VIVE DANISH CENTRE OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Known and Unknown Identity:
The Experience of Openness and Identity
among Adult Adoptees

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the relationship between openness and identity among 18 adoptees. Many studies have argued that a high degree of openness is important for the identity formation of adoptees. However, few studies have explored this relationship. Two types of openness (biographical knowledge and communicative openness) are used to categorise the empirical material, making it possible to illuminate how different types of openness influence identity. The findings suggest that there is no direct link between a high degree of openness and positive identity formation. Instead, the relationship appears to be situational and changeable as adoptees come of age.

Introduction

The identity formation of adoptees is a topic that has attracted a great deal of interest in research for many years (Carsten, 2007; Darnell, Johansen, Tavakoli, & Brugnone, 2016; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000; March, 1994). Grappling with the question of identity − the question of who we are, and who others think we are − is not only faced by adoptees. However, there is reason to believe that identity formation is more complex for adoptees than it is for non-adoptees (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant et al., 2000; Jenkins, 2008). This greater complexity is often explained within a framework of openness in adoptions. Having two sets of parents − birth and rearing − and navigating one's position between the two, lacking knowledge of one's biological parents and understanding oneself as an adopted person are all aspects of openness and growing up adopted. These aspects may bring a level of complexity to identity formation that others do not experience (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant et al., 2000). Therefore, many researchers have argued that there is a close relationship between a high degree of openness and the positive identity formation of adoptees (Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006; Berry, Dylla, Barth, & Needell, 1998; Grotevant, 1997; March, 1994). However, very few studies have focused specifically on investigating this relationship in a wide range of adoptees; instead, they often only explore the relationship of adoptees who have had certain experiences of openness. Consequently, this study investigates this question by exploring the relationship between openness and identity among domestic and international adoptees in Denmark.

Adoptees in Denmark

The focus of this study is on adoptees who were adopted by families in Denmark with whom they share no kinship ties or prior relations. In Denmark all adoptions are regulated by the law of adoption. While the total number of adopted children in Denmark from the mid-1980s to the late 2000s has been between 400 and 800 annually, the number has decreased significantly since 2010, with only 89 children being adopted in 2016. Of these children less than 30 children each year are domestic adoptees varying from 6 to 30 children from year to year (Henze-Pedersen & Olsen, 2017). This study includes interviews with both international and domestic adoptees.

Two Dimensions of Openness

From the mid-1970s, several American and Western European adoption agencies started to facilitate an increased level of openness in adoptions (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Reamer & Siegel,

2007). Openness refers to a continuum of different levels of contact between the biological family and the adoptive family (Berge et al., 2006). At one end of the continuum are closed adoptions, characterized by a lack of contact and the exchange of only the most basic information (e.g. the nationality of the child). At the other end are open adoptions, characterized by the direct contact between one or more members of the biological and adoptive families (Grotevant et al., 2008; Wolfgram, 2008). Thus, openness consists of the adoptee's access to *biographical knowledge* – also known as kinship knowledge – either through an exchange of information or actual contact with the biological family (Carsten, 2007; March, 1994).

However, openness is not limited to biographical information – it also includes *communicative openness* (Brodzinsky, 2006; Jones & Hackett, 2007). Communicative openness refers to how members of the adoptive family address and explore the meaning of adoption. This can be expressed in conversations about adoption, and it depends on how comfortable the family members are with talking about the biological family; it also includes potential communication with the biological family. Hence, communicative openness relates to the ability and willingness of the members of the adoptive family to discuss adoption.

Theoretical Framework: Identity and Identification

Identity is one of those concepts – alongside "citizenship" and "tradition" – that has a strong presence as both an empirical phenomenon and a widely used category in social science (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Thus, identity is a concept used both by people in their everyday lives (and therefore reflected in some of the quotations in this paper) and as a theoretical term. The theoretical framework of this paper draws on sociological and anthropological identity theories (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2008; Somers, 1994) that emphasise the construction of identity, thus stressing the processual aspect of the term. Essentialism is an inherent danger in understanding the concept of "identity", i.e. viewing identity as a fixed essence and a reified analytical category (Brodwin, 2002). The problem with essentialism is its static approach, suggesting that identity is fixed and unchanging. To move beyond this and stress the situational and contextual aspects of identity, some scholars have replaced the concept with the term *identification* (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2008). Sociologist and anthropologist, Richard Jenkins, defines identity as a dialectical process of classification:

> As a very basic starting point, identity is the human capacity – rooted in language – to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what'). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on: a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it. (Jenkins, 2008, p. 5)

Identification is an active, on-going process of mapping the social world that is interactional and social (Jenkins, 2008). Thus, identity is not something you "have", but something you "do". It is not an entity that is ever finalized, but a continuous and never-ending process (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). It is this understanding of identity as an active process that forms the basis for the analysis.

