Research Proposal using Hermeneutical Phenomenology: A Study of the Experiences of

Trauma in Parents who have Adopted Children with Significant Trauma

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Abstract

This research proposal is to begin a hermeneutical phenomenology study using the six steps outlined by van Manen (2017) to explore and describe the experiences of trauma for parents who have adopted children with significant trauma. The proposal provides background information on the adoption of older children and the effects of trauma. Additionally, a brief history of adoption and the lack of preparation for parents who adopt will be considered as reasons for the traumatization to support the focus of this study. Using a conceptual framework of attachment, interpersonal neurobiology, and the personal experiences of the researcher relevant ways in which they inform this proposed research will be chronicled. The research design is thoroughly planned and described while at the same time allowing flexibility in the structure to adapt to the data as needed. Throughout the research design, trustworthiness will be addressed along with a dedicated section focusing on trustworthiness. Participants will be given an opportunity to share their adoption story with additional questions to draw out deeper meaning and themes.

Introduction

Bowlby (1982) recognized the need for children to have an attachment figure to provide feelings of security. Further, he asserts that when there is maternal deprivation instead of stability, it leads to disadvantaged psychological development. Adoption occurs because of some type of deprivation of not only the mother but often, the entire caregiving network. This loss has an impact on a child's psychological development and depending on the disruption: the timing, severity, and pattern, result in not only increased psychological risk, but physical, cognitive, regulatory, and relational risks as well (Perry, 2014). Trauma symptoms are often paired with other behaviors such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), depression, anxiety, and others (Tedeschi & Billick, 2017). This comorbidity complicates not only life for the children, but also for the caregivers. Cervin et al. (2020) noted links between posttraumatic symptoms of children exposed to trauma and caregiver PTSD and caregiver stress. Further, Riggs (2021) noted the significant impact of trauma-related behaviors that create burdens on foster parents. Similarly, Wilcoxon et al. (2021) reported evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) developing in parents of children whose children experienced just a single-event trauma.

Adoption continues to be an option for providing orphans with family care; however, it is not without costs including additional trauma for both the child and the family (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; Riggs, 2021). Adoption breakdown, disruption, dissolution, and other terms speak to the ending of an adoption placement and a child placed elsewhere (Palacios et al., 2019). When identifying the key factors in these disruptions, they found that older age at placement, exposure to adversity, and behavioral and emotional problems often decreased the success of the

placement. For parents, they identified unrealistic expectations, parent flexibility, and difficulty with attachment as factors that led to increased adoption breakdowns. Finally, poor preplacement preparation and limited postplacement interventions were added factors in ending placements (Palacios et al., 2019).

Purpose of Study

Keeping these factors in mind, this proposal is an effort to conduct a study to explore and understand the experiences of traumatization on parents who adopt children with significant trauma. Adoption is a complex life event for both children and parents. The dance of attachment can be intimidating and for many children feel life-threatening. Children often react with behaviors that seem quite bizarre, but these behaviors have become engrained for their survival (van der Kolk, 2014). For parents, these behaviors can feel life-threatening as well, perpetuating a cycle of wounding (Riggs, 2021).

Numerous studies, both quantitative and qualitative have looked at the trauma of children for those both in foster care and adoptive families (Blake et al., 2022; Brodzinsky, 2022; Emanuel, 2002; Kim, 2022; Srinivas et al., 2015), but very little research discusses the impact of the child's trauma behaviors on the parents. Information on the disruption of adoptions hints at the trauma that parents have experienced, but the direct study of these impacts seems to have little empirical evidence. As such identifying the effects through the qualitative study of the experiences of adoptive parents will be the purpose of this study.

Conceptual Framework

Designing a conceptual framework requires an exploration of the literature, pre-existing knowledge, and my experiences. I believe there are several areas that contribute to the approach

of the design and methodology. First, having reviewed the literature on adoption and trauma, attachment, adoption breakdowns, trauma and shame, adoption support, and trauma and moral injury, a number of items stand out: trauma can bring severe consequences. These consequences impact adoptive families, and adoptive parents often have limited support both before and after adopting. Through the lenses of attachment theory, interpersonal neurobiology, and personal experience, it is easy to see a need for a better understanding of what is happening when children who have experienced significant trauma are adopted into a family.

