racism in interpersonal exchanges (e.g. rudeness or "awkward" behavior) reported that these instances often stirred strong emotions within them including feelings of anger, less comfort, and more threat during the interactions (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). Furthermore, perceived racial discrimination in a group of adult Korean immigrants was related to lowered positive affect as well symptoms of depression (Noh, Kaspar, & Wickrama, 2007). In studies with other populations such as gay men, cultural stigma was found to be negatively associated with positive self-perceptions (Frale, Wortman, & Joseph, 1997). Also, sexual orientation minorities regularly contend with homophobia, which has implications for hindering the process of building a healthy identity (Frost & Meyer, 2009). The current study will follow previous research regarding microaggressions, and therefore will focus less on the intent of the initiator and the actual microaggression event, and more on the way the adopted individual received it.

A meta-analysis looked at general discrimination for sexual orientation, women, and racial groups and showed that perceived discrimination was associated with increased depression symptoms, greater feelings of distress, more negative psychological stress responses, increases in unhealthy behavior, and decreases in healthy behaviors (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Although microaggressions and perceived discrimination may be related to serious negative outcomes for

marginalized groups, it is unclear if these same outcomes in emotional and psychological realms would be found for adopted individuals. The current study will look at these two realms in order to see if microaggressions against adoptees can actually alter perceptions of how an adoptee feels or thinks about his/her adoption.

In summary, although blatant discrimination against adopted people and adoptive families has diminished over time, stigma still exists and is felt by adoptive families (Wegar, 2000). Furthermore, adoptees still may experience covert discrimination or stigmatization (March 1995; Wegar, 2000). Although microaggressions have been used to study negative slights towards other marginalized or nonnormative populations (Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010a; Sue, 2010b; Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010; Nadal et al., 2011; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Clark et al., 2011), this has yet to be studied with adopted persons and their experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The current study used a mixed methods exploratory sequential design to analyze the interviews of White American adolescents adopted into same-race families to understand their unique lived experiences regarding microaggressions. Due to the use of mixed methods, this thesis will be structured into three separate studies- one that comprises the qualitative part, and two that use the qualitative data in quantitative data analyses.

The first study revealed the themes of microaggressions. The second study explored the intensity levels of microaggressions (in terms of the subtlety of a microaggression), the general emotional reactions that adopted persons have to

microaggressions, and the initiators of specific microaggressions. This study additionally discovered where adopted persons' experiences with microaggressions converge and diverge with other marginalized and stigmatized groups. The third study examined different microaggressive themes in relation to gender and age group, as well as how microaggression intensity level is related to an adopted person's feelings about his/her own adoption.

The major research question of Study 1 was the following: What are the general themes of microaggressions that are reported by adopted adolescents? Because of the exploratory nature of this analysis and the lack of preexisting literature on this subject, I approached this particular research question with no specific distinct hypotheses as to the content of the themes. Although I tried to be conscious to minimize preconceived notions of what *should* or *would* be found at this beginning stage, after distilling the themes, I compared the adoption themes with the preexisting model found in the literature on microaggressions with other populations (e.g. Sue's (2010b) microassaults, microinvalidations, and microinsults paradigm). Upon comparing the adoption themes to Sue's (2010b) paradigm, I ascertained if the existing microaggression model is appropriate for adopted people.

The second study analyzed the intensity level, emotional reaction, and initiator in relation to the microaggression themes culled in Study 1. Exploratory analyses were conducted on the intensity and initiator categories in order to discern if specific initiators and intensity levels were associated with certain themes. For emotions, it was hypothesized that the Target Adopted Children (TAC) in the study would have a range of reactions from negative to neutral to positive. It was

hypothesized that the emotional reactions that adolescent adopted persons had towards different types of microaggressions would span a wide spectrum that would fall into negative, neutral, and positive emotional categories. This hypothesis is based on past microaggression literature which has studied the diverse emotional responses and coping styles that victims of microaggressions may employ consciously or unconsciously (Liang, Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2007; Nadal et al., 2011; Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010).

In the third study, self-report questionnaires were used to investigate whether there was an association between microaggressions and perceptions and feelings that an adoptee has regarding his/her adoption. It was hypothesized that microaggressive themes that are related to more obvious and overt negative connotations with adoption would be associated with lower positive affect scores and higher negative experiences with own adoption scores compared to microaggressive themes that were more covertly negative about adoption.

Research on overt and covert discrimination with ethnic groups such as Koreans have found that overt discrimination was directly associated with lowered positive affect regardless of emotional or cognitive “mediators,” while being exposed to more covert instances of bias increased depressive symptoms when it was mediated by a cognitive appraisal of the event (e.g., feeling “powerless” and “frustrated”) (Noh et al., 2007). Therefore, adopted individuals’ overt experiences of discrimination and prejudice could be more easily and directly linked to their affect and experiences, while subtle experiences of bias may go undetected or not be appraised as negative resulting in less psychological harm.



In addition, the third study examined how adolescent adoptees may experience microaggressions differently according to their gender and age. Grounded in the research on intersectionality of marginalized identities (Smith et al., 2008; Camacho & Lord, 2011; Daley et al., 2007), it was hypothesized that females who were adopted would perceive or actually experience microaggressions more often than males who were adopted due to their possible experiences with sexism and gender inequality.

Furthermore, it was hypothesized that older adoptees would be more aware of their adoptive identity, and thus may experience or perceive microaggressions more often than their younger counterparts. This hypothesis was based on the idea that older adolescents may perceive microaggressive comments from peers as especially impactful (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). Additionally, older adopted adolescents may be navigating more complex adoptive identity issues compared to younger adoptees (Miller et al., 2000; Fisher, 2003).

## CHAPTER 3

### GENERAL METHODS AND PROCEDURES

A mixed methods approach utilizing an exploratory sequential design (Syed, 2011) was used in the current studies. The exploratory qualitative component constituted Study 1, and elucidated and explained microaggressive themes with adopted adolescents. Study 2 used the themes culled from the qualitative data and used the *microaggression* as the unit of analysis. Analyses in Study 2 were conducted in order to determine intensity levels, emotional reactions, initiators of microaggressions, gender, and age group. In Study 3, quantitative analyses were conducted using the *individual person* as the unit of analysis. This Study assessed the experience of microaggressions (e.g., average intensity level and number of microaggressions) across all TACs related to gender, age, and adopted persons' perceptions of their own adoptions. The data were collected between 1996 and 2001 for Wave 2 of the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP), which is an ongoing longitudinal study (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013). MTARP and its related projects have been reviewed and approved by the University of Massachusetts Amherst IRB.

#### **Participants**

Participants for Wave 2 were drawn from adoptive families who were active in Wave 1, which included adoptive parents, siblings, and the “target” adopted child (TAC). These families were originally recruited via 35 adoption agencies that spanned a range from confidential to varying levels of openness in their adoptive placements. The agencies represented 23 different states and regions across the

United States. Adopted children in Wave 2 were between the ages of 11-20 (mean age = 15.7 years). All TACs were adopted domestically before their first birthday. Every TAC in the current study was part of a same-race adoption into primarily Caucasian, Protestant and middle to upper-middle class families. The demographics of these families reflect a majority of the population who were adopting unrelated children through agencies at the time the study began. All of the adoptive families were in adoptions ranging from confidential to mediated to varying ranges of openness among adoption triad members. For further details about the original Wave 1 sample, please refer to Grotevant and McRoy (1998).

At Wave 2, 177 adoptive families participated including the adoptive parents, siblings, and the TAC. In total, there were 156 target adopted adolescents who participated: 75 males and 81 females.

For the qualitative data analysis, 153 of the TAC transcripts were used to discern the general themes of microaggressions against adoptees (Study 1), as well to gather information about adoptees' perceptions of and reactions to microaggressions (Study 2). There were 3 adolescents that were not used in the analyses because the interview was unable to be transcribed due to technical problems. Of the TAC in the qualitative analysis, 79 were female and 74 were male.

For the quantitative analyses in Study 2, the same number of TACs as in Study 1 was included in the analyses for intensity, emotional reaction, and initiator.

For the quantitative analyses in Study 3, 140 TACs had complete data from the interview (from which the microaggressions were coded) and the Positive Affect scale on the Adoption Dynamics Questionnaire (ADQ), and 139 TACs had complete

data from the interview and the Negative Experience with Own Adoption subscale of the ADQ. For the PA subscale, 67 were male and 73 were female and for the NE scale 67 were male and 72 were female.

Grotevant (2001) had previously conducted a more general analysis concerning nonparticipation at Wave 2 for all adoptive families. Although there were 190 families in Wave 1 who participated in MTARP, 13 families chose to not participate in Wave 2. In addition, 4 adoptive mothers, 15 adoptive fathers, and 21 adopted adolescents declined to participate in Wave 2. Reasons for nonparticipation include divorce, death, adjustment problems with the adopted adolescents (which could have or could not have been related to adoption), families did not want to discuss personal family dynamics or adoption-related matters, and some families were never scheduled due to busy schedules. The details of the full methods and measures used in this study can be found at [http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption/research\\_design/measures/](http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption/research_design/measures/).

### **Procedures**

For Wave 2, adoptive families participated in an interview in their own homes lasting between 4 and 5 hours. Adoptive parents and the TAC were interviewed individually. Additionally, a family interaction task was administered to the adoptive family. When a family member could not be present at an interview, some members were interviewed by telephone (15 fathers, 20 mothers, 14 adolescents, 2 siblings). Researchers informed participants of the nature of the study and all the potential risks and benefits involved, outlined how confidentiality would be preserved, and notified participants of their right to withdraw from the

study or to not answer any questions at any point in time. Furthermore, a list of resources was provided to participants in case they experienced any emotional distress during the course of their involvement with the study. The procedures and measures for Study 1 and 2 were the same.

### **Measures**

Although questionnaires were administered to adoptive parents as well as the TAC, only the measures pertinent to TACs in this study will be described. For a full list of the measures used in Wave 2, please consult [http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption/research\\_design/measures/](http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption/research_design/measures/).

### **Adopted Adolescent Interview**

The interview that was created for use at Wave 2 with adopted adolescents was developed to tap into TAC's unique experiences, feelings, thoughts and attitudes concerning their own adoption, adoptive identity, adoptive family arrangement, and beliefs about birth parents. In addition, the interview asked about occupation, their particular level of openness in their own adoption, friendship, religion, and adoption in general. Lastly, questions eliciting thoughts and feelings about external views of adoption were asked. The main questions that were taken from the adolescent interviews to identify microaggressive experiences were "Do people ever tease you about being adopted?" and "Do others ever show that they don't understand what adoption is all about?" In order to capture all possible relevant comments, the entire transcripts were reviewed. Interviews were audio recorded and conducted for approximately 1 to 2 hours. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy.

## Adoption Dynamics Questionnaire

In addition to the measures described above, Study 3 also included two scales from the Adoption Dynamics Questionnaire (Benson, Sharma and Roehlkepartain (1994)). There were three modifications to their instrument for the current study wherein one question was not used, and another question was changed to elicit answers for birthmothers and birthfathers. Furthermore, one question was taken out of the scale that asked about teasing. This question was omitted in order to maintain some independence between measures. The questionnaire included 44 items on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = *not true* or *strongly disagree* or *never* to 5 = *always true* or *strongly agree* or *always*. Although the 44 items were used to create scales assessing Positive Affect about Own Adoption (PA), Negative Experience with Own Adoption (NE), and Preoccupation with Own Adoption History (PRE), only the NE and PA were used for this study. The NE scale contained statements including “Being adopted makes me feel angry,” “I get tired of having to explain adoption to people,” and “It hurts to know I was adopted.” The PA scale comprised statements such as “I feel good that I’m adopted,” “I feel proud my parent(s) adopted me,” and “Being adopted makes me feel special.” The Wave 2 alpha for the PA scale was  $\alpha = .89$ , 20 items, while the alpha for the NE scale was  $\alpha = .89$ , 20 items.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **STUDY 1 METHODS**

#### **Code Development**

Thematic analysis was used to code the text from the transcripts. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It organizes and describes the data set in rich detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). Boyatzis (1998) furthered this definition by explaining that thematic analysis can involve an interpretive process. Thematic analysis is one of the most common ways of analyzing qualitative data and is atheoretical in its conception, thus having no ties to any specific epistemology (Howitt & Cramer, 2007). Thematic analysis was chosen to explore and examine the TAC’s interviews due mainly to its theoretical flexibility. Furthermore, other methods that are theoretically constrained such as grounded theory were not considered appropriate for this study as they specify certain sampling techniques, procedures, and data (e.g. observational data) that should be utilized and followed in order to soundly analyze data. In using thematic analysis, vivid and rich complex insights can be gained from the interviews in a guided, structured manner. Because microaggressions have never been studied with this population before, a method that allowed the participants’ voices and experiences to be thoroughly revealed was sought. At the same time, it was unclear if adoptees’ experiences with microaggressions unfolded and were perceived in the same way compared to other marginalized populations with whom microaggressions had been studied including racial, sexual orientation, gender, and religious minorities (Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010a; Sue, 2010b; Shelton,

2009; Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010; Nadal et al., 2011; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Clark et al., 2011). Thus, the lived experiences of this group of adopted people were consistently compared to Sue's (2010b) prevailing framework for organizing microaggressions to investigate shared and unique experiences. Therefore, a data analysis method that had theoretical flexibility and clear guidelines was chosen for the current method.

There are many pertinent details of the current method that should be explicitly stated before starting analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined such relevant major "decisions" that should be considered including: what constitutes a theme, whether the researcher should aim to acquire a "rich description data set" or a "detailed account of one particular aspect" of a data set, whether an inductive or deductive reasoning should be used in analysis, if "semantic" or "latent" themes should be identified and evaluated, and one's epistemological stance. After making important theoretical and practical decisions for the qualitative data analysis, the researcher analyzed the data for themes of microaggressions by adapting a version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guide to navigate the data analysis process.

During this coding process I, as both the main researcher and an adoptee, tried to be mindful about how my own adoptive identity may influence the themes that are "seen" and the themes that are "not seen". It was important to have others on this project (e.g. coders, advisers, professors on the Master's committee, an auditor) who were not adopted and who could challenge me to see viewpoints and voices that are similar and different from my own experiences with adoption. I had



3 other coders who were not adopted but had varying degrees of knowledge about adoption or connection to adoption for this study. In training for coding, I emphasized the importance of arguing and justifying one's point in writing when they were separately coding so that our process was clearly elucidated and transparent. I also continuously consulted with other adoption researchers who are adopted and who are not adopted to ensure that the way I was conducting my coding process was appropriate and that my findings were realistic. Samuels (2009) described a system of "checks and balances" that are apparent in the analysis process to enhance the "credibility" of the study in situations where the author is a member of the group under study. This system seemed appropriate to integrate into this study.