Previous Studies on Openness and Identity

Previous studies on openness and identity point to a positive relationship between the two, i.e. a high degree of openness has a positive influence on the identity formation of adoptees (Berge et al., 2006; Berry et al., 1998; Grotevant, 1997; March, 1994). However, very few of these studies have looked specifically into this relationship. Moreover, some are based on a narrow sample of adoptees with specific attitudes towards openness, e.g. adoptees who have searched for their birth families, or adoptees in adoption reunions (Carsten, 2000, 2007; March, 1994). Thus, when identity is used as an analytical focus, it is often only explored for a select group of adoptees who strive for a specific type of openness arrangement. A few studies identify different groups of adoptees with different experiences of arrangements with varying degrees of openness (Berge et al., 2006; Powell & Afifi, 2005; Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004). Still, in these studies, identity is often a by-product of the analysis rather than the primary focus. Therefore, the question of identity is only explored for some, instead of all, of the identified groups of adoptees.

Finally, some studies focus on the influence of openness on specific aspects of an adoptee's identity e.g. adoptive identity by examining the extent to which adoptees reflect on their status as adoptees (see e.g. Grotevant et al., 2000; Horstman, Colaner, & Rittenour, 2016; Le Mare & Audet, 2011; Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011), or their ethnic identity if they are international adoptees (see e.g. Godon, Green, & Ramsey, 2014; Huh & Reid, 2000). Hence, these studies do not apply a holistic perspective to identity, and instead only focus on specific aspects of identity based on predetermined notions of what part of their identity is important to the participants.

In this paper, I explore the relationship between openness and identity among adoptees in Denmark. First, different types of openness are identified within the sample. The categories are then used in the analysis to investigate the contextual nature of identification.

Methods

This paper draws on the qualitative data of a mixed methods study on the upbringing and living conditions of adoptees in Denmark (Henze-Pedersen & Olsen, 2017). The qualitative part of the study consists of interviews with six domestic and twelve international adoptees. In addition, interviews with nine adoptive parents from five families, of whom four families chose international adoption and one chose domestic adoption, were also conducted. Participants were recruited through groups for adoptees and care leavers on Facebook, as well as through a network of acquaintances. The dual recruitment strategy was selected to recruit participants with different experiences of openness, and different preoccupations with adoption. Table 1 presents an overview of the adoptees in this study.

Table 1   Participant distribution based on key variables and number of participants

Theme	Variable	Number of participants
Adoption type	Domestic adoption	6
	International adoption	12
Gender	Female	12
	Male	6
Age	20-29 years	10
	30+ years	8
Place of birth	Europe (including Denmark)	7
	Asia	7
	South America	4
Age at adoption	0-11 months	12
	1-2 years	-
	3-6 years	6

Source: Qualitative interviews.

The majority of the interviews with the adoptees (15) used a life story approach (Atkinson, 1998). This approach is relevant in the study of identity as it provides insight into the identity formation of the participants by allowing the participants to highlight the people and events that have influenced their lives and who they have become. It is important to emphasise that life stories are constructed

through the close interaction of the participant and the interviewer. This interplay influences the life story because (in this case) the life story is told to an interviewer as part of a study on adoption, which can amplify the relative saliency of the adoption aspect (Plummer, 2001). Finally, three adoptees were interviewed as a group to facilitate a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of different degrees of openness (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999).

In addition to the interviews with adoptees, in-depth interviews with a small number of adoptive parents, using a semi-structured interview approach, were conducted. These interviews focused on choosing adoption, family life, being an adoptive parent and the adoptee's school life, friends and leisure. It is important to stress that it was only possible to recruit adoptive parents with a positive experience of adoption and with high levels of communicative openness. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Coding

The two dimensions of openness identified in previous research (biographical knowledge and communicative openness) were used to categorize the adoptees' narratives. The adoptees were placed on a continuum of the two dimensions according to their own descriptions of their access to biographical knowledge and communicative openness during their childhood. Table 2 presents an overview of the degrees of openness identified in this study. Previous research treats the two dimensions separately; however, combining them enables an analysis of the relationship between different types of openness and identity formation.

