Chapter Three: Research Methods

The phenomenon of concern in this research proposal is nested within a life juncture of sorts, a point where several channels or layers of life experience converge; each of the path markers is necessary in order to accurately pinpoint or label the phenomenon. The roads leading to this intersection are: adoption plan decision-making in light of an unintended pregnancy, human information behavior with respect to that decision, and informational coping efforts employed to work through both the short-term and long-term repercussions. This juncture is situated within a complex milieu of emotional affect, social norms and stigma, and life-long consequences. As we consider the life road of a woman interrupted as she realizes an unintended pregnancy, we may ask questions such as: what does this interruption mean to her…does she identify this as a full-blown *personal crisis* or more of an added life complexity? Are there options and outcomes she considers or explores? If so, how does she seek out relevant information, what information does she look for, who or what does she consult, how does she process information in relation to her own situation? What sort of pressure does time contribute in the decision-making and information gathering process? What role does her information behavior play in coping with the situation and people around her? Does she share information with other people? If so, how does that work? Post decision and adoption placement, what is her information behavior like? Does she continue to monitor or seek pieces of information? What adoption-related “stuff” does she keep and how does she preserve any selected information, physical or digital documents and/or artifacts? As time moves forward does she maintain a collection of documents or artifacts from the
adoption? Does she spend time with any pieces of information or artifacts as she copes with the situation? Reflecting back on the decision-making and earlier stages of the coping process what information does she identify as helpful? Does she recognize any barriers to information (including incomplete, misleading or inaccurate information)? Has she encountered additional or alternative information that would have been helpful? What role has information played in how she continues to make meaning of the adoption experience? Table 1 organizes these general questions about a birthmother’s experience into three chronological phases: pre-placement decision-making phase, point of relinquishment event phase, and post-placement phase, which stretches out over the lifetime of the birthmother.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision-making phase (pre-placement, prospective birthmother)</th>
<th>Adoption placement event phase (birthmother)</th>
<th>Post-placement phase (short term and long term, on-going)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of crisis level</td>
<td>Documents, artifacts</td>
<td>Reflecting on information behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information gathering regarding options</td>
<td>Decision strategies</td>
<td>Engaging with, curating and preserving information, documents, artifacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information evaluation</td>
<td>Challenges / barriers to information</td>
<td>Crafting the adoption decision narrative (on-going)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information influences (sources, people, media, stories, etc.)</td>
<td>Information sharing</td>
<td>Information sharing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information sharing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on challenges / barriers to information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information sharing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on helpful information</td>
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HUMAN INFORMATION BEHAVIOR, COPING AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF A PERSONAL CRISIS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE VOICES OF BIRTHMOTHERS ON RELINQUISHING A CHILD FOR ADOPTION

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2007) found that “…most women struggling to make decisions about unplanned pregnancies do not have accurate information with which to make an informed choice about whether this [adoption] is a reasonable option for them” (p. 5). Heeding this call to address such a gap and information need, this exploratory study approaches the phenomenon from the vantage of the primary experts, birthmothers themselves, and intends to elucidate their experience of information behavior with regard to the adoption process. Clearly the experience of a woman and her engagement with information during and after the very intimate decision process of relinquishing a child to adoption is a deep and rich context to explore. The complexities of such an experience cannot be adequately captured and fully examined through traditional methods of natural science. Case files, demographics, statistics and survey responses may characterize incidents of adoption, predict decisions, and offer causal explanations for certain outcomes. However it is the human sciences that seek an understanding of lived experiences and the meaning made of it by women in the context of child relinquishment. Looking beyond the quantifiable appearance of adoption, this study aims to explore and expose the subjective experiences and perceptions of individual birthmothers. In sum, this research aims to probe the birthmother decision process and coping process through the lens of information behavior.

The selection of an appropriate research methodological approach is vital in any attempt at scientific inquiry; it frames the questions, units of analysis, sources of data, analysis tools and ultimately undergirds any findings. This research seeks to understand the ways in which birthmothers made (and continue to make) meaning of their experience through child relinquishment, their interaction with information surrounding that decision
and subsequent coping strategies. We begin without benefit of a theoretical model adequate to fit every angle of this phenomenon, no hypothesis to test. Instead this exploratory research will pursue the rich description of the phenomenon with the purpose of gathering in-depth narrations from birthmothers about their own understanding of their experience and behavior.