### **Coding and Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the qualitative data from the interviews until they were exhaustively distilled into distinct categories. The themes identified in the final codebook constituted a typology that was used to determine the types of microaggressions that are committed against adolescent adoptive persons. The coding process included 9 phases that generally followed the framework of Braun and Clarke's (2006) method: 1) Become familiar with the data, 2) Set up and unitize the data, 3) Create and finalize themes in the codebook, 4) Train coders, 5) Conduct a dependability audit, 6) Unitize codes with coding team, 7) Code units with coding team and codebook, 8) Compare observed themes to existing frameworks, 9) Produce the report. This analysis process was more recursive rather than linear in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This means that the

researcher moved between different phases of coding fluidly, and was seamlessly fluctuating between examining the original data set, the themes that were being extracted and examined, and the data that were being molded into themes. The adapted phases are described in more detail below:

### **Phase 1) Become Familiar with the Data**

In this phase of thematic coding, I became “immersed” within the data. I completely read through all of the interviews in order to gain an understanding of the context of the TAC within his/her own experiences. There was a particular emphasis on specific questions asking about how and when adoption was brought up by others, the TAC’s experiences with ignorance about adoption, any teasing that was directly attributable to their adoptive status, or any emotional reactions that were recorded. Nevertheless, each transcript in its entirety was reviewed for possible microaggressions.

### **Phase 2) Set Up and Unitize the Data**

Next, I formed initial “codes” in a process called “unitizing” by highlighting all relevant information in each selected microaggression. Boyatzis’ (1998, p.63) defined a code, or a “unit” in the case of this study, as “the most basic segment or element of the raw data that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon.” I first worked systematically through every third TAC interview to unitize each exact microaggression. Because participants were not directly asked to assess the intensity of the microaggressions, intensities were based on formulations and discussions between the coders and me based on the content of the comment and how it may be received. Specific emotional reactions to the microaggressions

were coded when possible because specific emotions may inform the “functionality” of a given emotion within the context of intergroup relations (Dasgupta, DeSteno, Williams, & Hunsinger, 2009). However, in the majority of cases when the TAC did not mention a specific emotion, then the TAC’s sentiment was coded more generally (e.g. negative, neutral, positive emotions). All of the unitized microaggressions for a third of the cases were copied and pasted from each interview into columns in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet while preserving the case numbers to reference each participant.

### **Phase 3) Create and Finalize Themes in the Codebook**

After units were identified and compared, they were clustered and organized into potential higher order themes. In this stage, analysis was centered on thinking about “relationships” between units. The principle of saturation was used in this study wherein, as Mason (2010) conjectured, with a qualitative sample there is eventually a point of diminishing return. Data saturation occurred when the researcher realized that no “new” phenomena were being reported, and the data being investigated became repetitive. After identifying all potential themes, general emotional reactions, intensity levels, and initiators, themes were merged together if there was too much overlap. In addition to each type of microaggression identified, there was an “Other” category. This catchall category was sorted through constantly to see if any additional themes were forming.

After all the themes were solidified in this phase, I reexamined all of the unitized microaggressions within each theme to ensure that all of the units made logical sense within the higher order theme. By looking at the units for each theme,

a name and definition were discerned for each type of theme. Following the finalizing of themes, a codebook was created by the researcher with the names for each theme and a description of each theme. Furthermore, the codebook contained the general themes of emotions that were deduced from the interviews. It is important to note the codebook was created based on one third of the TAC's transcripts. A coding team was used for the next phase of the study.

#### **Phase 4) Train Coders**

Coders were interviewed thoroughly and asked about their connections to adoption and their knowledge of adoption. Of those chosen, one coder had a sister who was adopted, another had a best friend who was adopted, and the third generally had no personal connection to adoption. All 3 coders were advanced undergraduates who were in their senior year of college or who had already graduated college. Coders were trained by first reading research articles about the general phenomenon of microaggressions and the different types of microaggressions as they pertain to various marginalized groups. During the several weeks of reading articles, the coders and I repeatedly discussed the possible forms that microaggressions with adopted individuals could look like compared to other groups. After a solid knowledge base of microaggressions was attained, each week coders then practiced as a group discussing examples of microaggressions in 5-10 interviews.

#### **Phase 5) Conduct A Dependability Audit**

In qualitative research, a dependability audit fulfills the same function that a reliability analysis fills in quantitative research. Mertens (2010) explained that the

dependability audit demonstrates the “quality and appropriateness” of the analysis. In this stage, an external auditor with training from Dr. Sue and a research background in microaggressions was consulted in order to review the data and confirm if the themes appropriately represented the interviews. Furthermore, I tracked the entire thematic analysis process leaving a visible narrative of steps taken, decisions made, and changes enacted so that the process could be publicly tracked and scrutinized (Mertens, 2010).

#### **Phase 6) Unitize Codes with Coding Team**

Every week all coders read a subset of the TAC’s transcripts and individually unitized each microaggression until every transcript in the data set was completed. Then, the team met once or twice a week to ascertain that all their individually coded units were the same. If there were inconsistencies, the team discussed and subsequently agreed on which pieces of data should be included for coding later. Each participant had a separate Word document containing all instances of microaggressions unitized within his/her transcript. In paragraphs of data where there were several units, highlighters in Word were used to identify and denote each specific unit. I monitored the unitizing process every couple of weeks in order to ensure unitizing was being done uniformly.

#### **Phase 7) Code Units with Coding Team and Codebook**

After unitizing all microaggressions (which was a necessary process so that coders were all coding the same data), the same team of coders coded all units in the *entire* data set using the codebook created by the researcher in Phase 3. One to two times a week, two coders independently unitized every microaggression, emotional

reaction, intensity level, and initiator, and then later joined together to compare, discuss, and determine the final themes for every unit. The coders reviewed each case in a rotating pattern where the pairs were constantly grouped differently. Each microaggression theme unit that was coded was paired and tracked with its respective emotional reaction (negative, neutral, and positive emotions), intensity level (low, medium, and high), and initiator. I attended all these meetings to clarify points and monitor the reliability of the process.

The coding team and I regularly discussed if the themes were still appropriate as coding the entire data set continued. Themes that did not contain enough units were saved if theoretically the microaggression theme was distinct from other themes; this was done in case the codebook would be used with other adoption populations where the theme could be more prominent. Coding continued until themes, emotion categories, and intensity levels were all *mutually exclusive and exhaustive*. If more than one *initiator* committed a microaggression, then more than one code was noted for the microaggression. Coders were to take any notes, ideas, or questions on their coding sheets in a separate column if they emerged so that the team could discuss them on a weekly basis. If a consensus process was needed, the third coder acted as a “tiebreaker” or a clarifier for any questions or disputes. The interrater reliability scores were then calculated, using Cohen’s kappa.

### **Phase 8) Compare Observed Themes to Existing Frameworks**

At this point, the current themes were then contrasted with the existing framework for microaggression as denoted by Sue (2010b). This is an important step as his categorization system may or may not fully capture all of the

microaggressive experiences that adoptees have. Thus, the adopted individuals' themes were examined against Sue's (2010b) categories of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations in order to see if the themes aligned to this model. Any major areas of difference that emerged between the two sets of themes including omitted or unique experiences to adoptees were particularly noted. Sue's (2010b) paradigm can help to illuminate any missed or overlooked areas by the researcher.

### **Phase 9) Produce the Report**

The last phase entailed using the themes to tell the complex "story" of the data set; in this case, the microaggressions that occur to adoptees. I explained connections within and across themes and provided examples from the data set itself to illuminate each theme in an understandable and concise way.

## CHAPTER 5

### STUDY 1 RESULTS

A total of 623 microaggressions were identified across 153 transcripts. Sixteen overarching themes indicative of participants' experiences were derived from the coding process (see Appendix A for the codebook defining and providing examples of each theme.) Microaggressive themes ranged in their frequency (Table 1). Cohen's kappas were calculated to assess the agreement between coders regarding the microaggressive themes ( $\kappa = .72$ ) and the person committing the microaggressions ( $\kappa = .74$ ) indicating "substantial agreement" according to Landis and Koch (1977) (Table 2). Cohen's kappas for microaggression intensity levels ( $\kappa = .54$ ) and emotions related with the experience of the microaggression ( $\kappa = .51$ ) were also calculated and interpreted as "moderate agreement" (Table 2). The themes delineated below are ordered by frequency from the most frequent theme to the least. Quotes from the TACs that illustrate and exemplify the themes are included after the theme definition. Frequency distributions and percentages of the number of instances of microaggressions by case showed that the number of microaggressions decreased as participants reported more instances (Table 3). The mean of comments per case was  $M = 3.20$  and the median of comments per case was 3.0 (Table 3).

#### **Microaggression Themes**

##### **Silence about Adoption**

There were 222 occurrences of this theme. This theme is when the initiator is aware of an adoptive person's adoptive status, but does not speak with the



adopted person regarding this identity. The adopted person's adoption is never or rarely spoken about with him/her.

*Well, we don't really, I mean, talk about it like that anymore. When I was younger, we didn't, I don't, we didn't really even talk about it that much then, I don't think. We'd more talk about, like, you know, [name], or something like, we wouldn't say, you know, anything about my adoption...*

### **Overly Intrusive Questions**

There were 86 cases of this theme. Adopted persons often must either field questions about the adoption process, the "adoptee experience," or they are asked personal questions about their history that they cannot answer from initiators.

*Well, the questions that people ask are just so specific, that I just can't answer them, I'm just like I have no idea. Like people will be like, 'Oh, what's your birth mother's birthday?' And I'll be like, 'I don't know.' Or they'll be like, 'how much did she weigh?' Or, I mean, just stuff that I wouldn't, as far as I'm concerned, how would they even think that I could possibly answer these kinds of questions...*

*I don't - I don't know. Well like, if they know already, you know, sometimes they just say, "Well, you know, so, you know, why did, you know, your birth parents give you up?" or, you know, it doesn't bother me, so.*

### **Assumption of Bionormativity**

There were 62 cases of this theme. Biological familial ties are privileged in terms of how people believe families are and should be formed. This assumption occurs on the behalf of initiators when adoptive families are omitted from

discussions about how families are formed, or biological families are considered the norm or ideal way to form a family. This can also include the assumption that adoptive individuals' ties with their adoptive families are not legitimate or "real." Lastly, this theme can encompass moments where the initiator conveys or expresses the importance of biological ties through the belief that family members should look alike. Bionormativity deals more with how initiators believe *families* should be as opposed to how individual adoptees should be.

*It comes up a lot in religion classes, because a lot of times, you know, they're talking about who you came, where you came from, or like, how you were raised. And what I like say, 'oh I was adopted, you know, but it doesn't really make a difference.'*

*'Oh, do you know your real mom?' 'Yeah, I live with her.' 'Well, no, you know what I mean.' Kind-of, it's just there.*

### **Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption**

There were 56 occurrences of this theme. The initiator continuously misunderstands the concept or process of adoption, or expresses skepticism about the concept or process of adoption despite attempted explanation from the adopted individual.

*They're, already involved in adoption, I guess, but the majority of them are either skeptic or, yeah, they want to know more about it or, yeah... I don't know, just like, just, yeah in general like, mostly like the open adoption and, you know, how it affects like, having a kid know about the, their adoptive, or their birth parents.*

*Well they keep asking. If they don't get it they keep asking...And, so you have to repeat it over and over again before they finally get it and sometimes they don't get it, so. That's pretty much it.*

### **In-House Divisions within the Adoptive Family**

There were 29 cases of this theme. The adopted individual is made to feel unwanted, slighted, or separate from the adoptive family. Slightings can include the adoptive parents (the initiators, in this case) not respecting the pace at which adopted individuals would like to discuss adoption, or not giving the adopted individual information about his/her adoption when requested. There may be different levels of acceptance by different extended family members or different nuclear family members.

*Well, sometimes like, my cousins' parents told them that me and my brother were adopted, and one time my cousin got mad at me, and he said, 'Well, you really aren't my cousin'...They said that he just, I guess, didn't understand that...I mean, just because we're not their flesh and blood, we were raised to be their cousins.*

### **Public "Outing"**

There were 28 occurrences of this theme. Adopted individuals are "outed" or have their adoptive status publicly acknowledged by the initiator. In this case, the control over the disclosure of their adoptive status is taken away from the adopted person him/herself. Adopted individuals may also be asked to publicly identify themselves.

*Well, like, at school, sometimes a friend will tell a friend that I didn't tell that I was adopted, and they'll ask me about it and ask what's like...*

### **Using Adoption**

There were 23 cases of this theme. Adoption is used “against” the adopted person in order to hurt him/her or try to gain an outcome.

*Everybody's pretty stupid, and he's the one who uses the adoption stuff against me and makes up nasty stuff about it. And thinks it's just something that you can go and get, and cut down someone, and use it against him and then try make up for it the next day. That's not stuff you just go and forgive and forget everybody for just everyday...*

### **Questioning Authenticity**

There were 19 cases of this theme. The initiator reacts with disbelief or willfully rejects a person's adoptive status. The initiator could either exhibit open skepticism concerning whether a person has been adopted, or may express confusion about an adopted person based on the initiator's own preconceived notions adopted families. This theme differs from Questioning Authenticity because the skepticism is not concerning whether an individual is adopted or not, rather, it is more about negative outcomes in adoption.

*You know, and people are just like, 'Oh really, you're adopted?' Because like yes, I mean, now-a-days, you know, adopted children are usually of a different culture. Or something like that, and you know, I'm just, pure white, just like my parents, and, they're like, and I kind-of look like my dad, too. So, they just kind-of, you know, they're just like, 'really? Are you kidding me?'*

*[Others] don't believe me when I tell them I'm adopted. [They say] 'Yeah right,' and that kind of stuff.*

### **Unacknowledged Identity Status**

There were 19 cases of this theme. Adopted individuals' adopted status remains unrecognized by others around them and therefore this part of their identity is not validated. The failure to acknowledge can be on individual, group, and societal levels. In the case of this theme, the initiator is *unaware* of the person's adoptive status and thus while they may not have any intention to be ignorant of a person's adoption, the adoptive person's identity remains an unacknowledged part of the adopted person. An example could be a teacher who unthinkingly gives out the traditional family tree assignment in class.

*If they don't care then they, I don't care to tell them because it's a waste of my time and I don't, and I care about people being informed but, I don't care enough to really spend lots of time.*

*Well, if they ask, I do. But, nobody's really ever asked or anything like that.*

### **Being the Spokesperson for Adoption**

There were 16 occurrences of this theme. The initiator asks questions to adopted individuals who must become the "spokesperson" for all adoptees. This means that adopted individuals must answer a question about adoption that forces them to sum up the experience of all adopted people.

*I used to feel mad, I guess, not, it was kind-of I was mad at the person I was talking to because, they wouldn't understand what I was trying to say, and it*

*wasn't their fault, but they, you know, they'd ask questions like... "How does it feel to be adopted?" "Well, how does it feel not to be adopted?" Because I've been adopted since I was three days old, I don't really remember sitting in the hospital you know, incubator thing, you know, stuff like that. And it'd make me mad like, "Why do, why are you asking such stupid questions?"*

*Whenever they, they know I'm adopted because their parents told them I was. And, they always use me as an example, because my parents are social figures...*

### **Adoptees as Nonnormative**

There were 15 occurrences of this theme. The initiator perceives adopted individuals as different, strange, dysfunctional, or apart from those of "normal" biological families. The initiator may also convey discomfort with adoption or adopted individuals through negative body language. This theme occurs on a more personal or individual level (e.g. the expectation that adoptees will be "different," have behavioral or emotional problems, or are "weird" because they are not biological children.)