Table 2 Classification of participants in terms of the two dimensions of openness (biographical knowledge and communicative openness)

		Biographical knowledge		
		High degree of access to biographical knowledge	Development in the degree of access to biographical knowledge	Limited access to biographical knowledge
Communicative openness	High degree of communicative openness	3	2	8
	Development in the degree of communicative openness	-	2	-
	Low degree of communicative openness	-	1	2

Source: Coding of qualitative interviews.

Table 2 shows that most of the adoptees in this study have experienced a high degree of communicative openness. However, most have also experienced limited access to biographical knowledge. The most frequent combination of the two dimensions reflects a group of adoptees with a high degree of communicative openness and limited access to biographical knowledge. In this study, this group is entirely composed of international adoptees. By contrast, all the domestic adoptees have either had access to biographical knowledge or have experienced a development in the degree of their biographical knowledge throughout their childhood (e.g. by meeting one or more biological family members). Only a few have experienced a low degree of communicative openness.

Findings

In the following sections, the relationship between openness and identity is articulated and the experience by the adoptees in their life story narratives is analysed.

Finding the Missing Piece

Several adoptees in this study express having experienced a positive relationship between openness and identity. In particular, they draw attention to the importance of access to biographical knowledge. The following sections elaborate on this specific element, and return to the influence of communicative openness later in the paper.

Most adoptees in this study were only given access to a limited amount of biographical information during childhood (see Table 2). Emily, who was adopted from South Korea, has not only had access to a very limited amount of information about her biological family, but her adoptive family can also be characterized as having a low degree of communicative openness. In her early teenage years, questions about her biological family started to arise. Emily explains that her lack of knowledge has made her feel like she does not know who she is:

> The closedness [of my adoption] gives [me] inner anxiety… I would probably call it an identity crisis. That you don't know where you come from or who you [are]… You know you're from South Korea, but what's the story and why was I abandoned? Are there any papers? And why didn't my mother want me? […] So, it has just created an uneasy childhood and adolescence. A [feeling of] frustration and powerlessness, also. Why can't I just find out, why I am the way I am?

Similar to Emily, other adoptees express a feeling of internal anxiety because of their limited access to biographical information. For Indian-born Maya, she began to raise questions about her adoption when she was around 10 years old. She is part of the most common group of adoptees identified in Table 2: those who were raised with limited knowledge of their biological family, but in an adoptive family with a high degree of communicative openness. Maya explains that she would like to search for her birth mother at some point, as she hopes it will give her a sense of inner peace: "I hope that I will be able to relax, or – how can I put it…? That I won't feel so rootless. That I will know a little bit more about who I am". Hence, these adoptees expect that having more knowledge of their past will contribute positively to their identity formation by giving them a greater sense of who they are today (Carsten, 2007).

Others describe the lack of biographical information as a void, or as a missing piece. An example is Casper, who was adopted from Sri Lanka. In the following, Casper describes a feeling of not knowing who he is – a feeling that arose late in his teenage years:

> This void… For me it is… I think it depends on who you ask, but for me it has a lot to do with the fact that I have been looking for answers. I don't know who… […] I just don't know… About my adoption and things like that. All I can tell people is that I was adopted from Sri Lanka. That's it. It is hard because it is not specific. I would like some more structure, so I can say: "Okay, it's like this and like this and like that".

Casper also grew up with little knowledge of his biological family, but in an adoptive family characterized by a high degree of communicative openness. He describes feeling a void that cannot be filled because of lack of biographical openness. This is also expressed by Camilla, who is a domestic adoptee. Throughout her childhood, her adoptive family was very open about the adoption, and she has also had on-going contact with her biological mother and has knowledge of her biological father. When she was in her early twenties, she started considering searching for her biological father. She explains her feelings as: "The lack of something. Like 'the missing piece'. That is probably why I still think about it – that [I] at some point… Or, that I still hold on to the fact that I would like to find him [her biological father]". Camilla describes a feeling of missing a part of herself – a missing piece that she believes can be found if she ever meets her biological father.