A qualitative and interpretive design is a logical choice in exploring human behavior with intent to better understand people’s experience within a specific context. Four degrees of understanding underpin qualitative inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1994): ontology: what is the nature of reality? epistemology: what counts as knowledge of the real world? methodology: how can we understand reality? methods: how can evidence be collected about reality? In crafting this research proposal and selecting an appropriate methodological approach with respect to these questions, we reframe these questions of understanding in the following manner. Ontological: What constitutes reality of the birthmother’s world in terms of information behavior both in the pre-placement decision-making process and post-placement? Epistemological: What should we count as knowledge of the birthmother’s world with respect to information behavior? Methodological: Are there means at our disposal for accessing knowledge of the reality the birthmother makes of her world regarding information behavior? Data collection methods: How can evidence be collected of the reality the birthmother makes of her world in light of information behavior?

Phenomenology

Generally speaking the phenomenological approach to inquiry aims to reveal the common threads of meaning attributed to a phenomenon as ascribed by those who have
lived through its experience. The approach focuses on what is experienced and how it is experienced (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Rooted in the philosophical study of consciousness and experience, phenomenological inquiry began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the work of European philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As the study or science of phenomena, phenomenology begins with the examination of things themselves as they appear in our experience, what it is like to find oneself in a particular experience; indeed the descriptions of personal experience are the source of all claims to knowledge (Smith, 2013; Spinelli, 2005). A phenomenological approach is best suited to understanding the nuances and variations in experience across individuals and the meaning they ascribe to the phenomenon (Conklin, 2007; Creswell, 2013). The term lived experience is often applied since lived experiences are those that reveal the immediate and pre-reflective consciousness one has regarding events in which one has participated. In essence the researcher attends to the descriptions of the phenomenon given by participants and through a rigorous process of dissecting the descriptions attempts to discover the essential meanings and interrelationships.

The starting point in investigating our world begins with the experincer or the self and an object outside of the self, specifically consciousness of or experience of something (Sokolowski, 2000). The focal point of phenomenological inquiry is the connection between the “self” and an “object” (people, spaces, time, etc.). Indeed, this intentional relationship between the self and the object is referred to as the phenomenon and is the unit of analysis in phenomenology. Vagle (2014) offers a helpful map of the phenomenology landscape by using prepositions as guides in moving from philosophical
starting points to methodological pathways. To the transcendental or descriptive branch of phenomenology in the vein of Husserl and Giorgi, Vagle assigns the preposition “of” to depict the focus of inquiry on epistemological concerns and form questions such as, “What is the experience of grief?” Methods of transcendental phenomenology involve a deep commitment to description of experiences rather than explanation or analysis in order to retain and illuminate the phenomena (describe, don’t explain). Initial focus is on the data or phenomena of consciousness described directly by the participants in order to stave off leaps to explanation based upon preconceived theories from the researcher. A fundamental principle of transcendental phenomenology is identified as epoché in which we attempt to set aside preconceived ideas and assumptions about things in order to focus on immediate data of experience. Bracketing, bridling, or intentionally trying to suspend preconceptions is a critical component of data collection and analysis in the transcendental style (Cohen & Omery, 2994; Vagle, Hughes and Durbin, 2009).

In the hermeneutic or interpretative branch usually associated with the work of Heidigger, Gadamer, Van Manan and many others, questions become more ontological and Vagle (2014) ascribes the preposition “in” as we study what it is like to be in a certain state of being. An interpretive or hermeneutic approach might ask, “What is it like to find oneself in grief?” As the label suggests, this approach incorporates both descriptive and interpretive components (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011) and leverages a more interactive and dynamic nature on the part of the researcher in both collection and analysis of data (Smith, 2011). Heidegger (1962) rejected to an extent the notion of bracketing so prevalent in the work of his mentor, Husserl, and promulgated the value of engagement on the part of the researcher as a means of knowing
Situating one’s work properly within the formidable phenomenological tradition is a daunting experience. Navigating the numerous variations and flavors of phenomenology forces one to consider carefully and repeatedly the intent and focus of research questions. But at its core, a phenomenological inquiry begins with only three requirements: a phenomenon, individuals willing to describe their lived experience surrounding that phenomenon, and a researcher actively attentive to the commonalities and variations amongst the shared experiences. I am interested not only in the description of the phenomenon but also the meaning that participants make and continue to make of their experience as a birthmother. So I will follow the interpretative or hermeneutic pathway in trying to uncover and bring to light the information behavior embedded in the decision-making and coping experiences of participating birthmothers.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