Attachment theory offers much for understanding these relationships and early child development. When early attachment is disrupted, the consequences can be difficult not only for the child but for his or her caregivers (Blake et al., 2022; Brodzinsky, 2022; Emanuel, 2002; Srinivas, 2015). Additionally, interpersonal neurobiology brings into focus an understanding of brain development, relationships, and feelings of safety and belonging necessary for healthy psychological development (Perry, 2014; Siegel, 2019; Thompson, 2015). Finally, my own experience has shown that adopting a child with significant trauma can have devastating effects. Figure 1 illustrates a preliminary conceptual framework.

Major concepts represented in Figure 1 include:

- Child with Early Trauma: a child who has experienced maltreatment, abuse, neglect, loss of caregivers, etc.

- Attachment Deficits: lack of secure attachment with primary caregivers

- Adoptive Family with Limited Support: a family who adopts without sufficient pre-adoptions preparation and/or little support during and post-adoption

- Child with Survival Behaviors: a child who exhibits behaviors that seem to push

  caregivers away as a means to protect themselves from further hurt

- Felt Safety: the perception that a situation is free of danger that would trigger a defensive

  response

- Moral Injury: actions that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations

- Belonging: a feeling of value and respect in reciprocal relationships (Mahar, 2013)

  The graphic is a representation of my personal experience and those of other parents from my adoption network who also adopted older children with significant trauma histories. As we consider the big picture we begin with children who have encountered trauma and then suffered the loss of their first caregivers. These children often have attachment deficits that lead to survival behaviors. These perplexing behaviors kept them alive in their early environment, but are no longer adaptive in the new setting of an adoptive family. When adoptive families have insufficient pre-adoption training and limited support during and after placement, increased trauma is the result for both parents and children. As this trauma cycle repeats there is difficulty attaching and children have a decrease in felt safety producing more trauma. As time goes on, parents feel shame and begin acting in ways that go against their moral beliefs resulting in moral injury and PTSD. The children feel shame and a lack of belonging, increasing their survival behaviors and potentially developing PTSD as well.