*It makes you feel - I don't think it's right because it makes me feel that I'm not normal or something, you know, like, I don't - it's fine if they had a few questions, but I just want to, you know, have a normal life. It's not that important.*

*'I'm adopted, I'm not weird.' You know.*

*If they ask, I tell them and then they don't ask a question, they just like, have a funny look on their, to their faces. And they just change the subject or*

*something...So they'll either just ask a question or just look... if somebody else comes in and talks about it and then, well, or just walk away.*

### **Sensitivity**

There were 14 occurrences of this theme. The initiator approaches adopted individuals with the assumption that adoption is automatically a “sensitive,” taboo, or difficult subject for the adoptee. The initiator may also express pity for the adopted person or assume that the adopted person pities him/herself for being adopted.

*They, I mean the only time that they really happened was when there's like big family problems or if I'm having like a really bad day and they're like, "Does it have to do with parents?" I'm like "No". Usually we just associate it with parents once they question that you're having a fight with your parents are associated... No, not necessarily, I mean it probably sounds really confusing like they ask if I'm having problems with my parents, but that's only when, they ask, like this has to do with what I don't know if I can say or not. When like things happen and I'm really upset they ask me like you OK with at home, do you want to leave, do you want to do this that and the other, you know.*

*I mean, they try, what hurts me the most, is when you say something to it, and then as soon as you say something, they think that you're trying to feel sorry for yourself about it when they're the one who asked the question.*

### **Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents**

There were 13 cases of this theme. Adopted persons are either teased about not knowing their birth parents or treated as “defective” or “rejected” due to their

adoptive status. Similarly, the initiator may misunderstand or misperceive the relationship between birth parents and the adoptive individual.

*I mean I've had really nasty stuff said to me like would like "Your mom didn't want you," and stuff like that, like Monday morning or something like that. I mean I almost didn't go to school once because this guy [name] made up a song about me, it was really a nasty song. I went up there and told him to say it to my face and stuff and he just kind of walked away from me and I pushed him against the wall and then I got sent down to the office, we both got sent down to the office.*

*That they say that my birth mother was like really stupid and it's like you don't understand, she didn't, she's trying to do what she thought was better for me. It was better for me that I was put up for adoption, which was hard on her...I know it was hard on her, but it was better for me, and obviously she knew that.*

### **Adoptees as Orphans**

There were 10 occurrences of this theme. Adopted individuals are assumed or considered to be orphans or have lived in orphanages. Initiators stereotype adopted individuals to have qualities, lifestyles, or histories of orphans, and hold preconceived notions of adoption.

*All the time, at school. They think I came (laugh) from an orphanage no matter how many times I tell them, they think so and they call me 'Orphan Annie' (laugh), stupid, but- and I thought that end at like, third grade, but it didn't.*

### **Negative Societal Portrayal of Adoption**



There were 4 occurrences of this theme. Larger societal institutions and the media portray adoption or adoptive individuals and families in a negative or unfavorable light. This can include film, books, television shows, or news programs that misrepresent adoption.

*Most people have this thing where like if you were adopted you were a crack baby. It's wonderful T.V. that's done this to my generation and they're like do you find yourself more perceptive to drugs, I'm like NO-GO AWAY!*

### **Other**

There were 7 occurrences of this theme. The Other theme is any theme that does not fit within the other classifications.

*I believe [adoption is] a good thing, a good experience to go through, because it tests your faith in other people and G-d...If you're not adopted or- yeah, if you're not adopted, you should respect other people, if they are adopted.*

## CHAPTER 6

### STUDY 1 DISCUSSION

The themes culled from the interviews illuminate the experiences of microaggressions targeted at adolescent adopted individuals in a variety of situations and contexts. Furthermore, cultural assumptions concerning adopted individuals, adoptive families, biological parents, and the process of adoption are highlighted by the remarks, behaviors, and media perpetuated by a bionormative society. The themes are pertinent because although adoption may become more popular (Fisher, 2003) and receive more news coverage (Kline et al., 2006) compared to past decades, stigmatized and problematic views on adoption still exist and are communicated to adopted individuals in social exchanges.

#### **Adoption Microaggressions Compared to Existing Microaggression Frameworks**

The themes generally ranged in their intensity levels from subtle to intense, which is a relevant theoretical finding that was solidified in phase 8 of the coding process. During this phase, the microaggression themes in the codebook were examined in terms of their range of intensity and compared with Sue's et al.'s (2007) framework. Each of the current study's themes were conceptually contrasted with Sue's framework and mapped out in Table 4. The 3 current intensity designations (low, medium, high) can loosely mirror Sue's existing framework for microaggressions including: microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults.

Sue et al.'s (2007) microinvalidations consist of instances where a marginalized person's identity is "nullified" or "negated." Furthermore,

microinvalidations are often considered very subtle because they overlook the experiences of marginalized groups as opposed to blatantly expressing offensive comments about a particular group of people. Although microinvalidations may seem rather benign, consequences of “passing” in a hidden identity that is stigmatized can include what Goffman (1963) delineates as: learning what people “really think” including negative opinions, the unanticipated need to identify oneself to others to “discredit” wrongful or stereotypical information, being unsure of who is aware of your hidden identity, and being identified in public by others. Microinvalidations often mapped onto the low level of intensity of adoptive microaggressions where TAC’s adoption or adoptive identity would be knowingly avoided, unacknowledged, or invisible altogether to those in the adopted person’s environment. Furthermore, in this study, many adopted individuals would acknowledge their status to others after ignorant comments were expressed in order to educate them about adoption. Microinvalidations seemed to be somewhat unique to adopted people in that they were actually reported to be the most frequently occurring microaggression. The frequency of microinvalidations may be related to adopted adolescents downplaying or hiding their adoptive identity in order to belong to a more bionormative peer group (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007), or adoption may be less salient than other identities during adolescence (e.g., one’s occupation or where one might go to college or who one might be as a friend or family member.)

Microinsults are described as behaviors or comments that denigrate a person’s background or identity (Sue et al., 2007). The medium intensity level of microaggressions in this study often matched up with the microinsult category as

TACs often contended with behaviors and comments that conveyed negative messages about a person's adoption or adoptive identity. Additionally, similar to other marginalized groups who experience microinsults from majority groups, there were times when initiators would be unaware that a harmful or negative message was being communicated to the adopted individual. Although most of the medium intensity themes matched up with Sue et al.'s (2007) concept of microinsults, there was one exception. The main mismatch was concerning Questioning Authenticity because although this theme was considered a medium intensity level in this study, it could conceptually be more of a microinvalidation where an adopted person's adoptive identity is invalidated or ignored.

In addition to Sue et al.'s (2007) characterization of microinsults (e.g., comments or behaviors conveying "rudeness" and "insensitivity,") the definition for microinsults with adopted people should also include the ideas of ignorance and thoughtlessness about adoption. Most of the medium intensity themes in this study (e.g., Overly Intrusive Questioning, Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption, Adoptees as Orphans, Adoptees as Nonnormative, Assumption of Bionormativity) were related to people being unaware or uneducated about adoption or adoptive identity.

Microassaults involve explicit and overt behaviors or comments aimed at hurting the marginalized person (Sue et al., 2007). In the current study, microassaults mirrored the high intensity level the most as they are the most overt and intense form of microaggressions. Microassaults were committed against TACS when others tried to consciously harm them with overt teasing or name-calling

regarding adoption. In comparing the themes with Sue et al.'s (2007), there was an exception where one high intensity theme (Stereotypes about Birth Parents) was considered a microinsult than a microassault because it was related more to denigrating an adopted person's background and was often not necessarily used to hurt the person.

In summary, there were 3 intensity levels found in this study for microaggressions that encompassed Sue et al.'s (2007) microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation framework. However, there were a few unique exceptions for adopted people where there was a mismatch between the current study's intensity level and Sue et al.'s conceptualization. The fit between Sue et al.'s and the current study's three intensity designations reaffirmed my decision to examine the levels of intensity in more depth in Study 2.

On a more general level, the microaggression themes in this study differ from previous conceptualizations of microaggressions with other groups because the evolution and history of adoption varies from other marginalized groups in the United States. For example, although prejudice, racism, and homophobia have received more awareness and been more widely discussed within the public consciousness, adoption was cloaked in a history of secrecy and shame up until very recently. Thus, issues of adoption may appear less frequently and more covertly (e.g., microinvalidations) in social exchanges between adopted adolescents and others, and may be experienced in a different way.

### **Adoptive Identity and the Importance of Contextual Factors**

More recent frameworks of adoptive identity have also reinforced the notion that identity is created through intrapsychic meaning, the family environment, relationships with important others, specific contexts, and culture (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000). Although adoptive parents in the sample could commit microaggressions against the TACs in some ways, siblings proved to be a more complicated and complex matter. Nonadopted siblings would sometimes bring adoption microaggressions to the fore of the relationship with the TAC in “joking” or even hurtful ways. However, in terms of siblings who are also adopted, the microaggressions literature is extremely scant on the issue of microaggressions between ingroup members. In the current study, adopted siblings who had more “privilege” in terms of access to their identities, stories, background, health history, or birth parents were conceptualized as microaggressing the target adopted child when these issues of access were brought up between siblings. Future studies on microaggressions as a general phenomenon will have to address layers of privilege that can occur with ingroup members (e.g., colorism in a given racial group). Additionally, studies on adoptive identity have demonstrated that having contact with birth family is associated with more communication in the adoptive family about adoption, which aids in the process of adoptive identity formation (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Thus, a person’s contexts, supports, and stressors may play a significant role in how one evolves or becomes stagnant or confused in his/her identity. With microaggressions impinging on the adopted person’s sense of self and personal history, the “meaning” with which one constructs his/her own identity can become complicated and potentially harmful. Thus, conceptualizing what is

helpful in minimizing instances of microaggressions or effecting change in the way our culture perceives adoption is important.

### **Adoption Microaggressions and the Importance of Education**

In looking at some of the more frequently occurring microaggression themes towards adopted individuals, it appears that many people commit microaggressions through their lack of knowledge and experience with adopted individuals, and less through open malice or assuredness of their own negative beliefs about adoption. This finding suggests that there needs to be more education and greater public awareness about the experience of adoption- both the difficult experiences and the positive experiences. Although negative portrayal of adoption in the media was the least reported microaggression and therefore may seem the least significant, the media are another area that can become powerful in educating others about important adoption issues and more accurately representing adoption to the public. The media can become an omnipresent force that shape society's perceptions of a topic. For example, the success of dramatic current television shows such as *Teen Mom* have highlighted how the media capture audiences' interest towards adoption. In terms of the low frequency of this particular microaggression theme in this sample, it is possible that adolescent adopted individuals are less concerned with how they are represented in a grander cultural frame, and more aware of how social exchanges with peers affect them. As adopted individuals age, it is possible that this theme may become more relevant, or adopted individuals may have a greater awareness about how more abstract and less tangible forces like the media affect societal perceptions of adoption.

## CHAPTER 7

### STUDY 2 RESULTS

For Study 2, the unit being analyzed was the *microaggression*. Thus, analyses focused on the individual microaggressions (N = 623) experienced across individual participants in order to describe relevant characteristics of each microaggression theme. Following the study's mixed methods exploratory sequential design, Study 2 used quantitative analyses to determine, for each theme that had emerged in Study 1, whether the occurrence of the theme was associated with particular levels of intensity of the microaggression, type of emotional reaction to the microaggression, initiator of the microaggression, gender, and age group.

A series of chi squares were conducted in order to determine if there were significant differences between observed and expected values for microaggression intensity level, emotion categories, and person committing the microaggression. Two series of chi squares were performed for gender and age variables across microaggression themes. A Bonferroni correction was used for these chi squares and the cutoff level was  $p = .003$ .

#### **Intensity Level**

The intensity level of each microaggression theme was coded in terms of how "subtle" a microaggression was. While coders and the researcher consistently had discussions regarding whether 3 intensity levels were appropriate for the data, the scheme that was the most coherent and reliable was a low intensity for the most subtle forms of invalidation (e.g., invalidation or the absence of an action), medium intensity (e.g., slights that were negatively related to adoption), and high intensity



(e.g., derogation conveying more blatant and derogatory behaviors concerning adoption). A chi square test was used for each microaggression theme to test the null hypothesis that the 3 levels of intensity were equally distributed. A Bonferroni correction was used to set the alpha level at .003 rather than .05 because 16 chi square analyses were conducted for intensity level, and a more conservative significance level was warranted.

The following chi square tests determined that intensity was not equally distributed across two themes, with the most frequent level of intensity being low: *Unacknowledged Identity Status*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 19) = 18.11, p < .001$ , and *Silence*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 222) = 438.03, p < .001$ , (Table 5).

For nine themes, the level of intensity was not equally distributed across themes, with the most frequent level being medium: *Questioning Authenticity*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 19) = 22.84, p < .001$ , *Sensitivity*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 14) = 22.43, p < .001$ , *Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 19) = 39.25, p < .001$ , *Being the Spokesperson for Adoption*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 16) = 21.13, p < .001$ , *Overly Intrusive Questions*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 86) = 132.72, p < .001$ , *Assumption of Bionormativity*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 62) = 38.74, p < .001$ , *Adoptees as Nonnormative*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 15) = 24.40, p < .001$ , *Public "Outing,"*  $\chi^2(2, N = 28) = 34.57, p < .001$ , and *In-House Divisions*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 29) = 20.76, p < .001$ .

There were two themes that indicated intensity was not equally distributed across themes, with the most frequent level being high: *Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 13) = 12.15, p = .002$ , and *Using Adoption*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 23) = 19.39, p < .001$ .

Lastly, The themes that did not differ by intensity level were *Other*, *Negative Societal Portrayal of Adoption*, and *Adoptees as Orphans*. These last 3 themes also tended to be lower in frequency of occurrence.

### **Emotion**

Another series of chi squares was conducted in order to assess if specific emotions were reliably associated with certain microaggression themes. The emotional reaction of adoptees to microaggression themes was coded in 3 levels: negative emotional reaction (e.g., anger, sadness, annoyance, alienation, or frustration), neutral emotional reaction (e.g., reactions that do not seem all positive or negative such as fine or normal), or positive emotional reaction (e.g., happiness or pride). The alpha level was set at .003 again because 16 chi square analyses were also conducted for emotion group.

The following chi square tests determined that emotion was not equally distributed across twelve themes, with the most frequent emotional response being neutral (Table 6): *Questioning Authenticity*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 19) = 18.11, p < .001$ , *Sensitivity*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 14) = 22.43, p < .001$ , *Unacknowledged Identity Status*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 19) = 38.00, p < .001$ , *Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoptions*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 56) = 21.14, p < .001$ , *Being the Spokesperson for Adoption*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 16) = 21.50, p < .001$ , *Overly Intrusive Questions*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 86) = 89.67, p < .001$ , *Assumption of Bionormativity*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 62) = 71.26, p < .001$ , *Negative Societal Portrayal of Adoption*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 4) = 2.0, p < .001$ , *Public "Outing,"*  $\chi^2(2, N = 28) = 50.21, p < .001$ , *In-House Divisions*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 29) = 23.24, p < .001$ , *Using Adoption*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 23) = 14.70, p = .001$ , and *Silence*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 222) = 426.24, p < .001$ .

Lastly, the theme of *Adoptees as Non-Normative*,  $\chi^2(2, N = 15) = 10.80, p = .005$  was slightly below a significant threshold in the direction of negative emotional reactions.