A fairly recent incarnation of the interpretive or hermeneutic branch of phenomenology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers guidance in designing studies into how people make sense of major and transformative life experiences, matters that are of *existential import* to the participant (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2011). IPA research focuses on the experience of individuals and their reflections on the significance and meaning surrounding it. This aim aligns well with the context and sensitive nature of the phenomenon in this study. Placing a child for adoption is a major decision, a transition of tremendous import; a woman making such a decision is highly likely to spend a considerable amount of time in reflection about the experience, all necessary ingredients for a strong IPA study.
Three theoretical channels undergird and help delineate IPA in the research methodology landscape. 1) It is a qualitative approach concerned with the lived experience of individuals and the meanings they make of their own experiences, thus phenomenological. 2) It requires a process of engagement and interpretation on the part of the researcher (Smith, 2011), therefore tied to an interpretive or hermeneutic tradition. Smith repeatedly describes IPA as double hermeneutic in nature (2004; 1996; Shinebourne & Smith, 2009), it involves a parallel process in which, “The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). 3) IPA is idiographic, tending toward the particular rather than the general, investigating not only the commonalities among individuals but highlighting variance and equivocality across experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Because of this commitment to idiography as well as the intensity level of data analysis, sample sizes in IPA studies are typically small and homogenous in nature (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry, 2011). In-depth, semi-structured interviews are the most common form of data collection and verbatim transcription of each interview is the norm. But additional or supporting streams of data are welcome; examples of additional data in previous IPA work include case notes or files that add context to an interview, field notes and observations from the researcher, diaries or other writing activities generated by participants, and even focus groups (e.g. Flowers, Duncan & Frankis, 2000).

The in-depth semi-structured nature of an IPA interview is dialogical, empowering the participants with a significant role in determining what is said.
Questions or prompts asked of participants are a critical part of the in-depth interview in a phenomenological study (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). The researcher should carefully word each question to ensure it is as open as possible. Questions should never assume anything about the participants’ experience, lead them toward an answer or be closed in any way. Moustakas (1994) identifies two fundamental questions: 1) *What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?* 2) *What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?* It is critical that the researcher assume a stance of dialogical openness meaning the researcher is ready to allow the participant to speak and the researcher is ready to listen. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest researchers prepare an *interview schedule* ahead of time that formulates a loose agenda and identifies questions or topics that *ideally* will be addressed by participants. The interview schedule is intended as a tool for facilitating a comfortable and productive interaction and should include opportunities for participants to move easily between descriptive narration regarding their experience with the phenomenon and a more evaluative or analytic role as they discuss their experience. During an interview the interviewer/researcher works in flexible collaboration with each participant in identifying, describing and interpreting relevant meanings that are used to make sense of the phenomenon (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). The setting of the interview should be carefully selected to ensure comfort. In-person interviews allow for observable nuances of the participants’ experience to be recorded as well. IPA study interviews are audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before the analysis phase.

Personal accounts of the phenomenon as reported by participants make up the primary source for all findings in a phenomenological study (Pringle, Drummond,
McLafferty & Hendry, 2011). Data analysis is directed toward participants’ attempts at making meaning of their experience and so any claims or implications must be rooted in their words; direct quotes from participants are frequently used in analysis reporting.

Following in the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition, IPA also places value on the researcher’s involvement, engagement and interpretation of data through “an intensive qualitative analysis of detailed personal accounts derived from participants” (Smith, 2011, p. 9).