Figure 1
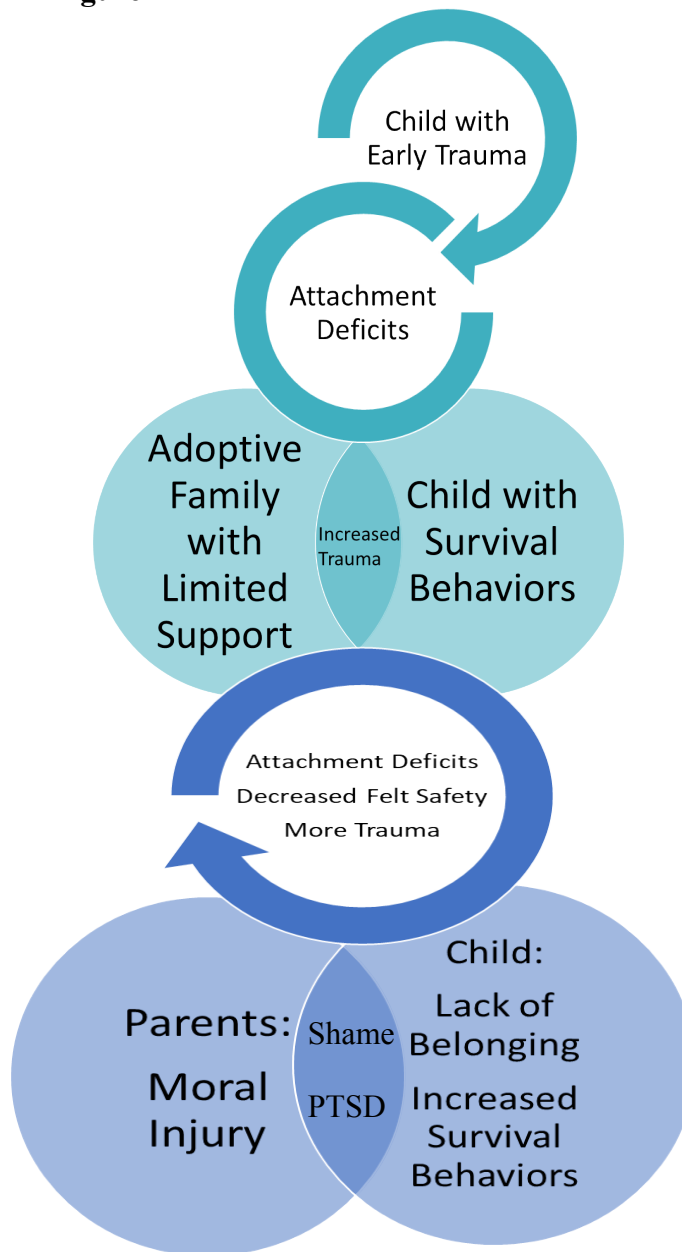
Research Questions

As a hermeneutical phenomenological study, my aim is to discover what the experience of trauma is like as a raw moment, oriented to the meaning arising from the experience of adopting and then parenting children who have experienced significant trauma (van Manen, 2017). This inquiry will be framed in curiosity and wonder looking for the unusualness in the usual to arrive at a place of understanding and insights that are unique and meaningful (van Manen, 2017). There is very little recorded about adoptive parents' trauma, so there is a responsibility to provide a strong foundation for further studies.

As such, the research required will include background and contextual data about the participants to understand and develop a context for the study. Van Manen (2017) recommends an "inceptual process of reflective wondering, deep questioning, attentive reminiscing, and sensitively interpreting the primal meanings of human experiences" (p.819). He also notes that descriptions of lived experiences that include "anecdotes, stories, narratives, vignettes, or concrete accounts" (p. 814) are phenomenological "examples" of the paradigmatic data in the qualitative study.

To collect this data, questions will emphasize topics that will dig beneath the surface and attempt to find multiple views of experiences to help orient the information to living meaning from the experience (van Manen, 2017). Open-ended questions will begin with a request to tell the adoption story from the beginning of their conversation about adoption, through the preparation, and on to the placement and beyond. This question is will hope to begin to shape a framework for the lived experience of the adoptive parents. If needed, additional follow-up questions will be prepared to more fully grasp all of the experiences.

Additional questions such as these that follow can be used:

1. What was your motivation to adopt?

2. What was your experience of the process?

3. What was your preparation level?

4. What if anything did you feel was missing from your preparation?

5. Describe the impact of the adoption experience on your mental health.

6. Describe the impact of the adoption on your relationships (spouse, other biological children, extended family, friendships, faith community).

7. What methods if any, have you used to cope with difficulties?

8. What have you learned about yourselves?

9. How do you feel about the person that you have become?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

Research Methods

Design

A qualitative research design using van Manen's six-step process for hermeneutical phenomenology will be used to explore the experiences of adoptive parents who adopted children with significant trauma. This theory was selected as an appropriate methodology to shift from facts to "being" and connect to what matters by deepening the search into consciousness and self-awareness (van Manen, 2017). To enrich the data as consistent with a phenomenological study, I will be a participant, immersing myself in the data, showing interest and care as I collaborate with the participants in an authentic, transparent way, sharing thoughts and reactions

with them as I focus on their experience to unearth the meaning and representation of their

"being" (Nielson, 2022).

As activities for this study, I will follow van Manen's six steps outlined as aspects of a

process for hermeneutic- phenomenological method (Errasti-Ibarrondo, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

Van Manen (2016) recommends that we commit to a topic that seriously interests us. So with a

topic in mind, the first is to turn to the nature of the lived experience in order to explicate the

assumptions and preunderstandings with an invitation to openness through epoché-reduction

(Errasti-Ibarrondo, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Second, rather than investigating

conceptualizations, the instruction is to gather material essential to the nature of the lived

experience. Third, uncovering thematic aspects in lived descriptions by analyzing reflectively

and writing on these essential themes to characterize the phenomenon (Errasti-Ibarrondo, 2018;

van Manen, 2016).