No themes were reliably coded as a positive emotional reaction to a microaggression.

### **Initiators of Microaggressions**

The person committing the microaggression was coded in terms of who stated each particular microaggression. Four categories were used for initiators: peers/friends, adoptive parents, adopted siblings, non-family adults (e.g., mentors, teachers, birth parents, people in the media etc.) As in the previous sets of chi squares, the alpha level was set at .003 because 16 chi square analyses were conducted for initiator group.

The following chi square tests indicated that initiator was not equally distributed across ten themes, with the most frequent initiator being peers/friends (Table 7): *Questioning Authenticity*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 19) = 49.42, p < .001$ , *Sensitivity*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 14) = 23.14, p < .001$ , *Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 56) = 137.71, p < .001$ , *Being the Spokesperson for Adoption*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 16) = 28.50, p < .001$ , *Overly Intrusive Questions*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 86) = 212.33, p < .001$ , *Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 13) = 20.54, p < .001$ , *Adoptees as Orphans*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 10) = 30.00, p < .001$ , *Assumption of Bionormativity*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 62) = 121.10, p < .001$ , *Adoptees as Non-Normative*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 15) = 24.73, p < .001$ , and *Public "Outing,"*  $\chi^2(3, N = 28) = 29.43, p < .001$ .

For two themes, the initiator was not equally distributed across themes, with the most frequent initiator being adoptive parents, *Silence*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 222) = 127.05$ ,  $p < .001$ , and *In-House Divisions*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 29) = 72.10$ ,  $p < .001$ .

For one theme, the initiator was not equally distributed across themes, with the most frequent initiator being siblings, *Using Adoption*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 23) = 13.70$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $p < .001$ .

For one theme, the initiator was not equally distributed across themes, with the most frequent initiator being non family adults, *Unacknowledged Identity Status*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 19) = 19.11$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The theme for which the initiator was equally likely to be any person was *Other*.

Lastly, the theme of *Negative Societal Portrayal of Adoption*,  $\chi^2(3, N = 4) = 12.00$ ,  $p = .007$  was trending towards significance in the direction of non-family adults.

### **Gender**

Chi square analyses were conducted in order to analyze if gender was reliably paired with certain microaggression themes as found in Study 1. The following chi square tests determined that gender was not equally distributed across three themes, with females being the most frequent on: *Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 56) = 8.64$ ,  $p = .003$ , *Overly Intrusive Questions*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 86) = 8.64$ ,  $p = .001$ , *In-House Divisions*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 29) = 9.97$ ,  $p = .002$ .

### **Age Group**

A series of chi squares was completed in order to assess if age group was reliably paired with certain microaggression themes as found in Study 1. The age groups were divided as such: younger adolescents that were of high school age (11-17 years old, N = 149) and older adolescents (18-21 years old, N = 28). Contextually and developmentally it made sense to create a split between those still in secondary school and those who were possibly in college or working. This split was created because it seemed that general maturity or a TAC's general environment could affect their awareness of microaggressions or increase their exposure to microaggressions. The following chi square tests assessed that age group was not equally distributed across two themes, with younger adolescents being the most frequent on: *Silence*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 222) = 101.35, p < .001$ , and *Questioning Authenticity*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 19) = 19.00, p < .000$ , *Unacknowledged Identity Status*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 19) = 8.90, p = .003$ , *Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 56) = 20.64, p < .001$ , *Being the Spokesperson for Adoption*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 16) = 9.00, p = .003$ , *Overly Intrusive Questions*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 86) = 39.12, p < .001$ , *Assumption of Bionormativity*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 12.65, p < .001$ , *Public "Outing,"*  $\chi^2(1, N = 28) = 20.57, p < .001$ , and *In-House Divisions*,  $\chi^2(1, N = 29) = 9.97, p = .002$ . There were no themes for which older adolescents more frequently experienced them.

## CHAPTER 8

### STUDY 2 DISCUSSION

#### **Adoptive Microaggressions and Intensity Level**

The majority of the microaggression themes were medium intensity level with a few exceptions. Most the themes were medium intensity because the content was not as aggressive or negative as the high level, and it was not always clear if the initiator was intending to denigrate the TAC's background, familial structure, or adoptive identity. However, because the comments and behaviors did imply disrespect or a clear negative message concerning the adopted person's identity, these microaggression were not at the lowest intensity. For example, *Overly Intrusive Questions* about a person's adoption can convey intense curiosity or open ignorance about the TAC's adoptive experience, even at the expense of making the TAC uncomfortable, frustrated, alienated, or feeling that their privacy has been invaded.

Two themes that were the most intense were *Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents* and *Using Adoption*. *Using Adoption* could be viewed as particularly intense because these microaggressions are consciously aimed at obtaining some sort of outcome from the adopted individual (e.g., gaining attention, manipulating the adopted person's emotional state, etc.) at his/her expense. Therefore, this theme was often expressly used in order to hurt the individual based on his/her identity or nontraditional family structure. Regarding the theme of *Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents*, this theme was often coded at the highest intensity level because of the content of the microaggressions as well as the way they were

delivered. The microaggressions about birth parents would often reify stigma and stereotypes that have been historically associated with adoption, and were worded in a manner that was openly derogatory towards the birthmother and her connection with the adopted individual. Microaggressions would often emphasize topics such as an adopted person being “unwanted,” or a birth mother being uncaring for the adopted child, or having negative feelings towards the adopted child. In contrast, research on birthmothers’ feelings towards their adopted children indicates that it is common for birthmothers to think about their adopted children, and also feel an emotional connection with the child in fully disclosed, mediated, and confidential adoptions (Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000). Thus, negative stereotypes about birthmothers and their connection with their adopted children continue to be perpetuated and pervade societal awareness of adoption despite what many birthmothers may feel and think. This clashing of realities could be hurtful or upsetting to adopted children. Additionally, this theme could be perceived as particularly intense because adopted children could feel protective over their own adoption story or their birthmothers’ reasons for placing them for adoption.

The themes that were perceived to be the lowest in intensity were *Silence* and *Unacknowledged Identity Status* because both themes were not necessarily directed in a purposeful or even conscious manner at the adopted child. Both themes represent the absence of an action versus the presence of an action. Though some TACs did state that they felt upset or wished to have the adoptive piece of their identity validated, many other TACs expressed that s/he did not feel burdened

by others' silence or unawareness of their adoption. Thus, these themes seemed to be the least detectable to the TACs as the initiators often exhibited a lack of behavior, consciousness, or awareness about the TAC's adoptive identity, versus more proactive or aggressively obvious negative behaviors and comments about adoption.

### **Emotional Reactions to Adoptive Microaggressions**

A notable finding was that for the majority of the themes, adoptees regularly responded with "neutral" emotions after being microaggressed by an initiator. This finding was particularly unexpected because despite the intensity of the theme, TACs generally reported feeling neutral about the microaggression. One possible reason for neutrality being particularly salient is that TACs may tolerate other's insensitive microaggressions in order to be "included" with other peers. Kowalski (2003) hypothesizes that the need to feel included is important in relationships with others, and people will even endure incessant "annoying" or "teasing" behaviors in order to keep relationships intact. She further discusses her theory of inclusion in the context of Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belongingness, wherein the consequences of not having relationships can be detrimental in many ways; even if relationships can cause pain, the perceived connection with others can feel extremely important. Adolescents such as these TACs may tolerate microaggressions from others in order to feel a connection with their peers and family members, as it is often developmentally a time of navigating relationships, solidifying friendships, dating, and belonging. Indeed, in looking at outcome studies, adolescents who perceived belonging with peers to be important and also had a



positive sense of belonging with their peers reported fewer behavioral problems than those who perceived belonging with others as important, but did not have a positive experience with being included in peer groups (Newman et al., 2007). Therefore, it is possible that the TACs elected to respond neutrally to potentially hurtful or offensive slights in order to preserve relationships and, in turn, protect their own well-being. Some of the TACs mentioned that although they may have been hurt or upset about a negative comment, they added they were still friends with the initiator, even when the intensity of the comment was high.

The literature on coping and emotion regulation can perhaps illuminate some of the coping mechanisms and strategies that individuals may practice in order to tolerate negative experiences. Garnefski, Kraaij, and Spinhoven (2001) theorized that some coping strategies such as positive reappraisal (where people “attach” a positive meaning to a negative event such that they are bettering themselves), positive refocusing (thinking positively about an event versus focusing on the actual event), and putting into perspective (cognitively framing an event in a less serious manner or comparing the event with other events), can be quite “adaptive” for an individual, specifically when undergoing a negative life event. The data did highlight some of the strategies that TACs used that could explain them having a neutral or even positive view on a negative event such as: they stated they felt positively about educating some individuals who had stereotyped views of adoption, ignored the comment and saw it as insignificant, perceived the comment as a ridiculous joke that was not worth responding to, or mentioned they were able to “stand up” for themselves in the face of the initiator.

Lastly, it is important to consider that TACs could have felt negatively about their microaggressive experiences, but did not feel comfortable disclosing it. Discussing taboo or difficult experiences may cause the TAC pain or discomfort in speaking about discrimination, ignorance, or alienation, and thus it is possible they did not wish to delve into such negative subject matter. Furthermore, adolescents may also try to conceal negative effects of teasing in order to diminish any additional victimization they may feel (Rivers, 2013).

### **Initiators of Adoptive Microaggressions**

In examining the initiators, it is necessary to identify who is committing which themes in order to think about how and where to properly address specific microaggressions. Overall, across the themes, the majority of initiators of microaggressions were peers and/or friends, which fits with the idea that neutral emotional reactions may have been necessary from the TAC in order to preserve relationships. Peers and friends tended to initiate some of the more intense themes including *Adopted Individuals as Orphans* and *Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents* and most of the moderately intensive themes; they did not seem to commit the subtlest microaggressions nearly as often.

Many of the themes initiated by peers and friends were related to ignorance of adoption or having little knowledge of what it means to be adopted, and therefore insensitive microaggressions may occur more overtly or obviously because peers/friends may not understand the implications of comments.

In more unintentional circumstances of microaggressions, peers may not be aware that disclosing a TAC's adoptive status in public may not be hurtful, or they

may need to ask continual questions about adoption or the adoption process in order to understand an interesting and novel phenomenon. Many peers and friends may not be aware of a TAC's adoptive status in a same race family, and therefore may not believe a TAC about being adopted, or may "parrot" stereotypes they have heard about adopted individuals not being "normal" or having problems.

However, it is possible that some adolescent peers may be trying to harm or joke with a TAC in a negative manner as well, and thus may use more intense comments to retain power over their relationship with the TAC. Indeed, in other studies that look at teasing or verbal "roasting" between peers, students may tease others "for fun," "for revenge," or in order to "defend themselves" (Rivers, 2013). Adoption may be a salient characteristic of the TAC that is then used by the initiator to harm the adolescent using overtly negative remarks about the birthmother or orphanages. It is possible that joking or accidentally offensive comments from friends could be perceived as less detrimental than those of peers or classmates as this finding occurs with other forms of teasing at school (Jones, Newman, & Bautista, 2005). Furthermore, the data seemed to reflect that TACs were more forgiving of slights from friends.

Due to the fact that many of these themes may reflect adolescents' ignorance regarding adoption, intervention aimed at education to broad audiences (such as at schools, assemblies, or in classrooms) may help to decrease adoptive microaggressions initiated by peers and friends. Educational programs about adoption will help take the responsibility of "teaching" off of adopted individuals such that hopefully their relationships with peers/friends can be less strained when

ignorant comments arise. Furthermore, it can help give others who are not adopted experiences, education, and language to help “defend” adoption when appropriate.

In considering parents’ role in adoptive microaggressions, one would assume the majority of comments or behaviors were not aimed at harming the TAC in any way. In examining the themes *In-House Divisions* and *Silence*, often parents did not seem to have any conscious awareness that they may be committing a microaggression against their child. Microaggressing from adoptive parents took two general forms. In one form, adoptive parents either made comments that separated the TAC from the family by inadvertently reinforcing the importance of biological ties within the family (e.g., discussing at length how family members are related biologically without thinking of the impact on the TAC). Indeed, adoptive mothers in the MTARP sample have demonstrated that genetics and biology may become salient when they try to determine similarities and differences between themselves and their adopted children (Perry, 2006). Therefore, biology and genetics may be a theme that consciously or unconsciously surfaces in adoptive families’ conversations, which could possibly have some impact on the adoptive person.

Another form of microaggression from adoptive parents occurred when they did not speak *openly* and *regularly* about adoption with the TAC as s/he progressed throughout various developmental life stages. *Silence* was overall the most pervasive theme compared to all the other themes, possibly because it is a subtle microaggression that can be easily ignored by the adoptive family or even the TAC especially as life becomes busier and the adoption becomes less salient. Though this

is a lower intensity microaggression, and adopted individuals should not be forced to discuss adoption issues if s/he is not emotionally or psychologically ready, the willingness and awareness to “check in” and have regular and open communication can be important in adopted families about adoptive issues. It is also possible that because parents are more knowledgeable about adoption (as well as the TAC’s adoptive identity), silence may feel more like a microaggression.

Communication about adoption can be important for adoptive families in fully disclosed, mediated, and confidential adoptions, whether it’s related to family connections (Grotevant, Wrobel, van Dulmen, & McRoy, 2001), how adolescents develop their identity, and for those in confidential adoptions, TAC’s search for birth parents. Brodzinsky (2006) reinforced the importance of communication in his study that found adoptive families who are more “open and sensitive” about communication patterns have children who report higher self-esteem and less behavioral problems. He added that “communication openness” is a more important predictor of children’s well-being than the “structural openness” or level of access that adoptive families and birth families have. Thus, parents should be informed, either through their adoption agency or other post adoption services, of the significance of regular, open, and sensitive communication with their adopted children.

Siblings also practiced *Silence* with the TACs with regards to their adoption, though the most prominent theme was *Using Adoption*. According to the data, siblings would often draw attention to the TAC’s adoptive identity in the middle of arguments, presumably to gain some outcome or negative emotional reaction from

the TAC. Other siblings would joke with the TAC about his/her adopted identity. Research on sibling relationships assert that although siblings can have exchanges that are intense and angry, they can also quickly morph into moments of “teaching, concern, and helpfulness” (Bedford & Volling, 2004). Furthermore, the authors explain that individuals can take more “emotional risks” with other siblings, and may use more intense or aggressively negative language than they would with friends where the relationship may discontinue. Thus, angry or jestful negative language may be a regular occurrence between siblings, and adoption may become a part of the banter between them. However, it is possible that these types of microaggressions could be perceived as harmful or an attempt to separate the TAC from the family, and thus it is important that adoptive parents are aware of communication content in their families, and the possibility that these slights can occur.