Although there is no strictly prescribed recipe for data analysis in IPA, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) offer several suggestions regarding analysis strategies, heuristic framework, and structure, all undergirded by the clear reminder that analytic attention should center on participants’ attempts to make sense of their experiences. The process is inductive (moving from particulars to the shared) and iterative (moving back and forth between description, reflexive engagement, and interpretation). Each interview and corresponding transcript, field notes and other supporting data are addressed in a consistent fashion, attending to the unique particularities of each case by:

1) **reading and re-reading an interview transcript** (and other supporting data) to become immersed in the data

2) **initial noting** to highlight comments which appear interesting or significant (includes descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments)

3) **developing emergent themes** in a whole-part-whole process; the whole of the interview is parsed into discrete chunks for analysis and then sewn together into a new whole of abstractions and themes
4) **searching for connections across emergent themes** by clustering themes together according to conceptual similarities (may include abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and/or function),

(Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009)

Throughout these phases the researcher focuses intently on the lived experience of participants as expressed in their own words and begins the process of interpretation (by nature a subjective and reflective process). The connections between the primary text (interview transcript) and layers of interpretation must be maintained with vigilance on the part of the researcher (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005).

In an effort to reinforce the integrity of the idiographic nature of IPA analysis, it is important to bracket themes percolating from one interview and not let those influence analysis of a different case; one should try to contain ideas emerging from each individual account as much as possible in this phase of analysis. Adhering to this process in a systematic and rigorous way leaves the researcher open to hear and see new themes and particularities within each account.

Once this process is repeated separately for each interview or case and we have developed exploratory comments and emerging themes from each account, we are ready to look for patterns and variances across cases. This fifth and final stage of analysis involves developing some form of structure that illustrates the relationships between themes. A certain degree of creativity and flexibility is encouraged (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) so that the presentation captures the salient and important aspects of the themes in a satisfactory manner. Shinebourne & Smith (2009) depict this final stage of analysis with particular flair:
The table of themes provides the basis for constructing a narrative account of the interplay between the participant’s account of her experience and the interpretative activity of the researcher. The narrative account contains relevant extracts in the participants’ own words, not only to enable the reader to assess the pertinence of the interpretations, but also to retain the voice of the participant’s personal experience (p. 155).

Crafting the analysis or results section of an IPA project write-up must be approached with careful thought to balance as this section should clearly depict for the reader the lived experience of participants (the P of IPA) as well as the interpretation of the meaning by the researcher (the I of IPA). A strong IPA narrative “represents a dialogue between participant and researcher and that is reflected in the interweaving of analytic commentary and raw extracts” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 110).

Transcript extracts provide the reader immediate access to the data (voices of participants) thus empowering readers to form their own evaluations as they follow the researcher’s analysis and interpretation with a high level of transparency. Some degree of freedom is displayed across published IPA studies in terms of what a results section looks like but it is common to identify themes (usually in some form of hierarchy) and then describe and support each theme with excerpts from interviews. The experiential account of each participant is presented using pseudonyms to an extent sufficient for the reader to follow each story through the analysis. In addition to thematic patterns of similarities across accounts, the idiographic element of IPA accommodates and even highlights variations and complexities within the data so we find results sections carefully describing any unique experiences, ambiguities or paradoxes. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) note that early drafts of IPA studies are often heavy on the descriptive side but
researchers are encouraged to move deeper into the interpretive water with subsequent drafts.

**Rationale for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has been selected to shape this research study for three primary reasons:

1. Information behavior of birthmothers surrounding adoption decision-making and coping processes in present-day society is not well understood generally. IPA is particularly suited to researching such *unexplored territory* through its inductive nature. IPA starts at the phenomenon of interest with no tether to a particular theory or hypothesis. Lived experience of participants is the source of all data. IPA privileges the voices and accounts of individuals intimately familiar with the phenomenon based upon their own personal experience, in this case women who relinquished a child for adoption.

2. Relinquishing a child for adoption is a major life decision, an experience around which a birthmother is prone to spend considerable amounts of time in reflection (pre and post decision). The intensity of the experience along with the life-long impact likely enables a birthmother to recount the experience with the richness of detail necessary for a strong IPA inquiry.

3. The methods of IPA will allow me to construct a detailed picture of the subjective and unique experience of birthmothers that is not possible with a quantitative approach. And unlike some qualitative methods that pursue primarily commonalities in experience, the idiographic nature of IPA empowers me to focus on what is distinct amongst participants’ experiences while also balancing shared themes as
they emerge as commonalities across participants.

Methods

Heeding the call for methodological rigor (Maggs-Rapport, 2001; Flick, 2007) this research proposal aims to describe and justify with utmost transparency the methodological approach, specific data collection methods, and processes of data analysis in pursuit of ‘best research practice’. This section details study procedures including sampling, participant recruiting, data collection and data analysis.