The fourth step is to engage in hermeneutic phenomenological writing, attending to the

silence and spoken language by borrowing words from participants to describe the participant

experience beyond my own ability with anecdotes and a variety of examples (Errasti-Ibarrondo,

2018; van Manen, 2016). In the fifth step, careful attention is given to the maintenance of the

relation to the phenomenon. By being sensitive to the ultimate purpose with deep and abiding

interest, the writing will allow my voice to be heard while seeking to orient a strong and rich text

(Errasti-Ibarrondo, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Finally, in step six a text is constructed with a

balance of the research context aiming to dialogically provide an argumentative organization in

which the significance of the parts plays a role in the total textual structure (Errasti-Ibarrondo,

2018; van Manen, 2016).

Research Relationships

Using personal experiences is assumed in van Manen's step two, investigating the experience as we live it (Errasti-Ibarrondo, 2018; van Manen, 2016). As such, my relationships are a key part of the research and will be included through writing and reflecting on my personal experiences alongside those of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Further, the relationship with some of my potential participants has been ongoing since my husband and I adopted our sons in 2011. By both experiencing the phenomenon and talking to others with similar experiences, I will have multiple roles in this area.

One of my roles is as a peer who has experienced the trauma of adopting a traumatized older child; another role is that of a mentor or consultant; and then, of course, my role as a researcher will also heavily inform this study. It is important to also note that because of the nature of these prior relationships, there will be a level of confidentiality and disclosure that has already existed. Going forward this confidentiality and self-disclosure will be documented and any prior memories will be included as fits with the study. For those potential participants that have interacted with me in the past, this interaction was almost solely based on our adoption experience, thus limiting peripheral social interactions.

Setting and Participant Selection

Approval from a review board will be sought prior to beginning this research. I will be the sole interviewer. I hope to have a total of eight participants composed of married couples who have internationally adopted an older child with trauma. I will provide a description of the research goals and give them an expectation of what their commitment would include. I will also provide informed consent, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation, the potential

risks and rewards, and referrals for additional counseling should their participation prompt the

need. Additionally, screening interviews will be conducted before making a final selection of

participants.

Data Collection

I intend to conduct as many personal interviews as possible in person. First, I plan to

interview each person individually and then later a second interview with each couple. Follow-up

interviews might need to be done virtually using a confidential secure video format.

Additionally, I intend to use dialogic engagement intentionally after the first set of interviews to

challenge my biases and assumptions and then include this process as research notes included in

the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Further, as Ravitch and Carl (2021) suggest, to improve

accuracy, and crystallization, participants will be given additional opportunities to give feedback

on the ongoing interpretations and descriptions. This process may be repeated through individual

interviews or in a focus group setting. The recursive nature of this study will also determine

additional research questions or further needed dialogue with participants or others (Ravitch &

Carl, 2021) until the experience is refined and clarified for others to truly understand what it is

like to be an adoptive parent of a traumatized child.

Screening Interview

As mentioned previously, there will be a screening interview for potential participants to

include giving informed consent information, a discussion on confidentiality, an overview of the

time commitment provided, and the process of the research explained. They will be assured of

the ethics and cautions used for their protection and the risks and benefits explained. They will

be informed of the use of a pseudonym for collection, outside discussions with others involved in

the research, and publication of what they will share. At all times, they will be assured of their voluntary status and ability to no longer participate in the study with no negative repercussions on them. Permission will be requested for making audio and video recordings of their interviews for transcription.

Questions will be asked to gauge their interest and willingness to engage in deeper conversations to provide the rich, saturated data needed (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Along with interview questions noted earlier, demographic information will be collected including gender, age, marital status, cultural identity, family composition, and potentially other data necessary for a fuller picture of each individual.

Individual Interviews

After the screening interview, participants will be given a short period to process the information and prepare for the individual interviews. Each person will be asked to give a general overview of their experience and then open-ended follow-up questions will help to increase the richness of the data. These follow-up questions will also allow the researcher to explore possible themes or patterns that become evident. Later interviews will focus on reviewing the researcher's analysis allowing the participants to correct, clarify, or add new thoughts since the first interview. Any new material may then be followed with additional clarifying questions.

Couples Interviews

Because the nature of parenting is a team effort, an opportunity to interview the couple together to gain further insights into this aspect of their lived experience plays a role in the research. After individual interviews, couples will be interviewed together to add a deeper

dimension to the lived experience. This process will mirror the individual interviews with opportunities for additional questions, and further interpretive dialogue (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Focus Groups

Participants will follow up their individual and couples interviews with a focus group where they will be encouraged to share only those parts within their comfort level noting the possible confidentiality infringements. This will be an opportunity to collect data missed during individual interviews with the addition of group dynamics and interactions (Ravitch and Carl, 2021). This group can also be used for interpretive dialogue and validating the analysis allowing for group construction of the themes.