Nonfamily adults’ microaggression themes were related to *Unacknowledged Identity Status* and *Negative Societal Portrayal of Adoption*. Because biological families are the normative experience for the majority of Americans, many may not consider or be aware that other families are built differently. In same race families, adopted individuals’ adoptive identity may be invisible to outsiders, and thus their identities may go undetected and unacknowledged. Invisible identities that appear in certain racial/ethnic groups, sexual orientation groups, and ability groups may experience conflicted feelings, negativity, or feel less authentic as a whole “self” even when they are able to “pass” (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005). Therefore, it can be important that people expect and understand that families may come in a diversity

of forms, even if it is not necessarily visibly obvious. One of the most negative experiences from nonfamily adults that TACs reported were teachers (particularly in religion, ethics, or health classes) making assumptions about how families are structured when assigning coursework (e.g., the family tree project, discovering one's family history, etc.) These assignments often left TACs feeling alienated or confused about how to complete a project, or they were forced to discuss with the teacher why the assignment was inappropriate. Teachers should be aware that adoptive families can exist in their classrooms, and consider how they discuss family or how certain projects may exclude some students. Other nonfamily adults who were initiators of microaggressions were doctors who would ask adopted individuals about their health histories without inquiring if this question was pertinent or not. Lastly, although the result was a nonsignificant trend, nonfamily adults may perpetuate *Negative Societal Portrayals of Adoption* wherein figures in the media or other adults may discuss or show adoptive families in a detrimental, abnormal, or psychopathological lens. Only creating shows about adopted individuals struggling with problems or having behavioral issues on the news, or broadcasting stereotypical versions of adoption (either as unidimensionally all positive or all negative) on television shows or in movies can perpetuate stigmatized archetypes of adoption. These messages about adoption invade the cultural consciousness of society and are then used as a lens in which to conceptualize all adopted individuals and families as the same. Interventions at the more general level are necessary to change our sociocultural perceptions of

adoption such as providing adoptive families that are counter to stereotypes and more dimensional.

This investigation of the intensity, emotional reaction, and initiators of microaggressions in relation to the microaggression themes that are committed towards TACs has illuminated the experience of adoptive microaggressions in various contexts and with many different entities. It also suggests how we can further determine where intervention may need to occur, and how interventions may help.

### **The Intersection of Gender and Adoptive Microaggressions**

Study 2 investigated how certain themes of microaggressions may be tied with participants' gender. The themes of *Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption*, *Overly Intrusive Questions*, and *In-House Divisions* are most frequently occurring with females. Based on prior analyses regarding initiator status, Overly intrusive Questioning and Recurring Confusion occur most often with peers in school. Due to the nature of these themes, adoptive microaggressions aimed at female TACs could be a form of relational aggression expressed by peers as intrusive questions about adoption and their personal identities. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) explicated how young females may express aggression in more subtle ways that negatively utilize interpersonal social relationships. Female adolescent peers may intentionally use knowledge of the female TAC's adoptive status to annoy, irritate, or alienate the TAC by discussing a topic that could be sensitive or private to the individual. Indeed, anecdotally, TACs expressed feeling upset or annoyed by constantly having to field questions, particularly at inconvenient times



when they wanted to be alone or not discuss the topic with acquaintances and peers. It is important to note that female TACs may in fact answer personal questions or explain adoption processes several times in order to avoid repercussions from peers despite how negatively they may feel internally. Although intrusive questioning about adoption on the part of peers may seem innocuous, if the TAC interprets it negatively, the relational aggression literature shows that covert aggression can be related to serious symptoms such as depression, loneliness, feelings of distress, and issues with self-restraint (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). In order to further understand the relationship between microaggressions and gender, in Study 3 I examined if adoptive female participants actually reported more microaggressions occurring to them, and if the intensity of the microaggressions were more intense.

The themes more associated with peers may also more frequently occur with females because of the nature of same-sex female friendships and relationships. It is possible that peers and friends of females genuinely are curious and want to understand TACs and their adoptive experiences. Throughout adolescent development, teens grow to value and desire closeness, which in turn can allow them to experience intimacy in their friendships and relationships. Adolescent females in particular have exhibited a stronger tendency to value and desire closeness compared to males (Montgomery, 2005). Thus, it is possible that peers and friends are asking several personal questions or repeatedly trying to clarify the adoption process in order to understand and become closer to the TAC. Female TACs may notice these attempts and/or seek them out from peers and friends more, and therefore may report instances of questions and discussion about adoption

more often. However, it is important to add that depending on the adolescent's interpretation of the microaggression, intrusive questioning can be viewed in a negative manner, even if the initiator has "good intentions." Thus, Study 3 went in more depth about the reported number and intensity level of microaggressions experienced by individuals as a function of gender.

In terms of In-House Divisions, there may be more frequent issues with females and their adoptive parents regarding adoption. This may be especially true when conflicts of adoption are indicative of gender-related expectations and stereotypes. In the general population, parents can tend to control and restrict their daughters' choices more readily compared to sons'; an example of such is how adolescents desire to spend their free time (Allison & Schultz, 2004). It is possible that access to birth parents or information about their adoption could be another subject that adoptive parents may restrict with their daughters. Furthermore, adolescent females are often socialized to value "communion," or joining together with others. This value can make them more "vulnerable" to conflict with parents (Davies & Lindsay, 2004). Taking these results together, female adolescents in general can experience more conflict with parents than males, and they may be more affected by parental conflict. Thus, adolescent female TACs may experience more conflict around adoption with their parents.

### **Age and Adoptive Microaggressions**

Contrary to the original hypothesis, microaggressions were especially prevalent for younger adolescents in middle school and high school regarding several themes. The majority of these themes such as Questioning Authenticity,

Recurring Confusion/Ignorance, Being the Spokesperson for Adoption, Assumption of Bionormativity, and Public “Outing” were more related to peers and friends (as shown in Study 2). These themes could surface more at a younger age because the TACs are regularly in school and interacting with their peers. One reason for younger adolescents being teased more is because it is more likely that at a younger age many of the TAC’s friends or peers are not yet aware that the TAC is adopted. For example, with Questioning Authenticity, it is possible that younger peers feel so incredulous by this discovery (after knowing someone for many years or never being aware they knew someone who was adopted) that they react with disbelief to the disclosure. By the time a person is significantly older, perhaps many of these themes fade out because everyone is already aware of the TAC’s adoptive status, or the TAC is no longer regularly with peers, or adoption does not come up as often in the context of college or work. However, this theme may also be predominant for younger TACs because early adolescence is a time when teasing becomes more popular. Children tease particularly around ages 11-12 years old and begin to understand the function of teasing better (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). Thus, one’s adoption can become an “easier” target to draw attention to because it makes the person “different.” Initiators may use the stigma of adoption to overtly separate the TAC from others due to their family structure.

Silence and In-House Divisions may also be prominent themes in the adoptive family during young adolescence due to differences in communication. The Family Adoption Communication Model (FAC) (Wrobel, Grotevant, Berge, Mendenhall, & McRoy, 1999) elucidates the various communication patterns that

can exist in adoptive families at different points in time. The first stage often occurs early on in the adoption process when the child tends to be younger. Parents often discuss adoption with their children and provide them with information, even when it is not requested on the behalf of the adopted child. A key idea here is that the parents are the ones in control of disseminating information *about* the child *to* the child. In the second stage, the child developmentally can consider more information about his/her adoption, and may have budding questions. Although parents still maintain the control for dissemination of information, the child can affect the “timing” of discussions. Developmentally, the child may have new questions for parents as s/he matures or undergoes important events. The last stage is when the TAC is able to find new information regarding his/her adoption “independently” without the parents. Throughout the stages, Wrobel et al. (1999) maintain that TACs’ desire may be more intense for information at certain points. Unfortunately, the adoptive parents may be unable (or possibly unwilling) to provide the information to the TAC exactly when s/he desires it. This “asynchrony of need for communication” could be a reason why silence occurs so often with younger adolescents.

Potentially, younger adolescents seek information that “silence” adoptive parents because they do not have the requested information, or they feel the information is developmentally inappropriate (e.g., their birth parents may have traumatic or difficult histories).

It is also possible that younger adolescents could have no interest in discussing their adoption and could have made this clear to parents, thus

extinguishing communication until they are older. Some TACs may want to focus on other areas of their lives, and then the topic of adoption never arises, and thus conversations never occur. It is possible that silence as a microaggression could be the most frustrating and impactful to an adolescent when asynchrony of need for communication occurs between the TAC and the adoptive parents. Older adolescents may not have less issues with asynchrony with their parents because either they are able to obtain information themselves (if they are 18 years old), or parents may feel they are mature enough to handle difficult information relating to their past, or older TACs could be more effective at navigating roles and reducing conflict with their parents due to cognitive and moral developments as found in other developmental studies on adolescent-parental conflict (Renk, Liljequist, Simpson, & Phares, 2005).

## CHAPTER 9

### STUDY 3 RESULTS

For Study 3, the unit being analyzed was the *individual*. Thus, analyses were conducted in order to describe the experiences of TACs. T-tests were conducted in order to ascertain if there were mean differences between genders for number of microaggressions and average level of intensity per person. Furthermore, a correlation was used to determine if age was related to mean intensity per person. Additionally, a t-test was conducted between younger and older adolescents to discover whether there was a mean difference in number of microaggressions. Lastly, multiple regression analyses were completed in order to determine if mean intensity level and number of microaggressions were related to PA and NE Scale scores.

#### Gender

A t-test was conducted to assess whether there was a mean difference in intensity level for males and females; the difference was significant ( $M$  for females = 1.70 ( $SD = .36$ ),  $M$  for males 1.47 ( $SD = .36$ );  $t(150) = -4.07, p < .001$ ).

Another t-test was used to determine whether there was a mean difference in number of microaggressions for males and females; the difference was also significant ( $M$  for females = 4.09 ( $SD = 2.80$ ),  $M$  for males = 2.54 ( $SD = 2.23$ );  $t(188) = -4.24, p < .001$ ).

#### Age

A correlation was used to see if there was a linear trend across the whole range of ages for mean intensity; age was not significantly related to mean intensity level,  $r(150) = .03, p = .70$ .

After conducting a correlation across all ages in the sample, a t-test was used to see if there was conceptual relevance between two groups who could be living in different contexts. The age groups were again divided as younger adolescents that were of high school age (11-17 years old,  $N = 149$ ) and older adolescents (18-21 years old,  $N = 28$ ). The t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a mean difference in number of microaggressions for younger and older adolescents. The difference between the two groups was not significant ( $M$  for younger adolescents = 3.43 ( $SD = 2.55$ ),  $M$  for older adolescents = 3.96 ( $SD = 2.60$ ));  $t(175) = -1.01, p = .31$ .

### **Number of Microaggressions, Intensity Level, and PA and NE Scales**

The mean level of intensity experienced per person was 1.59 with a standard deviation of .38 and range from 1.00 to 2.50. The mean number of microaggressions per individual was 4.04. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine if whether the frequency of microaggressions experienced by TACs and the average level of intensity of microaggressions experienced by each individual TAC predicted TAC's scores on the Positive Affect about Adoption (PA) and Negative Experiences with Own Adoption (NE) subscales of the Adoption Dynamics Questionnaire.

Table 8 summarizes the descriptive statistics and analysis results. Each of the predictors (number of microaggressions and average level of intensity) was negatively and significantly correlated with PA scores, indicating that those with

higher numbers of microaggressions and those with higher average intensity levels tended to have lower scores on the PA. The multiple regression model with both predictors produced,  $R^2 = .06$ ,  $F = (2, 133) = 4.37$ ,  $p = .02$ . Table 8 shows that only the number of microaggressions had a significant negative regression weight, indicating that TACs experiencing more microaggressions had lower PA scores when controlling for average level of intensity.

In terms of the multiple regression analysis for NE, neither of the predictors was significantly correlated with the dependent variable. The multiple regression model was also not significant,  $R^2 = .01$ ,  $F = (2, 132) = .95$ ,  $p > .05$ .



## CHAPTER 10

### STUDY 3 DISCUSSION

#### **Gender, Age, and Microaggressions**

Gender was related to number of microaggressions and average intensity level (Study 3), meaning that across individuals females reported more experiences of microaggressions and with more intensity compared to males. Due to the finding in Study 2 that the microaggression themes of *Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption*, *Overly Intrusive Questions*, and *In-House Divisions* were paired more frequently with females, Study 3 was concerned with how individuals of each gender were experiencing microaggressions. There are several different reasons why female TACs may actually experience microaggressions, and in particular, these 3 themes more often than males. Adopted females may actually have more encounters with adoptive microaggressions more often, or they may perceive them as occurring more often compared to males. One of the reasons females may report more intense microaggressions more often may be related to the hypothesis about adopted females' intersectionality of identities. Because females are marginalized due to their gender *and* adoptive identities in a patriarchal and bionormative context, they may actually experience more prejudice through these layers of identity similar to those who are multiply marginalized in other studies (Smith et al., 2008; Camacho & Lord, 2011; Daley et al., 2007). Thus, because males and biological families actually have more privilege in American society, it is possible that microaggressions can occur more frequently with females.

However, it is possible that females may *perceive* microaggressions more readily than males due to possessing doubly marginalized identities. The literature on the intersection of identities indicates that female TACs may particularly feel “different” than their peers in settings (e.g., school) where being female and adopted can come to the forefront more readily as adolescents are developing their own identities and navigate social relationships. Furthermore, more generally, adolescent females have indicated that they can have more “intense” experiences of self-consciousness during adolescence compared to their male counterparts, meaning that girls were more sensitive about altering their behavior in order to evade “social shame” (Montgomery, 2005). Therefore, females may already feel more “different” at school, and adoption becomes another layer of difference that they perceive.

In terms of In-House Divisions, microaggressions may also be more numerous with female TACs because they may experience more conflict in their families. As previous literature such as the Allison and Schultz (2004) studied has suggested, it is important to study the frequency and intensity of conflict with parents in order to more fully understand how issues arise in families with adolescents. Females were higher on both intensity and number compared to males. Similar to research on conflict between adolescents and their families, the current study realized that adolescent females, particularly younger ones, can experience more intense and more conflict with their parents throughout adolescence compared to adolescent males (Allison & Schultz, 2004). Anecdotally, females did mention more instances of feeling alienated from their families or

hearing comments where they felt somehow “separate” from the family when topics of biological ties between family members occur. These stories suggest that the idea of communion (Davies & Lindsay, 2004) could be relevant. Although female participants did not often speak directly about their socialization regarding their adoptive or gender identities, based on their comments about separateness (Davies & Lindsay, 2004), it appears that females may feel quite joined within their families. Thus, if females feel more joined or more communion within their families versus males, then conflict could feel more upsetting or salient to female adolescents.

Age was not related to number of microaggressions experienced by participants or the average intensity level of those microaggressions (Study 3), despite the fact that certain microaggression themes were more commonly experienced by younger adolescents (Study 2). This finding provides a larger context for microaggressions in that all ages are reporting similar numbers of microaggressions at comparable levels of intensity. The readiness (or lack thereof) to report microaggressions for younger adolescents could be related to their developmental perception of microaggressions (e.g., teasing occurs more regularly with younger adolescents in general (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001), so perhaps adoptive microaggressions are not perceived to be noticeable or salient.) Furthermore, younger adolescents may not feel comfortable speaking with unknown adoption researchers who are emerging adults compared to older adolescents where the age difference is less noticeable.

Both younger and older adolescents reported receiving about 4 microaggressions in their transcripts, highlighting the idea that these are multiple

instances of slights that occur as opposed to one major obvious event. Examining microaggressions in terms of their frequency and average intensity level can help us further illuminate who receives the microaggressions, and how and when they are communicated. Although Study 2 illuminates how some types of microaggressions were more frequently experienced by younger than older adolescents, Study 3 uncovers other aspects of how microaggressions are experienced and reported by individuals.