Research Question

How do women who have placed a child for adoption (birthmothers) understand and make sense of the decision-making and coping process with specific regard to their experience with information?

Sample

The participants or key informants for this proposed study are women who voluntarily relinquished a child for adoption and who are willing and able to share their experience in light of their decision-making, coping and information behavior. Criterion purposeful sampling will be used to identify prospective participants. Criterion sampling requires that all cases meet some criterion (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and will be useful in scoping the sample to individuals with some level of commonality in experience as prescribed in IPA study design (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Because this research focuses primarily on interaction with information in the exploration and decision-making process of adoption, it will be helpful if participants have a certain degree of similarity in terms of their experience and opportunities for access to information. The child relinquishment event should have occurred within the previous
fifteen years corresponding with significant online information and supporting technology saturation. Anonymous, autonomous, and free/inexpensive Internet search tools became pervasive in most sectors of U.S. society by the year 2000 with more than 50% of American adults reportedly using the Internet at least occasionally (Pew Research Center, 2014). Although there is no requirement that participants actually consulted online information sources, the assumption is they could have done so easily. Sampling criteria exclude minors (at the time of interview), involuntary relinquishment, international birth/adoption, and non-English speakers.

Birthmothers interested in participating in the study must be willing to share their stories and describe their experiences relating to the process of relinquishing their child for adoption. A preliminary questionnaire will be administered prior to the consent phase to ensure each individual understands and is able to meet the inclusion criteria (see Appendix X).

Criteria for Sample Selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion Criteria</th>
<th>Exclusion Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants are 18 years of age or older</td>
<td>• Transfer of guardianship/parental rights to family member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voluntary relinquishment of one or more children through a formal adoption process</td>
<td>• Temporary—only transfer of guardianship to another adult</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Involuntary transfer of parental rights to a state agency or adopting person</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Adoption process was halted and/or reversed</td>
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<td>Termination of parental rights within the last 15 years (1999 – 2014)</td>
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<td>Birth and adoption of child(ren) occurred in the United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birthmother is fluent in written and spoken English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birthmother is willing and able to share a rich account her child placement experience</td>
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Sample size and recruitment

Recruitment of birthmother participants follows IPA norms toward a small, purposeful and homogeneous sample in keeping with the idiographic focus (Brocki & Wearden, 2005; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest a sample size of 5-6 in order to effectively address the significant volume of data with appropriate depth of analysis. predecessors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPA Studies</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Amount of Contact</th>
<th>Data Analyzed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smith, J.A. &amp; Rhodes, J.E. (2014). Being</td>
<td>What is the first experience of depression like?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, detailed readings of transcription</td>
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<tr>
<td>McNeilly, K.D. (2012)</td>
<td>how they made sense of being from an LGB-led family, particularly within the contexts of school and Canadian society</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 interview 70-150 min (mean 93 min)</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, detailed readings of transcription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aparicio, E.M. (2014)</td>
<td>Experience of teen mothers in foster care</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3 sequential interviews (length not disclosed)</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, detailed readings of transcription, researcher reflexive journal</td>
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Thus I plan to recruit between 6 and 9 birthmothers for in-depth interviews. It is important to remember that this study draws from a limited pool of potential participants; The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2007) estimates 13,000-14,000 women voluntary relinquish a child for adoption each year in the United States. Face-to-face is my preferred format for interview data collection (as opposed to telephone or online synchronous communication) so recruitment efforts will target candidates living within roughly 200 miles of central North Carolina at the time of interview. If this geographic scope hinders recruitment, I am willing to travel further to meet with participants. Recruitment efforts entail sending calls for participation via three channels:

- Email and/or online posting to local and online communities of birthparents (Adoption Triad Dialogue Group; Triangle Adoption Support Group)
- Mass email advertisement to UNC Chapel Hill students, faculty and staff

The text of the call for participation is attached as Appendix X. This method will allow birthmothers to determine their own interest and comfort levels with participating in the study. Participants will make the initial contact with the researcher thus ensuring the privacy and voluntary nature of recruitment. An incentive of $50 gift card will be offered to study participants.