Data Analysis

While data collection was step two of van Manen's six steps (2016), steps three through six explain the analysis. Through reflective thinking, and continued writing and rewriting, grasping the essential meaning of the phenomenon and then choosing anecdotes and varied examples to work towards providing experiential structures and themes. Then testing these to determine if they have phenomenological power in the descriptions (Errasti-Ibarrondo, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

Coding

Coding in an objective sense is less desirable for van Manen (2017). Rather than objectifying the meanings or sanitizing them through abstract theories, he sees the challenge of phenomenology as making the "singular" knowable and understandable (van Manen, 2017, p. 814). Using "meaning units" to describe what the lived experience and consciousness "gives itself" by using examples to study, investigate, probe, reflect, analyze, or interrogate (van

Manen, 2017, p. 814). In this way, examples will be highlighted to reflect on while "maintaining a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon" (van Manen, 2016). It is my intention to work to immerse myself in the examples, wrestling, and reflectively writing to extract the lived meaning (van Manen, 2017).

Memo Writing

As this reflexive writing is required, memos will be used extensively to give life to the thoughts and capture the experiences as understood in those moments (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; van Manen, 2017). Memos will include my thoughts and observations, as well as reactions to the interviews. They may also be written on the data collection, the researcher's identity and positionality, the core constructs, ethics, formative data analysis, and others not yet identified (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Memos will allow for the ongoing analysis of the data, as well as for interpretive dialogue throughout the entire research time frame. All memos and other information pertinent to the study will be stored on a password-protected external hard drive connected to my personal computer which is also password protected.

Text Construction

Theory development is already beginning as the literature is synthesized. Further construction of a text will be a continuous process as data is added and reflected upon, then continually refined as new information is obtained (Errasti-Ibarrondo, 2018; van Manen, 2016). This text will contain themes and existential ideas based on the significance of the parts as well as the overall total structure (Errasti-Ibarrondo, 2018; van Manen, 2016). While the text will seek to represent the lived experience of the participants, the construction will be filtered through my interpretation as the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Trustworthiness

As mentioned before, the interpretive dialogue will be used to ensure rich and deep data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Further, van Manen (2016) emphasizes a "strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon" that keeps the researcher accountable for the trustworthiness of the data. With these as well as other details for methods and procedures, trustworthiness will be addressed throughout the research timeline. Researcher bias and reactivity will be transparent through researcher memos that include the values, beliefs, and theoretical framework used as partially explored in this proposal (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Another area that will be addressed is relationships and how the researcher's relationships to participants can be influential and should be addressed in the memos. Because relationship is key and the person of the researcher has a great impact on the ability to collect accurate data, the disclosure of the researcher's personal experience will be part of both the interviews and the included memos to ensure greater transparency and trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Ravitch and Carl (2021) address other areas for increasing trustworthiness including "triangulation, participant validation, strategic sequencing of methods, thick descriptions, dialogic engagement, multiple coding, and structured reflexivity practices" (p.165). Briefly, I will describe the triangulation to be used as methodological in collecting data through various means; theoretical through the use of a range of theories to view the data; and perspectival as I will intentionally and systematically include a range of participant perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The use of member checks as part of the strategic sequencing as well as participant validation can add to the thick descriptions. Dialogic engagements as well will allow for outside perspectives to help inform and shape the understanding and keep it within ethical guidelines.

Finally, structural reflexivity will help not only to keep the complexity and rigor of the study but also seek to inform biases and positionality through active and critical monitoring (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Conclusion

Exploring the lived experience of trauma for parents who have adopted children with significant trauma will be the guiding force of this study. The future of not only these individuals, their children, and their families, but also future adoptive families and children could be impacted through a better understanding of the themes and patterns discovered through this research. There are various studies available to understand the impact of trauma on adoptive children and the impact of trauma on caregivers, but little research details how this combination is lived out. This study hopes to identify and provide insight into the lived experience of the parents and provide an understanding of ways that further research might benefit this population.

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