### **Feelings about Adoption and Adoptive Microaggressions**

One of the most concerning findings consistent with the hypothesis was that the number of microaggressions and even the intensity level are related to the way TACs feel about their adoption. Similar to other marginalized groups (Noh et al., 2007; Sue, 2010a), TACs still encounter covert bias based on a stigmatized history. How this bias is internalized or appraised may make a difference in terms of negative emotional and psychological outcomes. In fact, some TACs in the sample were not even aware that a microaggression had occurred, although appraisals of microaggressions could change developmentally throughout one's life course. However, for TACs who do recognize and feel affected by microaggressions, results of this study suggest that the awareness of these slights is associated with less positive feelings about their adoption. Because microaggressions are often a perceived reality, it is relevant that although adolescents overwhelmingly reported feeling neutrally about microaggressions (and therefore they may be presumably "fine" with microaggressive comments), analyses indicated that microaggressions were related to lower levels of positive affect regarding adoption nonetheless. This

point relates to the idea that perhaps TACs chose to not fully disclose their feelings about microaggressions despite their initial responses. Additionally, it is possible that, due to the covert nature of microaggressions, adolescents are not consciously aware of the connection between their emotional reactions to microaggressions and their feelings about adoption; however, microaggressions can have a corrosive power over time that the adolescents are not fully aware of that can influence detrimental outcomes. Furthermore, because of the context of the interview and the study, it is possible that TACs felt obligated to present their experiences with adoption as “fine” to an unacquainted researcher. Lastly, although many interviewers directly asked TACs how they felt about teasing and ignorance related to adoption, this was not necessarily a consistent protocol and thus we had to infer emotions indirectly in some cases. It is possible that because the findings are correlational, results can also be interpreted as the adopted people who are less vulnerable to microaggressions may not be as affected by them. Nonetheless, it is significant to become aware that at least a subset of adopted individuals may be particularly vulnerable to influence of microaggressions.

Indeed, studies that examine the “weathering effect” of residing in a society that is “race-conscious” indicate that this constant stress can affect the health of Black Americans more so than White Americans; this finding was especially strong for Black Americans who had to use greater effort in coping with racism (Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, & Bound, 2006). Feeling negatively about one’s adoption could possibly affect feelings about the self, and therefore it is imperative to think about how microaggressions affect adopted individuals on a regular basis.

It is possible that over time, several microaggressions with differing levels of subtlety could create similar feelings at different developmental stages. Although microaggressions may only be a small piece of the puzzle that can lower TAC's positive feelings about their adoption, it is a piece that can be remedied. One of the most intense microaggressions such as *Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents* are based upon stigma in adoption history wherein images of poor orphans and desperate uncaring birthmothers are conjured (Wegar, 2000). Peers and friends who are unaware and uneducated about adoption can readily draw upon these archetypal images and stereotypes and use them, consciously or not, in hurtful and harmful ways.

Although the number and intensity of microaggressions were correlated with lowered positive affect about adoption, it was not significantly related to negative experiences with own adoption scores. In looking at the items of each scale, the NE subscale related more to specific negative comments from parents (e.g., "My parent(s) tell me that they can give me back if they want to," and "My parent(s) tell me that I should be thankful that they adopted me.") There were also items related to wishing that others did not know the individual was adopted, or having difficulty talking about adoption with others. These items may have been more relevant in how adopted people perceive their relationships with others and less about an adopted person's emotions regarding his/her own adoption. Although many parents committed microaggressions, often the slights seemed unintentional or much more subtle, and thus their comments would be less likely to be represented on scores on the NE scale. TACs frequently reported feeling positive in their

relationships with their adoptive parents, and many felt they could explain to others what adoption meant. However, the PA subscale taps more into the internal experience or feelings of the TAC (e.g., “Being adopted makes me feel angry,” “Being adopted makes me feel special,” “Being adopted makes me feel sad,” etc.) Thus, although microaggressions may not necessarily influence how an adopted person interacts with others, it may be related to how an adopted person internally feels about adoption.

It is important that adopted individuals have an adoption story that can allow them to have a semblance of “truth” about their identities and histories so that they can have this personal knowledge when another person tries to push other realities and generalizations of adoption onto the TAC. The adoption story can be a significant and helpful form of communication that is told by parents to their adopted children to help them make sense of their adoption (Wrobel et al., 2003). Additionally, formulating an adoption story and having regular discussion around it can convey openness and readiness to talk about adoption. Another intense theme of *Using Adoption* should be monitored in schools and in homes (as often this theme may be expressed by siblings) so that they understand why using adoption to tease or insult is unacceptable. Therefore, an adoption story for the family may be as necessary as the TAC understanding his/her personal adoption story. An adoptive family identity could be helpful in building understanding and empathy between family members such that even if siblings joke about adoption, there can still be a clearer sense of solidarity between adoptive family members and how they have a shared history (Rueter & Koerner, 2008).

## CHAPTER 11

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

#### **Adoptive Microaggressions in A Broader Context**

This study explored the various microaggression themes that adolescent adopted individuals encounter. These microaggressions can originate in several contexts and can appear in all manner of relationships. Although public opinion of adoption is becoming more positive (Fisher, 2003) and adoption may seem detached from the nucleus of its stigma in the late 1800s when adoption was shrouded in shame and secrecy (Carp, 1998; Zamosny et al., 2003), it is similar to many other forms of prejudice where stereotypical and discriminatory behavior “go underground” and become covert and masked (Pierce et al., 1977; Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010a; Sue, 2010b; Nadal et al., 2010). Although there are varying gradients of intensity of microaggressions similar to Sue’s framework (2010a; 2010b) (i.e., microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations), adoptive microaggressions exist in their own unique context and are expressed in ways that are indicative of how this practice has been situated in American history. Also, similar to other studies on microaggressions, perceived discrimination, and covert prejudice, the present research suggests that adoptive microaggressions can have actual negative repercussions for the victim (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Swim et al., 2001; Swim et al., 2003; Sue, 2010b).

Bionormativity is the current that continues to propagate stigma about adoption. Due to adoption’s history of being regarded as shameful, as well as its trajectory of being closed and completely confidential among triad members, the



microaggressions that currently surface are expressed in ways that harken to its past and solidify its recurring narrative. Practices of varying degrees of secrecy are still apparent in families not regularly discussing adoption, and also appear when nonfamily adults may not even be aware that adopted individuals are in their classes, playing with their children, or living in their neighborhoods. Bionormativity can be so all encompassing that teachers make assumptions in assignments that all students know their biological families or do not have more complex family structures and histories. Although these small slights or moments of unawareness may seem innocuous, they are messages that can alienate and invalidate.

The narrative of bionormativity affects what people in society expect in terms of what families look like and how families can be formed. Society's perception of adoptive families can be paradoxical at times. Interview transcripts revealed that some initiators can express surprise and even deny someone's adoptive status because they believe adoptions only appear in reality as they do with very specific examples on television or in the media (e.g., wealthy celebrities with "diverse" children of color). At other times, initiators indicate they believe members of a family are not related because they do not "look alike." When families do not fit a specific biological or even adoptive mold, this can often lead to intrusive questions requiring adoptive families to explain personal histories, or recurring ignorance about the process of adoption that is frustrating. Other communications imply that the adopted individual is or should feel that adoption

is a sensitive subject or that adopted adolescents' problems are constantly stemming from issues with their adoptive families.

As the media perpetuate specific archetypes of adoptive families based on the narrative of adoption, they have also continued to solidify stereotypes of adopted individuals. Even relatively recent narratives of adopted individuals help reinforce stereotypes as they flourish- productions such as *Annie*, *The Avengers*, and the horror movie *The Orphan* portray adopted individuals as deranged, without a moral code, behaviorally uncontrollable, unwanted, or as people to be pitied. People continue to connect adopted individuals with orphanages, even when this is not the case for many of them. In short, adopted individuals are often portrayed as nonnormative, leaving real and dimensional identities absent. The history of adoption, thus, began as an extremely stigmatized practice bolstered by the value of bionormativity. Over time, this value undergirded the narrative of adoption stigma as it became muted, repackaged, and perpetuated through cultural archetypes manifested as stereotypes.

### **Implications for Theory**

#### **Microaggressions, Control, and Identity**

One of the major overarching issues I generalized from the 3 studies could be related to negative feelings about adoption is the lack of control an individual may feel when caught in the crossfire of microaggressive comments. The notion of control of a hidden identity may constitute a meaningful part of identity formation and development for adopted adolescents in same race families. Because the adolescents in this study are in same race adoptions, adoption may be more salient

or may play a unique role in how adoption is experienced compared to other adopted individuals in transracial adoptions. Although it may seem contradictory that microaggressions could include adopted individuals being “outed” by nonadopted individuals in public or nonadopted individuals never acknowledging the adopted person’s status, in both cases, the control over the adopted person’s identity is taken away by someone else. Control for adopted individuals is generally a significant theme on many levels regarding the process of adoption as well as identity. For example, adopted individuals are often the people in the adoption triad who have the least amount of control over decisions that affect location and people with whom they are placed. It should also be noted that adopted individuals may not always have comprehensive or “complete” information about their backgrounds or their own adoption narratives (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011), and thus may not have full control over their own stories. Therefore, when others assert control, consciously or not through microaggressions over the identity of adopted persons, it could take away a truly meaningful sense of control and choice for the adopted person.

Control over when to disclose an invisible identity can be easily taken away from an adopted person by other people in a variety of circumstances. Parents or siblings can disclose this information to family or friends without their child’s consent, and this fact can (and was) spread to other people. Friends, peers, and teachers may ask adopted individuals to “out” themselves in front of other people even though the adopted person may not have planned on disclosing that piece of their identity. Adopted individuals may feel they must provide answers to

invasive questions when they are asked in the presence of large groups or by a person of authority (e.g., in classrooms, teachers would ask TACs to identify themselves during pertinent adoption-related lessons). In other situations, microaggressions expressed by others can take control away from how an adopted person may represent him/herself; examples include when adopted individuals are asked to speak for an entire diverse community of adopted people, or when adopted individuals try to gain understanding from someone who cannot or will not comprehend adoption despite repeated attempts. In these microaggressive interactions, adopted people may feel little control over how someone understands them and their histories as individuals.

Control can also be assumed through microaggressions as a form of domination when others exert control over an identity that the person has chosen to remain private. These microaggressions can be more overt or hostile in the forms of relational aggression or mean spirited teasing. Peers and siblings may use adoptive identity as “ammunition” to upset the adopted person or display superiority over someone who is marginalized and “different.” Just as relational aggression may use social relationships to control and dominate others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), highlighting how a person is unlike everyone else, or how it makes them inferior, or tying cruel or untrue stereotypes to that identity can alienate the person and undermine their ability to “fit in” with peers. Females and younger adopted adolescents in particular may be prone to be separated from peers in this manner.

When family is silent about adoption, the adopted individual may not have control over the flow of communication about adoption or the pace with which they receive information about their adoption. Even when silence is not intentional or there is very little new information to provide the adopted person, not having control over the flow of communication could matter. For example, parents with highly controlling or “Laissez-Faire” attitudes about discussing adoption (where discussions concerning adoption are neither “dictated” nor talked about openly) have been related to having children with higher levels of adjustment problems (Rueter & Koerner, 2008). In other family conversations, adopted individuals may also not want to listen to ways that other family members are tied biologically, or they may have other family members state that the adopted person is somehow different because s/he is adopted. Adopted children cannot always participate in some familial conversations, or they may participate and feel conflicted. Again, Kirk’s idea of “shared fate” from decades ago is currently relevant to adoption. The idea of a family having an adoptive identity as a unit may help bridge various family traditions, conversations, and values together.

There are also larger issues of control in society such as how the media propagate stereotypes about adoption that impinge upon an adopted person’s ability to be seen as a unique individual. As stated previously, adopted people frequently do not have control over their “image” to larger society, which means they are often depicted in stereotypical and harmful ways. These stereotypes manifest in the way that others interact with adopted individuals, which can be

upsetting as adopted people cannot control how others will perceive their adoptive identity or their adoption in general.

Lastly, the sample of adopted children in this study did not have the choice of whether they would like to be placed for adoption, and could not be consulted about their placement into a specific family. Thus, control is an element in an adopted individual's life that is often relatively absent early on, and therefore losing the small amount of control they have over the disclosure of their identities or feeling understood and respected as an adopted person may be incredibly powerful as they age.

### **Adoptive Microaggressions and the Importance of Context**

One of the other contributions to the microaggression adoption literature that is provided in this study is how these may appear in context. It was relevant to the study to further analyze the complexities of adoptive microaggressive interactions. To look at only one relationship or one context may mean missing major pieces of adolescent adopted peoples' experiences of microaggressions. It is not only important to know what form adoptive microaggressions take, but who initiates microaggressive behaviors, when, and where they occur. Because microaggressions may look different depending on the initiator, the environment, and the developmental stage or gender of the adopted person, delineating these factors helps us to understand that it is not just strangers in an adopted person's life that invoke these behaviors, rather, it is often people who are close in proximity or close in relationship to the person. Furthermore, because they can occur in so many different forms and in so many environments, it can give us an

idea of how all encompassing these experiences with microaggressions can be. Also in beginning to investigate context with microaggressions, we can refine and aim interventions in a more effective and efficient way.

### **Implications for Practice**

The need for education about adoption is a theme that has become prominent throughout the findings of this study. Given the results about the importance of microaggressions in context, we can begin to consider when, where, and how education should appear in order to make interventions the most potent and impactful.

Adoptive families were one context in which a TAC would experience microaggressions. Although it is strongly encouraged (and even necessary) for adoptive parents to educate themselves (e.g., through readings, documentaries, or other adoptive families) about some of the microaggressions their children may experience, a relevant place to receive education is through their adoption agencies before their children are even adopted. Adoption professionals could use the microaggression themes found in this study as a tool so that they can educate adoptive parents to be fully aware of the subtle experiences of stigma or prejudice that adoptees experience in their lives. If adoptive parents are aware of these instances, they can find ways to support their children through active dialogue; proactively educating teachers, students, other parents, or administrators in schools on adoptive issues; deciding on “stock answers” to common microaggressions beforehand; finding adopted mentors to which their children can discuss difficult microaggressive incidents; or being quietly supportive in the

background until the person is ready to have a discussion about microaggressions or teasing related to adoption.

Once adoptive parents understand adoptive microaggressions better and can recognize them as they occur, educating the entire family about microaggressions can help buffer against future issues. Siblings of adopted children should be aware of what adoption entails and how families can be formed in different ways, as well as what to say when asked questions about the family. Depending on the age of the siblings, discussions around language and how the family talks about adoption may be necessary once the child is adopted or as issues between family members arise (e.g., a sibling uses insults about adoption against the adopted child). Extended family including younger members and members of an older generation should also be aware of adoption and microaggression issues so that they do not accidentally miscommunicate with the adopted child and make them feel separate or apart from the family. If families feel they have an overarching adoptive identity, it can help motivate members to learn more about negative microaggressive instances and how to deal with them.

Adolescent and adult adoptees may also find becoming educated about microaggressions to be pertinent and relevant to their own adoptive identities, as reading other adoptees' experiences may be validating or informative regarding their own experiences with stigma or microaggressions. Feeling that one is not alone and that others may empathize with their microaggressive experiences could feel comforting and cathartic for adopted people.