Very few adoptees in this study have met members of their biological families. One of those who have is Colombian-born Michael. Michael's adoptive family has always communicated openly about his adoption and supported his search for his biological mother. Michael met his birth

mother when he was 19 years old. For Michael, the meeting gave him that sense of inner peace that some of the other adoptees seek, and it came from gaining greater clarity about his life story:

> It was definitely to hear my story. I have never had a need to go back and find my [biological] mother… To get [another] mother in that way. […] It has never really been something that I have thought about, and it was… It was actually more to see her. And to be able to put a face on her, and see if we look like each other. Also, to learn about the two years before… What happened the two years before [the adoption], because I can't remember. So my wish was actually that – and that was also what I got out of it.

For Jasper, a domestic adoptee who has acquired more biographical information as he has grown older (although his adoptive family is characterized by a low degree of communicative openness), his meeting with his biological father when he was in his mid twenties clarified his 'real' story: "You fill in the gaps as a child, you know? So I pretended all sorts of things – all sorts of weird things. So, it [the meeting] helped a lot, and gave me some of the right explanations". Hence, for Michael and Jasper, their meetings with their birth parents helped fill in some of the gaps in their life stories.

Searching for the Past – Searching for Yourself

Creating a story can be a way of constructing an identity as it establishes a connection between past events and the present (Friedman, 1992). When the adoptees mention a void, or a missing piece, they describe experiencing a 'fractured' or incoherent life history – for them, 'something' is lacking. The missing piece often concerns information about the time before their adoption, or information about their birth family. For example Colombia-born Maria. She was given very little biographical information growing up, but her adoptive family has been open to talking about her adoption. In the following, Maria explains why she believes that meeting her biological family will give her a sense of inner peace by giving her answers to a range of hitherto unanswered questions. Maria started thinking about these questions in her teenage years:

> I will get a sense of inner peace and I will be able to say: "Okay, this is where I come from; this is why I was adopted. This is why I was placed in care. I have these and these siblings, and they live there." […] Because, I am so confused inside – everyday. Like, I have so many things whirling through my mind because I don't know who I am.

By stressing the importance of "knowing where you come from", or the ability to "hear your story", the adoptees draw attention to the significance of a coherent life story with a clear and unbroken connection between the past and the present. An earlier study on adoption reunions also demonstrated this (Carsten, 2000). In the current study, knowledge of the past helps fill in some of the gaps, which in turn contributes to the creation of an unbroken life story and a coherent identity. Consequently, among some of the adoptees, their expression of identity has a reified ring to it. In these cases, identity is a fixed 'thing' that can be more or less complete. By gaining more knowledge about the past, they believe they can complete their identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Hence, by searching for information about their biological families, or the time before their adoptions took place, the adoptees are also searching for *themselves*. Thus, for these adoptees, knowledge about the past can contribute to their understanding of who they are in the present.

Finding Clarity

Not all of the adoptees in this study shared similar experiences to the adoptees in the previous section. Instead, some shared narratives of closedness having had a positive influence on their identity formation, whilst others explained that different forms of openness have had a negative influence on them and their identities.

Colombian-born Freya has, throughout her childhood, had little knowledge of her biological family. However, her adoptive family has been open to talking about her adoption and has always supported her, e.g. when she wanted to search for her biological family. Because of their communicative openness, Freya describes a high degree of openness in her adoption in general. For Freya, biographical closedness has not entailed an experience of forming her identity around missing pieces: "That part [not having knowledge of her biological family] is not something I have thought so much about – I haven't felt like: 'I am not whole yet because I lack this [knowledge of biological family]'". Unlike some of the other adoptees, Freya does not describe her identity as being incomplete because of a lack of biographical knowledge. Another adoptee who has had a positive experience of closedness is Indian-born Mia. She grew up in an adoptive family that is characterized by a high degree of communicative openness, but has no knowledge of her birth family. She has always known that she was a foundling, and therefore she has known that it is nearly impossible for her to search for information about her biological family. Of this closedness, she says:

The closedness has probably made it easier to come to terms with. Yeah…
There hasn't been anything to go on. There hasn't been anything… So…
Again, you are forced to just come to terms with it somehow. And it sounds
a little harsh, and it's not meant like that, but yeah… It has made it easier to
come to terms with the fact that you can't find your biological mother.

The closedness has made it easier for Mia to accept the lack of biographical information. This positive experience of having clear information – even when that information is a result of closedness – is also expressed by another adoptee, Casper, who previously discussed feeling a void because of his limited biographical information. He explains that he would rather have concrete information than potentially (im)possible information:

Casper: The thing about not being able to relate to something. If we assume
that my biological mother is dead, then I had something I could relate to.
Then I could say: "Okay, she's dead. Unfortunately". But the thing about
not knowing anything. That's frustrating at times.