**Ethical Considerations and Privacy of Participants**
Due to the highly emotional and deeply personal nature of placing a child for adoption, subjects in this study may be at risk for emotional distress. In particular birthmothers will reflect on a point in their life many would consider a personal crisis. Although the circumstances surrounding the unintended pregnancy are not the focus here, such an experience is difficult if not impossible to compartmentalize. In addition the act of relinquishing a child to adoption is sure to have a life-long impact on the birthmother – the child is never forgotten and thoughts of regret, guilt and grief are certainly common. Although social stigma surrounding birthmothers and adoption have diminished to some degree in recent years, the experience of placing a child for adoption is still shrouded in secrecy. The researcher is acutely aware of the emotional and personal nature of the birthmother context and will make the comfort, confidence and emotional well being of each participant a primary concern through the following efforts.

1. Voluntary nature of study
   - As individuals consider participation the researcher will verbally recognize and discuss the emotional and sensitive nature of the topic
   - A participant may refuse to answer questions or request to turn off the tape recorder in the interview at any time

2. Non-judgmental nature of study
   - Recruitment and informed consent material expressly assures potential participants that the study is focused only on the information behavior and information needs surrounding the decision-making and coping processes; there are no right or wrong answers; there is absolutely no judgment or
alternative motive regarding adoption, abortion, sexuality, teenage pregnancy, or lifestyle

- If appropriate, the researcher may disclose her own status as a birthmother to assuage any potential self-consciousness on the part of the participant and establish an element of trust

3. **Extent of personal privacy**

- Names, places, and any other details that could reveal personal identity will be omitted from the transcripts; pseudonyms will be assigned to each account/narrative by the researcher

- For the duration of the study, the recordings from the interview will be kept in a secure place (locked/password protected). The audio files will only be heard by the researcher and will be either deleted or destroyed after I have finished transcribing the information and completed the dissertation

4. **Professional mental health and counseling referrals**

- Along with the informed consent document (Appendix X) the researcher will provide each participant a list of professional mental health resources in their local area and encourage them to follow-up with a counselor if any emotional distress is lingering. See sample in Appendix X.

It may be interesting to add a note here reflecting on a pilot study I conducted in 2010 involving conversations with birthmothers (Clemens & Cushing, 2010). Each of the birthmother participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their story; everyday life does not often provide an occasion to talk about such a profoundly personal and deeply meaningful event.
Interview Procedure

Interviews will be arranged at a venue convenient and comfortable for each participant. Locations may include a private conference room on the campus of UNC-CH or public library, a café or coffee shop, a public park, the interviewee’s home or wherever the interviewee indicates they would feel at ease for the discussion. Although I intend and prefer to interview each participant in a face-to-face setting, some interviews may be conducted via telephone depending upon the preference of the participant. Each study participant will be interviewed for approximately 60-90 minutes. The full interview will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by myself. I will ask each participant if they are willing to be contacted in the weeks following their interview for any brief follow-up to clarify their responses (not required for participation).

A pre-crafted interview schedule (Appendix X) will shepherd conversations with participants. This guide is the product of numerous revisions with the ultimate aim to allow participants to tell me “what it is like to live in their personal world” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 61). Questions and prompts were developed to elicit responses that will help me address the overarching research phenomenon: the birthmother experience of decision-making and coping through the lens of information behavior. The interview schedule was developed with key subtopics in mind based upon the chronological process phases identified in Table 1: 1) decision-making pre-placement phase; 2) adoption placement event phase; 3) post-placement phase.

However, in keeping with the inductive epistemology of IPA, the interview guide will be treated as a flexible tool to help facilitate each participant’s ability to tell her own story in her own words. As the interviewer I will be keenly open to what and where each
participant leads our conversation, the priorities and nuances they place on their own story.

In addition to the words of each participant through our largely one-sided conversation, I will ask each birthmother before the interview if she is willing to share any documents or artifacts she identifies as relevant to her experience as a birthmother. For example does she have copies of any of the legal material regarding the adoption or agreements with the adopting parents describing future contact or letters she has crafted for the child or diary material she has written? If participants are amenable to showing me any material I will ask them during the interview to give me a guided tour, explaining the item and what it means to them. This will not entail any content analysis on my part but I may make a field note or take a photograph of the item (with permission) to supplement the interview transcript. The intent behind asking about these types of documents is to foster rich description from participants about their experience and their own interpretation of what information looks like. A guided tour as a means of data collection (for detailed survey of the guided tour see forthcoming Thomson piece) puts the participant in the driver’s seat during an interview, uses an object around which participants purposefully generate rich description (Everett & Barrett, 2012) and may cultivate a more relaxed and immersive experience for both the interviewee and interviewer (Hartel, 2007). Examining and explaining personal documents should provide the participant a concrete artifact about which to share part of her story and perhaps even a welcome break from the cognitive demands of responding to questions and probes.

