BACKGROUND

- Adoption is a non-normative experience that creates a narrative rupture in an adopted individual’s life course because knowledge of one’s birth origin is absent (Dorow, 2006).
- The birth family is an entity that needs to be integrated into an adoptive individual’s identity (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009).
- The development of an adoptive individual’s identity is defined as “how the individual constructs meaning about his/her adoption” (Grotevant, Dunbar, Köhler, & Esau, 2000).
- Contact and reunion with one’s birth family is an attempt to harmonize the narrative rupture and attain a more cohesive identity.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

- To investigate how adoptees make sense of their life disruption when they narrate reunion with birth relatives?
  - What sense of meanings do adoptees ascribe to their birth origin?
  - What sense of meanings do adoptees attach to the idea of a family?
  - How do adoptees construct their identities within a dual family context (birth and adoptive)?
  - How do adoptees comply and/or resist the dominant narrative that uses biogenetic ties as the basis of the family and identity?

METHODS

- 16 adult international adoptees were interviewed 2008–2013 about their adoption experiences as whole.
  - 4 adoptees were selected for this case study on the basis of their reunion with birth relatives.
  - The adoptees consisted of 3 female and 1 male, aged 21–34 years, and their birth countries were Taiwan (2), Ethiopia (1), Russia (1).
  - In 2014, a second semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted focusing on reunions, post-reunion relationships, and conversations with adoptive parents about the search and reunion.
  - The data were analyzed with a narrative approach with the aim of identifying how the adoptees individually make sense of their life disruption and construct their identities within a dual family context.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS:

Three broad narratives

Narratives of desire and loss justify the adoptees’ various needs for search and reunion with birth relatives and reflect their need to integrate their birth origin in to their identities. One interviewee stated:

“I was so unsure because I didn’t know any clear reason why I was put up for adoption. So this uncertainty may have been the reason I started to find out about my birth family. So there have just been these blank spots that I’ve wanted to fill in.”

Narratives of belonging to a family were characterized by various meanings being attributed to similarity, care and relationships within adoptive and birth families. Additionally, these narratives were characterized by consideration of what makes a family. One participant reflected:

“I think that the relationship which you have grown up is ultimately what makes a family. However, in some way I try to include them [birth parents] in to my family. So, this family also has some kind of important meaning. However, it is difficult to describe what the meaning is.”

Narratives of harmonizing a narrative rupture describe the different meanings of finding one’s birth origin. These narratives were characterized by the relief of finding one’s birth origin and its meaning for a more coherent identity. One interviewee explained:

“I discovered an enormous amount of information about myself which led to terrible distress. But at the same time I felt a sort of inner peace. You see, I don’t need to be distressed anymore, because my mysterious past has come out. Somehow, everything now feels self-evident or clear.”

CONCLUSION

- The narratives showed how uncertainty about birth origin led the interviewed adoptees to experience uncertainty about themselves.
- Reunion with their birth families gave the adoptees the opportunity to fill the information gap regarding their birth origin as well as to gain a more coherent identity.
- The narratives both complied with and countered the dominant narrative that uses biogenetic ties as the basis of the family and identity.
- The narratives included adoptees’ moral evaluation of family loyalties to one’s adoptive family as well to the birth family.

CONTACT INFORMATION: Maarit Koskinen, Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland maarit.g.koskinen@jyu.fi.