Interviewer: So it would be easier if you knew she was dead? To know that
there isn't anything to go on?

Casper: For me, definitely. It would be much easier to relate to. […] Not
knowing anything… I don't know if she is dead, alive, has started a family,
what she is doing? Has she left Sri Lanka? Does she still live in Sri Lanka? I
don't know any of these things.

Today, Casper is 20 years old, and in the excerpt he expresses that clear and concrete information would be easier to handle than the unknown. This suggests that the influence of biographical information on some adoptees' identity formation is dependent on the *nature* of the information. In a study on foster children's contact with their biological parents, researchers argue that some foster children who do not have contact with their birth parents sometimes experience a healthier identity formation, as there is no confusion connected to irregular or conflict-ridden contact (Browne & Moloney, 2002). This suggests that the question of openness and closedness in some cases is not about access to biographical knowledge, but has more to do with whether the *information* is open or closed. Thus, information can be open in the sense that it is unbounded and potential, while information can be closed in the sense that it is specific and unambiguous – for Casper and Mia, closed information would be easier to handle and identify with than open in the situations described above.

Selection and Rejection of Biographical Knowledge

In addition to the nature of knowledge as either uncertain or concrete, previous research on kinship also finds that biographical knowledge – or kinship knowledge – in itself is knowledge of a specific nature (Carsten, 2007; Strathern, 1999). Studies argue that when a person learns new kinship information, the information cannot be ignored but will become part of the person's identity formation. In that way, kinship knowledge has impact on identity formation, partly because it is constitutive for identification and partly because it can have a negative influence in cases where a person receives unwanted kinship knowledge. An example of this is Colombian-born Jacob. Today, Jacob is in his thirties. He has grown up with very little knowledge of his birth family, but with a high degree of communicative openness. Even though Jacob has limited biographical knowledge, he says that he does not have a need for more knowledge: "I actually don't think I would want to have a picture of them [biological family], because that would first make the carousel go round". This experience of increased biographical knowledge creating more unease than ease is also demonstrated in the experience of domestic adoptee, Matthew. Matthew has grown up having knowledge of his biological mother, and in an adoptive family with a high degree of communicative openness. On his birth certificate, his biological father is listed as 'unknown', and when asked about his experience with this closedness, he says: "My first thought is actually that it is quite nice, yeah… There is nothing to form patterns of thought on the basis of, and it is very concrete at some level". Thus, Jacob and Matthew both express that knowledge of their biological families could potentially become a disruptive element in their lives, which could inspire (unwanted) ideas about themselves. Here, we see two conflicting tendencies in the material. Where some adoptees feel that the acquisition or *selection* of (more) knowledge about their biological family will have a positive influence on their identity formation, others argue that the absence or *rejection* of biographical knowledge has a positive influence. Thus, rejecting kinship knowledge, or coming to terms with a lack of knowledge, is also a means of constructing one's identity (Carsten, 2007).

Furthermore, some adoptees express that (potential) openness could have a negative influence on their self-perception. Jasper has contemplated meeting his biological father, but has reservations: "What if I contacted him [biological father] and he didn't think I was good enough?" Here, Jasper reflects on the difficulty of his biological father potentially not finding him good enough. If that happened, it could have a negative impact on his self-perception. Similar to Jasper, Camilla has experienced how openness can sometimes be difficult to handle. She has always had a picture of her biological father, and for many years, the picture was on display in her living room.

However, recently Camilla (now in her mid twenties) has hidden the picture from view, as it reminds her of the fact that she has not tried to search for him:

> Before I had a picture on display, but at the moment I have hidden it from view, but that is because… It is probably also the reality of that I haven't done anything about it yet. I feel guilty for myself – not him, because he knows I'm here.

As described earlier, Camilla feels like she is missing a piece of her identity because she does not know much about her biological father. It can therefore seem paradoxical that she feels guilty for not having tried to search for him. For Camilla, the picture and knowledge of her biological father have had a negative influence on her in the sense that she feels bad for not looking for him. Hence, Jasper and Camilla are two examples of how it can sometimes be difficult for adoptees to cope with openness.

Talking About Adoption

When asked about how adoption has been discussed throughout their childhood, most adoptees express that their adoptive families have been willing and open to talk about adoption. Colombian-born Freya says:

> Freya: It [the adoption] has been open. It has been just like asking what we were having for dinner. If you have a question you ask and then you get an answer. I would say it has been very relaxed.
>
> Interviewer: Have your parents brought it up sometimes?
>
> Freya: Yes, my [adoptive] mother is a bit fussy. So she has taken out the photo album and talked for half an hour or an hour or four [hours].