Another issue is thinking about how peers and friends of adopted individuals should become educated about stereotypes and misrepresentations of adoption, how to talk about adoption, as well as the idea that adoptive families can exist in many different ways (e.g., foster care, international adoption, same race adoptions, etc.) It is important that adoptive families and adopted people themselves are not viewed as the only ones who constantly have to teach others about adoption on a more local one-to-one basis; this can be an exhausting, overwhelming, and enormous responsibility. Teacher trainings or continuing education should emphasize greater awareness of diverse family structures as well as how to appropriately and respectfully teach about such in classrooms. School wide interventions can be an efficient way of providing information to the entire school community such as with school assemblies that explain adoptive issues at a developmentally appropriate level (e.g., The Donaldson Institute goes to various schools and discusses adoption issues.) Though microaggressions can be insidious and nebulous, it is also possible to intervene in multiple ways at different levels.

Lastly, an important level of intervention could be in inserting adoption and the concept of diverse families into the national discourse on diversity and multiculturalism more broadly. Because adoptive microaggressions have followed a similar trajectory as other oppressed identities from overt to more covert stigma, it is relevant to include adoptive experiences in the broader context of discussions on diversity. More general and public discourses on diversity often center on larger more public and political identities including race, gender, and

sexual orientation, for example. However, diversity in families and adoption are topics that are rarely acknowledged and often omitted from multicultural frameworks. However, family contexts can greatly influence how other identities are shaped, formed, and discussed. If we begin to intervene by teaching about adoption issues in our classes and trainings on cultural competence and diversity, then adoptive microaggressions and ignorance regarding adoption could diminish as well.

### **Limitations and Remaining Threats to Internal and External Validity**

There are some limitations in this study in terms of both internal and external validity. The study population involved volunteers recruited through adoption agencies. This means the agencies could have chosen families with more positive experiences with adoption. This volunteer status may mean that those in the sample could vary or differ on certain demographic or personality characteristics compared to those who are not in the sample. Perhaps those who chose to be in the sample were more willing or mainly wanted to discuss the positive aspects of adoption, and thus not as many microaggressive experiences will be elicited. Furthermore, the majority of this sample is somewhat homogeneous in that it is mainly composed of White, monoracial, middle class, adolescents raised by heterosexual couples who adopted from agencies. However, for an exploratory study, homogeneity in the sample may be helpful as adding in certain sociodemographic variables may obscure results. In order to add some diversity to the sample, the researchers collected data from adoptees who differed along other dimensions such as religion, U.S. region, and contact with the child's

birth relatives. There is a wide array of states represented in this sample, which will aid in the researchers understanding of if this phenomenon occurs in many different parts of the U.S. Although this sample generally fits the profile of many families that have previously adopted, this trend is changing (Siegel & Smith, 2012). This means that themes found in the current study may not generalize to all types of different adoptive families. For example, it is likely that transracial adoptees will experience microaggressions that are more referent to or more intertwined with their race or ethnicity compared to this all White sample.

Another issue is attrition out of the study. It is possible that those who did not participate in the study during this Wave may have been experiencing more difficulty with adoption during this time compared to those still in the study. Furthermore, it is possible that there may not have been enough substantial engagement (Mertens, 2010) with some adoptees when discussing microaggressions as they could have attrited out of the specific questions about microaggressions. For example, they may have not wanted to discuss teasing or prejudice at length so as to not paint a negative picture of adoption, or perhaps they were not even aware when a microaggression occurred. This begins to tap into the idea of ontological authenticity as described by Mertens (2010), wherein an individual's experience with microaggressions may be limited by their level of awareness about subtle slights concerning adoption. However, this bias would make collecting data more difficult, and thus the estimate of microaggressions found within this study is probably a lower estimate than what exists in reality. Additionally, adolescents may not possess or may not be naturally inclined to

describe and delve into specific and painful emotions related to stigma with a researcher. For example, adolescents may not be practiced or feel comfortable in expressing that they are experiencing feelings of shame or embarrassment when confronted with microaggressions. Although it may be possible to probe for further information about microaggressions with those who feel uncomfortable talking about teasing or ignorance about adoption, the interviews were not created for looking at microaggressions specifically and I did not have access to behavioral cues or verbal hesitations with audio or videotapes. In not being able to view adolescents' reactions, my perceptions of their emotional reactions are limited. The best way to address some of these concerns is to analyze this concept developmentally as oftentimes in MTARP, while participants may opt out of certain questions, they may engage during another wave. Questions looking at this phenomenon are currently being asked of the same adoptees in Wave 4, and thus the relevance of these themes can be further explored at this stage where adoptees may be living in a different cultural context, they may be more developmentally matured, and they may be ready to discuss microaggressions in further detail.

Lastly, although the TACs were asked about experiences with microaggressions and their emotional reactions to such, they were not pointedly asked about the intensity level of each behavior. Although coders in this study underwent a rigorous process to become consistent in their coding of the intensity levels, it is possible that the TACs may view the intensity hierarchy somewhat differently. Future studies should ask more pointed questions about how TACs

perceive intensity level. Furthermore, although there were many instances of microaggressions found in the current study, defining a microaggression and asking adopted individuals specifically about encounters with microaggressions may also bring important new findings to our attention.

### **Future Research Directions**

Adoptive microaggressions are a relatively new topic of study, and thus further understanding and illuminating the context in which they occur is necessary. Future studies should explore how microaggressions impact the family environment such as communication patterns about adoption and other family dynamics. For example, examining if themes like *Silence* create different outcomes than *In-House Divisions* would increase our insight into how familial context creates, maintains, or extinguishes microaggressive behaviors.

Another example of context that is important to consider is how microaggressions interact with adopted peoples' feelings of adoption over the course of their lives. In the current study, some themes were more frequently related to specific points in adolescence. Over time, teasing by peers may subside and adoption microaggressions may arise in other contexts. Therefore, thinking about microaggressions developmentally may be relevant as adolescent adopted individuals age into adulthood and even start their own families. This developmental period could appear very differently in terms of microaggressions. For example, it would also be informative to study instances when adopted individuals create their families through adoption; do they reenact microaggressions they experienced with their own adoptive families, or are these

forms of communications muted or absent (i.e., are microaggressions transgenerationally transmitted?)

The context of this study was with TACs in same race families. Other adoptive family structures should be investigated to see how microaggressions in transracial, international, foster care, and LGBTQ families may appear. Although there may be some similarities in microaggressions that occur to all adoptive families, other unique variables about each type of adoption may surface so researchers and practitioners can prepare families in the most instructive and relevant ways possible. Additionally, it would be informative to understand if the topic of microaggressions would be aimed more at family composition (e.g., race) versus family structure (e.g., adoption).

Other important practical issues to investigate further are how adoption agencies are discussing microaggressions and other forms of covert discrimination that buttress the stigma of adoption. Although overt forms of discrimination towards adoptive families is diminishing, it is likely that many adoptive families and individuals will experience a torrent of intrusive questions or be the recipients of confused questioning about adoption. Understanding what forms of discussions and what strategies parents use to mitigate microaggressions are the most useful would be a valuable addition to the literature, agencies, and adoptive families.

Other future studies should investigate if adoptive microaggressions are actually related to perceptions of lack of control. As I have suggested, retaining control over their adoptive identities may be meaningful to adopted people for a

variety of reasons. Looking at instances of microaggressions and perceptions of loss of control may be particularly necessary as lack of control is related to other significant psychological and mental health issues.

Lastly, all the TACs were asked to retrospectively recall microaggressions that had previously occurred to them. Thus, difficulty in remembering microaggressions and feeling associated with microaggressions over time could obstruct recalling the actual number of microaggressions and reactions to microaggressions that occurred. In the future, it would be informative to have TACs recall microaggressions in vivo so that their emotional reactions, themes, and number of microaggressions can be more accurately reported and recorded.

Table 1

*Themes of Microaggressions Experienced by Adolescent Adopted Individuals*

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Silence about Adoption	222	35.6
Overly Intrusive Questions	86	13.8
Assumption of Bionormativity	62	9.9
Recurring Confusion/Ignorance	56	9.0
In-House Divisions within the adoptive family	29	4.6
Public “Outing”	28	4.5
Using Adoption	23	3.7
Questioning Authenticity	19	3.0
Unacknowledged Identity Status	19	3.0
Being the Spokesperson for Adoption	16	2.6
Adoptees as Nonnormative	15	2.4
Sensitivity	14	2.2
Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents	13	2.1
Adoptees as Orphans	10	1.6
Other	7	1.1
Negative Societal Portrayal of Adoption	4	<1
No Microaggressions	1	<1



Table 2

*Cohen's Kappas for Interrater Reliability by Microaggression Theme, Intensity Level, Emotional Reaction, and Initiator of Microaggression*

<u>Coding Subject</u>	<u><math>\kappa</math></u>	<u>Qualitative Label*</u>
Microaggression Theme	.72	Substantial Agreement
Microaggression Intensity Level	.54	Moderate Agreement
Emotional Reaction to Microaggression	.51	Moderate Agreement
Person Committing Microaggression	.74	Substantial Agreement

\* All qualitative labels based on Landis and Koch's (1977) guidelines for interpreting kappa values

Table 3

*Frequency, Percentage, Mean, and Median of Microaggressions per Case*

<u># of Microaggressions/Case</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>%</u>
1	152	24.4
2	140	22.4
3	110	17.6
4	82	13.1
5	50	8.0
6	38	6.1
7	25	4.0
8	10	1.6
9	5	.80
10	3	.50
11	3	.50
12	2	.30
13	2	.30
14	1	.20
0	1	.20
Total (n = 624)		
Mean = 3.20		
Median = 3.0		

Table 4

*Adoptive Microaggression Intensity Levels Compared with Sue et al.'s*

*Microinvalidations, Microinsults, and Microinvalidations Conceptualization*

<u>Microinvalidation</u>	<u>Microinsults</u>	<u>Microassaults</u>
Silence*	Sensitivity**	Using Adoption***
Unacknowledged Identity*	Recurring Con/Ignor**	
Questioning Authenticity **	Being the Spokesperson**	
	Intrusive Questions**	
	Assump of Bionormativity**	
	Adoptees as Nonnormative**	
	Public Outing**	
	In-House Division**	
	Neg Stereo Birth Parents***	

\*Low intensity in current study, \*\* Medium intensity in current study, \*\*\*High intensity in current study

Table 5

*Chi Squares for Intensity Level of Microaggression by Microaggression Theme*

<u>Microaggression Theme</u>	<u>Primary Intensity Level</u>	$\chi$
Silence about Adoption	Low	438.03*
Unacknowledged Identity Status	Low	18.11*
Overly Intrusive Questions	Medium	132.72*
Recurring Confusion/Ignorance	Medium	39.25*
Assumption of Bionormativity	Medium	38.74*
Public "Outing"	Medium	34.57*
Adoptees as Nonnormative	Medium	24.40*
Questioning Authenticity	Medium	22.84*
Sensitivity	Medium	22.43*
Spokesperson for Adoption	Medium	21.13*
In-House Divisions	Medium	20.76*
Using Adoption	High	19.39*
Neg Stereotypes about Birth Parents	High	12.15*
Other	Low/Medium/High	4.57
Negative Soc Portrayal of Adoption	Low/Medium/High	.50
Adoptees as Orphans	High/Medium	5.60

\* Indicates significance at  $p = .003$  level

Table 6

*Chi Squares for TAC Emotional Reaction to Microaggression by Microaggression*

*Theme*

<u>Microaggression Theme</u>	<u>Primary Emotional Reaction</u>	$\chi$
Silence about Adoption	Neutral	426.24*
Overly Intrusive Questions	Neutral	89.67*
Assumption of Bionormativity	Neutral	71.26*
Public "Outing"	Neutral	50.21*
Unacknowledged Identity Status	Neutral	38.00*
In-House Divisions	Neutral	23.24*
Sensitivity	Neutral	22.43*
Spokesperson for Adoption	Neutral	21.50*
Recurring Confusion/Ignorance	Neutral	21.14*
Questioning Authenticity	Neutral	18.11*
Using Adoption	Neutral	14.70*
Adoptees as Nonnormative	Neutral	10.80
Other	Neutral	8.86
Neg Stereotypes Birth Parents	Neutral	5.69
Negative Soc Portrayal of Adoption	Neutral	2.0
Adoptees as Orphans	Negative	5.60

\* Indicates significance at  $p = .003$  level

Table 7

*Chi Squares for Initiator of Microaggression by Microaggression Theme*

<u>Microaggression Theme</u>	<u>Primary Initiator</u>	$\chi$
Overly Intrusive Questions	Peers/Friends	212.33*
Recurring Confusion/Ignorance	Peers/Friends	137.71*
Assumption of Bionormativity	Peers/Friends	121.10*
Questioning Authenticity	Peers/Friends	49.42*
Adoptees as Orphans	Peers/Friends	30.00*
Public "Outing"	Peers/Friends	29.43*
Spokesperson for Adoption	Peers/Friends	28.50*
Adoptees as Nonnormative	Peers/Friends	24.73*
Sensitivity	Peers/Friends	23.14*
Neg Stereotypes about Birth Parents	Peers/Friends	20.54*
Silence about Adoption	Adoptive Parents	127.05*
In-House Divisions	Adoptive Parents	72.10*
Using Adoption	Siblings	13.70*
Unacknowledged Identity Status	Nonfamily Adults	19.11*
Negative Soc Portrayal of Adoption	Nonfamily Adults	12.00
Other	All Groups	1.57

\* Indicates significance at  $p = .003$  level

Table 8

*Regression Analysis Summary for Number of Microaggressions and Average*

*Intensity Level Predicting PA Scores*

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	$\beta$	t	<i>p</i>
# of Micro	-.83	.41	-.19	-2.04	.04
Intensity Avg.	-2.84	2.44	-.12	-1.17	.25

## APPENDIX A

### MICROAGGRESSIONS CODEBOOK

#### Themes

\*Each participant's codeno will be recorded with each microaggressive comment we code. Some participants will have multiple comments coded under their numbers.

**(1) Questioning Authenticity-** Other people react with disbelief or willfully reject a person's adoptive status. A person could either exhibit open skepticism concerning whether a person has been adopted, or may express confusion about an adopted person based on the person's own preconceived notions adopted families.

Examples:

"You know, and people are just like, 'oh really, you're adopted?' Because like yes, I mean, now-a-days, you know, adopted children are usually of a different culture. Or something like that, and you know, I'm just, pure white, just like my parents, and, they're like, and I kind-of look like my dad, too. So, they just kind-of, you know, they're just like, 'really? Are you kidding me?'"

"[Others] don't believe me when I tell them I'm adopted. [They say] "Yeah, right," and that kind of stuff."

**(2) Sensitivity-** Other individuals approach adopted individuals with the assumption that adoption is automatically a "sensitive," taboo, or difficult subject for the adoptee. Other people may also express pity for the adopted person or assume that the adopted person pities him/herself for being adopted. \*This approach may convey the other person's own discomfort or misconceptions about the topic of adoption.

