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Adult Adoptees Exploration of Self-Identity Through the Use of Art Therapy

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Adult Adoptees Exploration of Self-Identity Through the Use of Art Therapy:

A Literature Review

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Abstract

Numerous studies have demonstrated that most adoptees do not have enough information to make sense of their biological and cultural background due to the lack of acknowledgment and understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Darnell, Johansen, Tavakoli, & Brugnone, 2017). By reviewing past and current literature, the present paper sought to investigate and bring awareness to the lasting social, emotional, developmental, and psychological effects the adoption process can have on adoptees from birth into adulthood, in addition to the different ways art therapy can aid in facilitating identity exploration and development throughout. Results showed acknowledgment, openness, and integration of biological background and cultural heritage in adoptive families in earlier years of life led to a more cohesive sense of self for an adoptee later in adulthood. Furthermore, the incorporation of arts and creative expressions throughout the process served as a safe and useful mean to support adoptee's exploration of self-identity. Possible research limitations, interferences, and future directions were also discussed.

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Introduction

"Identity cannot be described, explained or categorized…what should be understood is that identity may be strategic, uneven, unstable, fragmented, heterogeneous; always in a process of change, never static, always in the state of 'becoming.'

-Researcher & Author, David Gilbert, 2005

The United States government reported more than 270,000 adoptions throughout the last two decades (US Department of State-Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2019). This number is expected to increase as a result of a rise of same-sex marriages, infertility, and adoption acceptance (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012). This statistic aligns with Corder's (2012) concerns that the adjustment and understanding of adoptees lived experiences are becoming a more significant social issue in the United States. According to Corder (2012), ancestry and ethnicity can shape a person's identity, and the lack of information in this area may be a concern for adoptees. The existing literature around adoptive identity, however, mainly focuses on exploring aspects of identity during childhood and adolescence while minimal research focuses on adoptive identity in adulthood.

Not all adoptees experience psychological distress or maladjustment throughout the lifespan (Robertson, 2001). Results from a study conducted by Darnell, Johansen, Tavakoli, and Brugnone (2017) suggested that some adoptees identify positively with being adopted and as such, come to terms with being adopted through a process of becoming aware of their

differences. Alternatively, some adoptees may not want to acknowledge or pursue exploring their

adoptive identity due to stigma and lack of acknowledgment of their adopted status (Darnell,

Johansen, Tavakoli, & Brugnone, 2017).

The incorporation of art therapy can serve as an effective modality for adult adoptees to

explore and integrate their unique life experiences into their ever-changing identities (Robertson,

2001). Parisian (2015) validated art therapy use amongst adult adoptee population due to arts

ability to serve as an authentic means of personal expression, whereby a client's experiences,

psychological concerns, culture, and worldview can be explored. From this perspective, the

creative process in art therapy serve as a container that allows adoptees to safely and freely

explore feelings related to their adoptive identity that might not be easily conjured by words.

Therefore, the current paper sought to investigate adult adoptees identity development and the

use of art therapy as a tool throughout the process. This literature review further examined and

brought awareness to the lasting social, emotional, developmental, and psychological effects the

process of adoption can have on adoptees from birth into adulthood. Lastly, the author aimed to

explore the ways that adoption was defined in current research and the therapeutic and

psychosocial impacts of art therapy on adult adoptees and their lived experiences.

Literature Review

In order to understand the exploration of self-identity in adult adoptees, one must

understand the personal, political, legal, social, scientific, and human dimensions of adoption

within the United States ("About the Adoption History Project" 2012). According to Rotabi and

Bunkers (2011), approximately one million children have been adopted internationally since the

Second World War (as cited in Richards, 2018). Kavanaugh and Fiorini (2009, p.1) describe

adoption to a be a "legal process in which a child is raised by someone other than his or her biological parents" (as cited in (Corder, 2012). Robertson (2001) similarly defines adoption as "a legal and social process that establishes a new parent-child relationship modeled on genealogical kinship" (p. 74). The nature of the parent-child relationship becomes even more complex as a result of the legalization process of adoption. The legalization of an adoption demands the biological parents, adoptive child, and adoptive parents undergo a two-step judicial process (Farlex, 2005). This process entails the transfer of legal obligation and rights of a child from the biological parents to the adoptive parents (Farlex, 2005). Furthermore, new legal rights and obligations have been created for the adoptee, adoptive parents, and biological parents in closed and open adoptions. As Corder (2012) claims, it is imperative for individuals to understand the distinctions between different types of adoptions as these differences greatly impact the adoptee in how they experience being an adoptee at each stage of life.

While each process of adoption is unique per the individual, family, and circumstance, there is a common understanding and set of policies that constitute each type of adoption within the United States. "Open adoption refers to any adoption relationship between the adoptive family and birth parents in which identifiable information, as well as contact, are shared between both parties" (American Adoptions, 2019). Open adoptions can be helpful in that they allow adoptees the opportunity to build physical and emotional connections with their birth family which can strengthen self-identity (Corder, 2014). Less common these days are closed adoptions. In most cases, closed adoptions involve limited to no contact or shared information between the birth family and adoptive family until the adoptee turns eighteen. As an adult, the adoptee can initiate a search for his or her biological family. Semi-open adoptions are when birth families and

adoptive families do not exchange identifying information and all information is generally sent through an intermediary, such as an attorney or agency (Corder, 2012).

Additionally, adoption in the US can occur either domestically or internationally. Domestic adoption occurs when adoption is completed and legalized within the United States where typically, both parents and child are United States citizens (Adoption Network Law Center, 2019). Differently, intercountry adoption is the process by which an adult adopts a child from a country other than their own through permanent legal means and then brings that child to their country of residence to live with them permanently (US Department of State-Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2019). As stated before, there is a myriad of complex aspects to all adoptions that are specific to each adoption story. Ja Sook Bergquist (2012), however, argues that intercountry adoptees face especially difficult challenges as implicated not only in risking the authentic identity of individual children, but also risking the perseveration of "families of origin, language, culture, and religion" (as cited in Richards, 2018, p. 4).