Immediately following each interview I will transcribe the conversation captured
via the recording device into a Word document. During the transcription process I will assign the participant a pseudonym and eliminate or modify any specific details of a potentially personally identifying nature. I will note any changes or deletions in the text of the transcript, e.g. “name of adoption agency omitted”. Any field notes, memos, photographs or other material related to the interview will be digitized and filed in a corresponding folder labeled with the participant’s assigned pseudonym. All project digital files will be stored on my personal laptop with a back-up copy regularly updated on a separate flash drive, both password protected.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis of all collected data will follow the route outlined in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and described earlier in this chapter. Initially each interview will be addressed separately through a process of deep engagement in order to yield a within-case thematic structure that represents the experiential account articulated by the birthmother in keeping with the idiographic nature of IPA. The specific steps in analyzing each interview are: 1) reading and re-reading the transcript; 2) initial noting yielding descriptive comments, linguistic comments and conceptual comments; 3) developing emergent themes; 4) searching for connections across emergent themes. A working data analysis document *(Appendix X)* will capture the process from original transcript through exploratory comments then to emergent themes for each interview record. The working data analysis document serves as an audit tool of the transition to a more interpretative role of the researcher, tying birthmother’s original words to conceptual labels and themes.

After all interview transcripts and supporting notes have been analyzed
individually I will look for patterns across these cases. This culminating phase of analysis typically results in a table of themes crafted in some sort of hierarchy with super-ordinate themes and nested themes. Direct quotes from participants are included to illustrate the manifestation of each theme and ensure that each theme is actually represented in birthmother accounts (Jarman, Smith & Walsh, 1997). This table of super-ordinate and nested themes displays the rate of topical recurrence amongst participants but ultimately themes are not selected solely on the basis of prevalence (Brocki & Wearden, 2005). In keeping with the idiographic nature of IPA the researcher must be acutely sensitive to both convergence and divergence within the sample and represent this accurately throughout analysis: themes may play out in different ways for individual birthmothers; participants may express vastly different priorities. Indeed this balance between shared and idiosyncratic understandings of a phenomenon based upon the lived experience of participants is a key feature in a quality IPA study (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). I plan to work through this final analysis stage largely “by hand” using notecards identifying themes with corresponding quotes, sticky notes on a large white board to manually arrange and rearrange the comprehensive thematic structure. However I plan to support this manual manipulation of data with digital qualitative software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti. I will import transcript and field note data into the software with a separate file for each participant and code data in parallel to the physical notecards. Analyzing data in this dual analog/digital fashion adds an element of portability to the work, a digital audit trail and an easy way to share the data analysis process.

**Question:** I’m a little on the fence as to whether or not to include this qualitative software element…primarily I want to leave the option of software open in case I feel it
Results

The results section of an IPA study has two aims: 1) to describe to the reader what the data are like by building a detailed picture of the subjective experience of participants (Shinebourne & Smith, 2009); 2) offer an interpretation of the data, address the original research question and illuminate the phenomenon under consideration through an analysis process that is logical, transparent and plausible (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). “Ideally the final narrative should move between levels of interpretation: from rich description through to abstract and more conceptual interpretations” (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 187).

Question: The headers below indicate sections that I am working on – not sure if I need them all for the proposal

Ensuring Quality and Trustworthiness

Researcher Bias and Disclosure

Implications

Limitations of the Study
References


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McNeilly, K.D. (2012). Beyond the ‘bedrooms of the nation’: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of Canadian adolescents with lesbian, gay, or bisexual-identified parents. *Dissertation, University of Toronto (Canada), NR97049*


HUMAN INFORMATION BEHAVIOR, COPING AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF A PERSONAL CRISIS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE VOICES OF BIRTHMOTHERS ON RELINQUIShING A CHILD FOR ADOPTION


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