This excerpt is typical for most adoptees in this study. The adoptees explain that their adoptive families have been open and supportive, e.g. by sharing their knowledge of the time before the adoption, by visiting the birth country with the adoptee or helping in the search for information on the biological family.

However, in this study we also have examples of a few adoptive parents who have not been able or willing to talk about the adoption. Characteristic of these families is that the adoptees have experienced the lack of openness as being negative in terms of their identity formation.

Throughout her childhood, South Korean-born Emily has struggled with feeling different, and she expresses that the lack of support from her adoptive parents has made it difficult for her to understand and work through those feelings:

> I've felt a bit alone with the whole thing. I would say. Like… I have probably lacked some sort of support from [my] parents. They have been very pessimistic and naïve and like… They have tried. I can see that now that they have tried. It's like they haven't taken it seriously, like: "There is nothing wrong with you".

Throughout her childhood, Emily felt a lack of support from her adoptive parents to help her understand the adoption and her feelings of otherness. However, it is not just in families with a low degree of communicative openness that talking about adoption can be challenging. Caroline grew up having little biographical knowledge, but in an adoptive family that Caroline describes as having a high degree of communicative openness. In spite of this, when Caroline was 18 years old, she found out that her biological parents were not both from Vietnam, as she had previously believed. Her adoptive mother told her at random that her biological grandparents were born outside of Vietnam, and therefore only her biological father was born in Vietnam. This information held great significance for Caroline, as the origins of her biological parents constitute part of her identity formation. In the following quote, she describes her reaction to the new information:

> Then I said: "Surely, then I have to be a mix between India, Thailand and my father from Vietnam." Then he [adoptive father] said: "No, because you were born in Vietnam." Then I said: "Yes, but my genes must still be from India, Thailand and Vietnam." But my parents would not let go: "Yes, but you're still from Vietnam, so that's where you come from". But for me it means a lot to know… Surely, it has something to do with the way I look… And also to find out… If my mother was actually Indian and my father was from Vietnam, then I am also sort of connected to India.

For Caroline, information about her grandparents' origins constitutes important biographical knowledge, but her adoptive parents did not ascribe the same importance to the information, and therefore had not thought of sharing it.

Other research suggests that communicative openness is not only desirable, but practically essential, for the positive development of adoptees (Jones & Hackett, 2007). In this present study, it also becomes apparent that a lack of communicative openness can complicate an adoptee's identity

formation. However, this does not mean that communicative openness is easy. This is examined in the next section.

The Potential Sharing of Sensitive Information

The adoptive parents in this study all explain that communicating openly about adoption is something they have done for as long as they can remember. Sonya, the mother of two Colombian adoptees, says "It [the adoption] has never been a secret". Philip, who also has two children from Colombia, states:

> We have always been open about those things [the adoption]. We have discussed it around the dinner table and when people have asked us – it has never been a secret any of it […]. We have looked at the adoption papers and our photo albums when they [adoptive children] have felt like it. Ever since they were children. Leafed through these things and talked about it.

The other adoptive parents in this study echo Philip's narrative. However, the interviews suggest that the adoptees can have different needs or wishes for communicative openness. Paula is the adoptive mother of two Indian adoptees. She explains:

> I remember once when Catherine [adoptive daughter] talked a lot about it [finding her biological mother], and she asked [her adoptive brother]: "Don't you want the same, Marcus?", and he said: "I am here. And that's it. So I don't want to talk about it!". He had just made up his mind 'this is what it is, and it won't change. Done!' Like, I don't think it has been too much for him [to talk about], but he just didn't want to probe around in it in the same way as Catherine did.

The example shows that there can be different needs for communicative openness within the same family. For several of the adoptees, it is important for them to be able to talk to their adoptive parents about their adoption, but not all express the same desire (Jones & Hackett, 2007).

Even though the adoptive parents talk positively about openness, it is not always an easy matter. In some families, the adoptive parents have withheld information about the biological family that could be perceived as unsettling – often in order to protect the adoptee. In one of these families, the adoptive mother, Suzanne, explains that the adoption papers describe how the biological father had been violent towards the biological mother and possibly also the children.