Examples:

"They, I mean the only time that they really happened was when there's like big family problems or if I'm having like a really bad day and they're like, "does it have to do with parents?" I'm like "no". Usually we just associate it with parents once they question that you're having a fight with your parents are associated... No, not necessarily, I mean it probably sounds really confusing like they ask if I'm having problems with my parents, but that's only when, they ask, like this has to do with what I don't know if I can say or not. When like things happen and I'm really upset they ask me like you OK with at home, do you want to leave, do you want to do this that and the other, you know."

"I mean, they try, what hurts me the most, is when you say something to it, and then as soon as you say something, they think that you're trying to feel sorry for yourself about it when they're the one who asked the question."



**(3) Unacknowledged Identity Status-** Adopted individuals' adopted status remains unrecognized by others around them and therefore this part of their identity is not validated. This failure to acknowledge can be on individual, group, and societal levels. In the case of this theme, the other person is *unaware* of the person's adoptive status and thus while they may not have any intention to be ignorant of a person's adoption, the adoptive person's identity remains an unacknowledged part of the adopted person. \*An example could be a teacher who unthinkingly gives out the traditional family tree assignment in class.

Examples:

"If they don't care then they, I don't care to tell them because it's a waste of my time and I don't, and I care about people being informed but, I don't care enough to really spend lots of time."

"Well, if they ask, I do [tell them I'm adopted]. But, nobody's really ever asked or anything like that."

**(4) Recurring Confusion or Ignorance Regarding Adoption-** Other individuals continuously misunderstand the concept or process of adoption or express skepticism about the concept or process of adoption despite attempted explanation from the adopted individual. \*This differs from Questioning Authenticity because the skepticism is not concerning whether an individual is adopted or not, rather, it is more about negative outcomes in adoption.

Examples:

"They're, already involved in adoption, I guess, but the majority of them are either skeptic or, yeah, they want to know more about it or, yeah... I don't know, just like, just, yeah in general like, mostly like the open adoption and, you know, how it affects like, having a kid know about the, their adoptive, or their birth parents."

"Well they keep asking. If they don't get it they keep asking...And, so you have to repeat it over and over again before they finally get it and sometimes they don't get it, so. That's pretty much it."

**(5) Being the Spokesperson for Adoption-** Other individuals ask questions to adopted individuals who must become the "spokesperson" for all adoptees. This means that adopted individuals must answer a question about adoption that forces them to sum up the experience of all adopted people. \*This can include being asked to represent adoptees in class.

Examples:

"I used to feel mad, I guess, not, it was kind-of I was mad at the person I was talking to because, they wouldn't understand what I was trying to say, and it wasn't their fault, but they, you know, they'd ask questions like, ..." "How does it feel to be adopted?" "Well, how does it feel not to be adopted?" Because I've been adopted

since I was three days old, I don't really remember sitting in the hospital you know, incubator thing, you know, stuff like that. And it'd make me mad like, "Why do, why are you asking such stupid questions?"

"Whenever they, they know I'm adopted because their parents told them I was. And, they always use me as an example, because my parents are social figures..."

**(6) Overly Intrusive Questions-** Adopted persons often must either field questions about the adoption process, the "adoptee experience," or they are asked personal questions about their history that they cannot answer from other individuals.

Examples:

"Well, the questions that people ask are just so specific, that I just can't answer them, I'm just like I have no idea. Like people will be like, 'Oh, what's your birthmother's birthday?' And I'll be like, 'I don't know.' Or they'll be like, 'how much did she weigh?' Or, I mean, just stuff that I wouldn't, as far as I'm concerned, how would they even think that I could possibly answer these kinds of questions, you know, it's like—"

I don't - I don't know. Well like, if they know already, you know, sometimes they just say, "Well, you know, so, you know, why did, you know, your birth parents give you up?" or, you know, it doesn't bother me, so.

**(7) Negative Stereotypes about Birth Parents-** Adopted persons are either teased about not knowing their birth parents or treated as "defective" or "rejected" due to their adoptive status. Similarly, others may misunderstand or misperceive the relationship between birth parents and the adoptive individual.

Examples:

"I mean I've had really nasty stuff said to me like would like your mom didn't want you and stuff like that, like Monday morning or something like that. I mean I almost didn't go to school once because this guy [name] made up a song about me, it was really a nasty song. I went up there and told him to say it too my face and stuff and he just kind of walked away from me and I pushed him against the wall and then I got sent down to the office, we both got sent down to the office.

"That they say that my birthmother was like really stupid and it's like you don't understand, she didn't, she's trying to do what she thought was better for me. It was better for me that I was put up for adoption, which was hard on her probab-, I know it was hard on her, but it was better for me, and obviously she knew that."

**(8) Adoptees as Orphans-** Adopted individuals are assumed or considered to be orphans or have lived in orphanages. Adopted individuals are also stereotyped to have qualities, lifestyles, or histories of orphans by other individuals holding preconceived notions of adoption.

Example:

“All the time, at school. They think I came (laugh) from an orphanage no matter how many times I tell them, they think so and they call me ‘Orphan Annie’ (laugh), stupid, but- and I thought that end at like, third grade, but it didn’t.”

**(9) Assumption of Bionormativity-** All families are assumed to be biological by other people. Biological familial ties are privileged in terms of how people believe families are and should be formed. This assumption occurs when adoptive families are omitted from discussions about how families are formed or biological families are considered the norm or ideal way to form a family. This can also include the assumption that adoptive individuals’ ties with their adoptive families are not legitimate or “real”. Lastly, this theme can encompass moments where other individuals convey or express the importance of biological ties through the belief that family members should look alike. Bionormativity deals more with how other people believe **families** should be as opposed to how individual adoptees should be (see Adoptees as Nonnormative.)

Examples:

“It comes up a lot in religion classes, because a lot of times, you know, they’re talking about who you came, where you came from, or like, how you were raised. And what I like say, ‘oh I was adopted, you know, but it doesn’t really make a difference.’”

“‘Oh, do you know your real mom?’ ‘Yeah, I live with her.’ ‘Well, no, you know what I mean.’ Kind-of, it’s just there.”

“People, I mean, you know, it just happened this weekend with someone and when I’m with my parents and it happens, it’s like a little joke between us, you know, like my dad and I were like, because my dad is really short, he’s a lot shorter than me and so, if my mom’s not there, he’s like, “Yeah, I have a wife and you know eight foot tall, but we kind-of keep her in the house, she’s kind-of like an odd sight.” You know, stuff like that, and so, I won’t tell if it’s an adult stranger, I don’t tell them all that much. You know, if the discussions really come up because I don’t feel comfortable like, especially around my parents.”

“On the rare occasion, but there’s nothing that really like, sets it off. Maybe, when I go to like, the doctor’s office or any, “Do you have a history of--” and we’re like, “We don’t know, she’s adopted.” You know, and so. I guess that could be a discussion,…”

**(10) Negative Societal Portrayal of Adoption-** Adoption and adoptive individuals and families are portrayed by larger societal institutions and the media in a negative or unfavorable light. This can include film, books, television shows, or news programs that misrepresent adoption.

Example:

“Most people have this thing where like if you were adopted you were a crack baby. It’s wonderful T.V. that’s done this to my generation and their like do you find yourself more perceptive to drugs, I’m like NO-GO AWAY!”

**(11) Adoptees as Non-Normative-** Other individuals perceive adopted individuals as different, strange, dysfunctional, or apart from those of “normal” biological families. Other individuals may also convey discomfort with adoption or adopted individuals through negative body language. This is different than Assumption of Bionormativity because it is on a more personal/individual level (e.g. the expectation that adoptees will be “different,” have behavioral or emotional problems, or are “weird” because they are not biological children.)

Examples:

“I’m adopted, I’m not weird.’ You know.”

“It makes you feel - I don’t think it’s right because it makes me feel that I’m not normal or something, you know, like, I don’t - it’s fine if they had a few questions, but I just want to, you know, have a normal life. It’s not that important.”

“If they ask, I tell them and then they don’t ask a question, they just like, have a funny look on their, to their faces. And they just change the subject or something...So they’ll either just ask a question or just look... if somebody else comes in and talks about it and then, well, or just walk away.”

**(12) Public “Outing”-** Adopted individuals are “outed” or have their adoptive status publicly acknowledged by other individuals. In this case, the control over the disclosure of their adoptive status and adoptive identity lies with other individuals. Adopted individuals may also be asked to publicly identify themselves in spaces with a majority of others individuals.

Examples:

“Well, like, at school, sometimes a friend will tell a friend that I didn’t tell that I was adopted, and they’ll ask me about it and ask what’s like...”

**(13) In-House Divisions-** The adopted individual feels or perceives himself or herself to be unwanted, slighted, or separate from the adoptive family. Slightings can include the adoptive parents not respecting the pace at which adopted individuals would like to discuss adoption, or not giving the adopted individual information about his/her adoption when requested. \*There may be different levels of acceptance by different extended family members or different nuclear family members,

Example:

“Well, sometimes like, my cousins’ parents told them that me and my brother were adopted, and one time my cousin got mad at me, and he said, ‘Well, you really aren’t

my cousin' ... They said that he just, I guess, didn't understand that...I mean, just because we're not their flesh and blood, we were raised to be their cousins."

**(14) Using Adoption-** Adoption is used "against" the adopted person in order to hurt him/her or try to gain an outcome.

Example:

"Everybody's pretty stupid, and he's the one who uses the adoption stuff against me and makes up nasty stuff about it. And thinks it's just something that you can go and get, and cut down someone, and use it against him and then try make up for it the next day. That's not stuff you just go and forgive and forget everybody for just everyday. (cough) And he thinks it is. He doesn't think it's anything big."

**(15) Other-** Any theme that does NOT fit within the above classification.

**(16) Silence-** Other people are aware of an adoptive person's adoptive status but do not speak with the adopted person regarding this identity. The adopted person's adoption is never or rarely spoken about with him/her.

"Well, we don't really, I mean, talk about it like that anymore. When I was younger, we didn't, I don't, we didn't really even talk about it that much then, I don't think. We'd more talk about, like, you know, [name], or something like, we wouldn't say, you know, anything about my adoption..."

### **Level of Intensity/Ambiguity**

Rate on a scale from 1 to 3 how aggressive the comment seems. This includes how "subtle" or how "apparent" the comment may seem.

There are **subtle** forms of invalidation (e.g., invalidation or the absence of an action), **medium intensity** (e.g., slights that were negatively related to adoption), and **high intensity** (e.g., derogation conveying more blatant and derogatory behaviors concerning adoption).

#### **(1) Low Intensity**

Example:

"They don't really talk about it, we don't really avoid the subject it's just like a subject that doesn't come up and when we do, I don't know, we don't talk about it I mean we brush over it I can't think of anything that stands out."

#### **(2) Moderate Intensity**

Example:

Interviewer: “Tell me a little bit about your friends you said that they’re kind of curious they ask you questions.”

Respondent: “Yeah, they think it’s really weird that I don’t know who my birthmom is and they always ask me if I want to know and I say no and they don’t understand that I don’t think it’s necessary. I think it will just complicate things.”

### **(3) High Intensity**

Example:

“That they say that my birthmother was like really stupid and it’s like you don’t understand, she didn’t, she’s trying to do what she thought was better for me. It was better for me that I was put up for adoption, which was hard on her probab-, I know it was hard on her, but it was better for me, and obviously she knew that.”

### **Emotion Reaction to Microaggression**

The emotional reaction of adoptees to microaggression themes can be coded as a **specific** emotion (e.g., they state their reaction as “happy” or “angry”), or a more general emotion.

In terms of **general** emotional reactions, code as **negative** emotional reaction (e.g., anger, sadness, annoyance, alienation, or frustration), **neutral** emotional reaction (e.g., reactions that do not seem all positive or negative such as fine or normal), or **positive** emotional reaction (e.g., happiness, good feelings, or pride).

### **(1) Negative**

Example:

Interviewer: “How do you feel during and after these conversations?”

Respondent: “Sometimes it can just get irritating, I mean it can be so irritating people, they just deny that we’re adopted and it’s just like no, yes I am, and you’re tired of saying, ‘Listen to me I am adopted and you can’t tell me that I’m not and I don’t care but I am.’ It just gets irritating that people and you want them to understand so they can know more about you but they just don’t.”

### **(2) Neutral**

Example:

Interviewer: “How do you feel during those conversations?”

Respondent: "I feel okay. I try to give what - the answer that they want so they can understand it."

Example:

Interviewer: "How do you feel during those conversations? Because they're asking these questions that are pretty out-there?"

Respondent: "I guess I, I can understand why they ask them. I mean, it's, I mean it's no big deal. It never really bothers me at all. I just give them their answers, you know, give them what they want to hear."

### **(3) Positive**

Example:

Interviewer: "How do you feel during and after these conversations?"

Respondent: "I feel good that I've been able to explain more about it to people who have been confused or just any questions about adoption."

### **Person Who Said the Comment**

- (1) Adoptive Parent (Mother)**
- (2) Adoptive Parent (Father)**
- (3) Adoptive Parent (Unspecified)**
- (4) Sibling**
- (5) Extended family member (specify)**
- (6) Friend**
- (7) Peer**
- (8) Person in authority (e.g. teacher)**
- (9) Stranger**
- (10) Family (General)**
- (11) Society**
- (12) Multiple People**
- (13) Birthparent**

**APPENDIX B**

**ADOPTION DYNAMICS QUESTIONNAIRE**

Adapted from Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994

***Positive Affect about Own Adoption Subscale***

1. I think my parent(s) are happy that they adopted me.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

2. I think of my adoptive mother as my real mother.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

3. I think of my adoptive father as my real father.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

4. I'm glad my parent(s) adopted me.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

5. I think my parent(s) would love me more if I were their birth child. (Reverse coded)

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

6. I like the fact that I'm adopted.



1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

7. I feel good that I'm adopted.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

8. Being adopted makes me feel loved.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

9. I feel proud that my parent(s) adopted me.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

10. Being adopted makes me feel special.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

11. Being adopted makes me feel angry. (Reverse coded)

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

*When you were in grades 6, 7, or 8 did the fact that you were adopted...?*

12. Make any difference to you? (Reverse coded)

1	2	3
No	Not Sure	Yes

13. Make you feel good?

1	2	3
No	Not Sure	Yes

14. Make you feel sad? (Reverse coded)

1	2	3
No	Not Sure	Yes

15. Make you feel special?

1	2	3
No	Not Sure	Yes

16. Make you feel angry? (Reverse coded)

1	2	3
No	Not Sure	Yes

17. Make you feel confused about yourself? (Reverse coded)

1	2	3
No	Not Sure	Yes

18. Make you feel loved or wanted?

1	2	3
No	Not Sure	Yes

19. When you were in grades 6, 7, or 8 did you feel good about your family?

1	2	3
No	Not Sure	Yes

20. It hurts to know I was adopted. (Reverse coded)

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

***Negative Experience with Own Adoption Subscale***

1. I get teased about being adopted (omitted for the current study)

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

2. My parent(s) tell me that I should be thankful that they adopted me.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

3. My parents tell me that they can give me back if they want to.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

4. I wish people did not know that I was adopted.

1	2	3	4	5
Not true	Seldom True	Sometimes True	Often True	Very true

5. I get tired of having to explain adoption to people.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree

6. I find it easy to talk about adoption. (Reverse coded)

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree

7. I like to tell people I'm adopted. (Reverse coded)

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree

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