Life Stories of International Romanian Adoptees: A Narrative Study

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Outline

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Rationale

- Communist regime in Romania 1965-1989 -> ban on abortion and birth control, women encouraged to have at least four children

- Following the fall of communism, challenging living conditions attracted international attention – 10,000 children adopted internationally

- A wealth of research has documented the progress of Romanian adoptees up to adolescence (English and Romanian Adoptees Study) – No research in adulthood

- Research has only been quantitative data and the voices of Romanian adoptees are unheard
Media have conjured a public image of Romanian adoptees, yet no research has looked at how adoptees themselves construct their identity.
Method

• **Recruitment:** via social media - support groups/forums for Romanian adoptees

• **10 Participants:** Gender - 9 female, 1 male; age 21-28 (mean 24.7); age of adoption 6 weeks to 8.5 years; geographical spread - 5 USA, 3 UK, 1 Australia, 1 Netherlands

• **Life stories interview:** 3 face to face interviews in the UK; 7 Skype interviews (5 USA; 1 Australia; 1 UK)
Narrative Analysis

- No one method of narrative analysis (Mischler, 1995)
- Drew on several approaches as the analysis progressed:
  1. Summary stories/ participant checking and editing
  2. Transcription/reflective notes
  3. Narrative segments of speech: noted shifts (tone, tense, topic etc.) and content within segments (Weatherhead, 2011)
  4. Core elements of participants’ stories (life chapters, characters, future script etc.) (Crossley, 2000)
- Chapters across narratives centred around identity construction across the lifespan – became the focus of the findings.
Chapter 1: Setting the scene – The adoption story “…let’s face it, it’s a communist orphanage” (Sonya)

• Participants moved between educative and descriptive accounts of the socio-political context of Romania in the 1990s to draw the listener into their story and lay the foundation for subsequent plots.

• Participants told their adoption story as the first chapter, reliant on the stories of others, and later acquired knowledge of Romania as no memories of their own to recall.

• This constructed an identity as a passive item in the adoption process (“it’s like shopping for a baby” – Christina), lacking autonomy
...I was born in 1988 which was the year before the revolution in Romania and then I was adopted in 1990 which was the year after. An American family went to Romania and they got me, I was born in [removed], so just north of the capital...when my father went to get me he had a lot of trouble because, you know, the government the system was sort of, you know was in the middle of being changed so, things were crazy (Caitlin)
Chapter 2: Constructing the self

- Following the adoption story, all participants narrated developing autonomy to navigate their new environment.

- Consistent with previous research (e.g. Rutter et al., 1998) participants described cognitive, developmental and physical delay, however demonstrated a quick ‘catch up’

...I was just in cots so I was a little bit maybe delayed in a sense...and then also, living with...the foster carer um she, like we collected water there was no like running water. So I'd not seen all that. So, when I came here they had like a dishwasher and stuff [laughs] and I'd just stand on the lid, and I broke stuff all the time and I flooded the room, 'cos i'd just leave taps on ‘cos I thought it was just quite cool that water could come out. And, stuff like that. But I think it was a really quick transition of it being fine” (Kate)
Chapter 2: Constructing the self

Constructing the ‘Westernised’ self – “if anyone asked me, I’d be like “oh I’m English” (Kate)

- Learnt English quickly and Romanian “faded away” (Sally)

- Roles of Romanian or adoptee were unavailable to participants, thus participants internalised a Westernised identity based on social roles available to them.

- This was reinforced by others, through messages or symbolically: “when they got me they put American clothes on me” (Caitlin)

- Participants attempted to explore their background and ask questions about Romania – however this was restricted by parents discomfort, inability or unwillingness to answer questions: “the questions I was asking went a bit above their heads” (Gillian)
Chapter 2: Constructing the self

Constructing the self as ‘different’ – “I knew I was from Romania, I knew I was different” (Sally)

• As participants moved into adolescence, peer groups expanded and became more important.

• Participants began to get questioned or teased about their backgrounds and family composition: “...when I say I'm adopted from Romania then all you get is ‘oh cos your parents didn't want you.' I mean, they're really cruel” (Sonya).

• Developed an identity as ‘different’ as they compared themselves to others and there were no Romanians or adoptees in their environment to identify with

• In addition, they realised they did not have the required answers, and became aware of their lack of self-knowledge: “...one of the students asked well if you're here and your family's there, why aren't you with them? And I remember being like, I don't have an answer for that” (Sally).
Chapter 3: Who am I? Quest for self discovery

Search for the self: “I’ve been like crazy searching” (Vienetta)

- Participants went on a quest of self discovery by searching for information about Romania and their backgrounds

- Used media to learn about Romanian culture and the country’s history and social media to connect with other Romanian adoptees

- Six participants had been to Romania and the remaining four described planning to visit. Three participants had met their biological families.

Constructing multiple selves: “It’s kind of like having two separate me’s” (Beatrice)

- Through exposure to Romanian adoptees and learning about their own histories, participants constructed a separate Romanian identity
Chapter 4: Negotiating the selves: “blending the two” (Sally)

- Participants narrated negotiation of the selves.

- For some this was assimilation of Romania and and Westernised selves into one overarching identity: “trying to, you know integrate, you know Romania and such into my life’s a bit, I can’t do without it anymore” (Beatrice).

- Some participants kept the selves separate or hidden – it did not become a large part of their identity

- For others, who did not wish to find their biological families, negotiation was achieved through an ongoing connection commitment to the country

- Overall, participants’ relationship to their identity was important. Despite some challenges with their searching, they continued with hope and the stories were not told with a tone of turmoil or psychological distress.
Clinical Implications

• Guidance for parents on facilitating search process and provision of age appropriate information

• Supporting adoptees with social media to facilitate safe searching for information. Where internet is inaccessible, provision of alternative methods.

• Mindful of the impact of missing information. Potentially a complete absence of information could impact on identity/well-being. Psychological support for making meaning of experiences could be useful

• Training for professionals on a lifespan perspective of international adoption – maintained communication and tailored support encouraged

• Adoption information should be appropriately documented and accessible for adoptees
Limitations and Future Research

• Sole use of social media may have excluded adoptees of differing socio-economic status, cognitive ability and non-English speakers. Also only included narratives of those who used this as a method of identity searching. Future research could recruit participants through different methods.

• Life stories interviews usually take longer than one meeting. Study is limited by a single interview. Future research could focus on identity for further exploration.