Suzanne had never shared this information with her adoptive child, Marlin, but she encouraged her to read the papers as an adult – forgetting about the information that she had concealed from her. She explains:

> Marlin found out [about her abusive biological father] recently, because I…
> I think it was a couple of months ago… She was home, and I asked:
> "Actually, don't you want to see your adoption papers from South Korea?",
> because I thought maybe she wanted to go to South Korea or something. So
> I showed her the papers and I had completely forgotten that it was written in
> the papers, but I didn't want to hide it either, right? And then she said: "No,
> no, no, has he been violent? What is this!" and – it was just too much for
> her.

Other adoptive parents have similar narratives about certain types of information that they have not yet shared with their children. The withheld information concerns new and additional information about birth families that can challenge their children's previous beliefs, or about the conditions in orphanages in their children's birth countries. That some knowledge can be difficult to handle is expressed by Hungarian-born Annie. She grew up with very limited biographical knowledge and in an adoptive family with a low degree of communicative openness. When Annie was in her teens, her adoptive parents told her that they presumed her biological mother had been raped and that Annie was a result of that rape. About her reaction, Annie says:

> "Your mother was probably raped and it was probably the person she
> worked for who did it". I mean, if you don't know then… Like, let it go. It
> is not nice to know because… As a child and even as a teenager – maybe
> you already felt unwanted then. That you weren't a wanted child.

For Annie, the openness was problematic. During her childhood and adolescence, Annie struggled with feeling abandoned, and her adoptive parents' openness served to reinforce that perception. Therefore, Annie would rather that they had kept their assumption to themselves. These examples suggest that closedness in some cases can be an expression of the adoptive parents' caring.

The interviews provide insight into the different considerations involved in talking about adoption. In most families, adoption is a topic that the adoptive parents have found important to address from the time that the adoptee was young. However, the interviews indicate – in accordance with previous research (Brodzinsky, 2006; Jones & Hackett, 2007) – that some adoption narratives have a sensitive nature. Thus, some adoptive parents have different considerations when addressing

the adoption. In some instances, talking about adoption involves talking about or sharing sensitive information, e.g. of a moral nature, social or political conditions in the birth country, or issues of abuse, poverty and abandonment, with the adoptee (Jones & Hackett, 2007). Therefore, communicative openness can be a continuous process that carries on throughout the adoptee's life, taking into consideration their age, needs and adoption history.

Discussion

This paper explores the relationship between openness and identity. Table 3 presents an overview of how adoptees experience this relationship as shown throughout the analysis. Table 3 is comprised of two dimensions – one describing the level of openness (openness or closedness), and one describing how the level of openness influences the adoptees' identity formation (in terms of being positive or negative).

Table 3   Classification of the adoptees' experiences of the relationship between the level of openness and their identity formation

		Level of openness	
		Openness	Closedness
Influence on identity formation	Positive influence	9	5
	Negative influence	9	14

Note: The classifications are not mutually exclusive, i.e. the same adoptee can be placed within several areas of the table.
Source: Coding of qualitative interviews.

In Table 3, what is important is not how many accounts are found in each area, but how it shows the variation in the adoptees' experiences of the relationship between openness and identity. Table 3 shows that there is a predominance of narratives in which the adoptees experience a negative relationship between closedness and their identity formation. Based on previous research, this finding is expected (Berge et al., 2006; Grotevant, 1997), but Table 3 also shows that several adoptees shared narratives describing a negative relationship between openness and identity. However, Table 3 also shows that some adoptees shared narratives that indicate that both openness and closedness can be experienced as being positive.

When closedness is articulated negatively, it reflects experiencing feelings of internal anxiety and rootlessness, while closedness creates a sense of inner peace when it is experienced positively. In the cases where openness is articulated positively, the adoptees explain that it has contributed to clarifying and give them unbroken life stories. However, the analysis also shows that

openness can be associated with troubling thought patterns. Similar results are found in a previous study on adoptive adolescents' feelings on different openness arrangements (Berge et al., 2006). The examples show that most of the identity narratives describe the influence of biographical knowledge on identity formation. According to identity theories, one aspect of identification is that it takes place within relational settings, e.g. through kinship or friendship (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Somers, 1994). What is fascinating is that adoptees' identity formation takes place in relation to two families – birth and rearing (Howell, 2003). In this study, the birth family is particularly present in the narratives, as at different times throughout the course of their lives, many adoptees respond to the selection or rejection of biographical knowledge. Here, the analysis points to some contradicting tendencies. While some experience or believe that biographical knowledge provides or will provide a sense of inner peace, others believe that it either lead or will lead to inner anxiety and confusion. Thus, the meaning that the adoptees ascribe to biographical knowledge in relation to their identity formation is ambiguous.

If we turn our attention to the influence of communicative openness, the narratives are less ambiguous – a result that is also supported by the findings of other studies (Jones & Hackett, 2007; Le Mare & Audet, 2011). Regardless of their family's degree of communicative openness, several adoptees express a desire for (more) biographical knowledge to provide a greater sense of who they are. A study on searches for birth parents finds that searches are often not a result of a problematic relationship between the adoptee and their adoptive parents, but often happens within the context of positively functioning families (Wrobel et al., 2004). Still, other adoptees do not express the same need to search for knowledge of their birth family. In this study, only one example is given that explains how the adoptive parents' communicative openness increased the adoptee's experience of feeling unwanted, thereby negatively affecting their identity formation. Thus, in contrast to the ambiguous narratives on the influence of biographical knowledge on identity, we see a clearer link between communicative openness and positive identity formation.

Furthermore, many adoptees have identity narratives that place them within several areas listed in Table 3, and most fall within two or three areas. Only one type of openness is limited to one area. This concerns the two adoptees who experienced having limited access to biographical knowledge combined with a low degree of communicative openness in their families. These narratives are only found within the area "closedness" with a "negative influence on identity formation". The fact that the adoptees have multiple and conflicting narratives of the relationship between openness and identity suggests that adoptees' experiences of this relationship are

situational and changeable over time (Fisher, 2003). Previous identity theories have sometimes favoured an understanding of a coherent and reified identity, where inconsistent accounts were viewed through a true or false lens, indicating that some narratives were more "true" than others (Hartman, 2015). However, more recent contributions to the research field on identity allow for conflicting narratives to be a legitimate expression of a person's identity. From this perspective, different narratives illustrate that identity is a contextual, dynamic and continuous process, where shifting narratives are unproblematic (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Hartman, 2015). Psychologist Tova Hartman suggests that: "Multiple perspectives may in fact be the natural outgrowth of multiple experiences – that people do not merely speak with a multiplicity of voices, but that they actually *live* within a multiplicity of self" (Hartman, 2015, p. 34, emphasis added). Therefore, the fact that the adoptees have narratives that place them within different dimensions of Table 3 does not mean that one narrative is more true than another. Instead of viewing these inconsistencies as contradictory, they give us a nuanced glimpse into the identity formation of adoptees and illustrate the multiple, situational and conflicting nature of identification.

The analysis indicates that the majority of adoptees in this study have experienced a positive relationship between openness and identity – but it also shows that there are adoptees who have experienced it differently. Several conflicting and ambiguous narratives appear in this empirical material, which does not support the unequivocal assertion that openness has a positive influence on identity formation, and closedness has a negative influence on it (Berge et al., 2006). Therefore, when studying the relationship between openness and identity, it is important to be open to these different experiences and nuances.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to our understanding of the relationship between openness in adoptions and the identity formation of domestic and international adoptees in Denmark. The study adds layers to our understanding of this relationship by combining two dimensions of openness (biographical knowledge and communicative openness). The analysis shows that while some adoptees feel that they are missing an unknown element of their identity – a part that can be uncovered by a higher degree of openness – not all adoptees feel incomplete because of a lack of openness. However, for many adoptees, these experiences are not static, but change throughout the course of their lives and take on different meanings as they come of age.

This study is limited by its small sample. However, the methodological approach that provides a rich data set consisting of detailed life stories compensates for this limitation. This paper touches on a vast area of research on adoption and identity, and contributes by combining two dimensions of openness that have not previously been combined. Furthermore, this paper adds to the existing body of literature by focusing specifically on the relationship between openness and identity, and by basing the analysis on a diverse sample rather than a narrow sample of adoptees with specific experiences of openness. For future research, it would be interesting to focus on the group of adoptees that does not feel that there are "gaps" in their identity, or on adoptees who have positive experiences with different types of openness arrangements, as this group of adoptees is often absent from adoption studies on identity. This could provide us with additional knowledge on how adoptees experience and navigate levels of openness in their adoptions – especially in terms of the selection and rejection of biographical information. In a time when adoption policies are moving toward increasing levels of openness, it is important to build a stronger basis for understanding the relationship between openness and identity among adoptees in a longitudinal perspective.

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