A study conducted by Chen (2016) used an online survey to examine cross-cultural adaptation and identity formation of international adoptees from the perspectives of ninety-nine adoptive parents over a two-year process. A previous qualitative research study of adult Asian adoptees led by von Bertalanffy (1968) helped to support the methods and findings. The study incorporated both time dimensions (e.g., before, during, and after adoption) and spatial dimensions (e.g., adoptive society and birth country) and included five dependent variables that were studied for analysis. Dependent variables included (a) adoptee's current adaptation to the reality of international adoption, (b) adoptee's positive attitude toward bicultural heritage, (c)

adoptee's proud feeling about bicultural identity, (d) adoptee's interactions with birth culture,

and (e) adoptee's trust in adoptive parents.

Findings demonstrated the influence adoptive parents had on their internationally adopted

child's cross-cultural adaptation. Most importantly, results emphasized the creation and embrace

of a bicultural environment in which the adoptive parent practice the internationally adopted

child's birth culture at home, talk to their child about the adoption and societal prejudice issues,

and encourage their child to ask questions about their birth parents. Chen (2012) suggested that

once a bicultural environment is established in the adoptive family home, the greater the chances

the adoptee will feel positively towards their bicultural heritage and identity, and the higher

probability they will seek out opportunities to interact with their birth culture and develop a

trusting relationship with their adoptive parents. Importantly, data was solely collected from

adoptive parent's perspectives, not from adoptees. Although the results of the study support the

positive effects acknowledging sociocultural, ethnic, and biological domains of adoptees within

adoptive family households had on cross-cultural adaptation and identity formation, studies such

as this limit our understanding of adoptee's perspectives and experiences.

Approaches to Understanding Adoptee Experiences

Historically, adoption practices and policies neglected to consider the thoughts and

feelings of adoptees. Prior to the 1980s, most mental health professionals theorized babies were

born as a "blank slate" without any previous knowledge of the outside world. This approach

suggested an adoptee would most likely not feel the need to seek birth family history and

biological connections if given a pleasurable and loving experience with the newly adopted

family. In other words, because of this theory, many adoption caseworkers and adoptive families

believed that all adoptees would easily assimilate to their adoptive families without

psychological distress or wonderment about their biological history. However, Mahmood &

Visser (2015) assert that growing data on adoptee experiences throughout the lifespan suggests

adopted children may initially experience a sense of comfort for being 'chosen' but gradually

develop a realization of having been adopted, bringing up the possibility of uncertainty and

unanswered questions later in life.

Grotevant, Fiorenzo, and Dunbar (2017) examined a sample of 145 adopted youth as part

of a nationwide longitudinal study to understand the connections between identity and

adjustment of domestically adopted infants in the U.S. Participants in the study were adopted

through a private agency and placed in same-race adoptive families. Adoptees participated in

Waves 2 (W2: adolescent: mean age = 15.7) and 3 (W3: emerging adulthood: mean age = 25.0).

Researchers assessed internalizing and externalizing behaviors by self-reports made by

adolescents (W2) and adults (W3). Further information was collected through the use of

semi-structured interviews, home visit, and online questionnaires. Data analysis found that

adolescent adoptees who had unsettled concepts of their adoptive identity had significantly

higher levels of internalizing problems in emerging adulthood. The results show the importance

of knowing and understanding one's own sociocultural, ethnic, and biological domains before

adulthood as these provide a foundation for understanding the significance and dynamic of other

domains of identity formation later in life.

Existing literature suggests adoptees may have difficulty understanding their adoption

story in all its complexities and therefore, struggle with emotional, psychological, and social

challenges throughout their lives. A study by Horstman, Colaner, and Rittenour (2016)

investigated the connections between communication, identity, and self-esteem by recruiting 143

adult adoptees through online forums, and undergraduate courses at a large Midwestern

university to complete surveys about their adoption experiences. Most of the participants were

adopted 0-6 months of age (n = 81, 56.6%) and were adopted both domestically and

internationally. Researchers discovered that a growing number of adult adoptees often

experience adoption-related issues of unresolved grief, uncertainty, and concerns of

belongingness in the adoptive family when not provided an open dialogue about their adoption.

The study also found a correlation between the lack of open dialogue and self-reports of low

self-esteem. Researchers stressed the importance of using open discussion and acknowledgment

of their adoption within adoptive families as this practice not only provided an outlet for putting

adoption related preoccupations and insecurities to rest, but had important implications for

positive feelings towards self.

McGinnis et al. (2009) validated these findings by proposing that for adoptees "gaining

information about their origins is not [only] a matter of curiosity, but a matter of gaining the raw

materials needed to fill in the missing pieces of their lives and to derive an integrated sense of

self" (p. 50, as cited in Godon, Green, & Ramsey, 2014). Also supporting this belief is Leon

(2002), who comments sharing early information about an adoptee's biological roots could be

readily integrated with their earlier sense of identity, rather than be a traumatic experience when

learning of it later in life. Findings from case studies conducted by Mahmood and Visser (2015)

affirmed that adoptees question circumstances behind their adoption and had questions about

their identity and their sense of belonging either before or entering into adolescence. Authors

suggest adoptive parents have a major role in supporting their adopted child come to terms with

their heritage and help fill these gaps in their identity. Therefore, understanding adoptee's curiosity of their biological roots and search for answers about their state of belonging at a young age should be normalized and supported by all to ensure a greater chance of creating a more secure identity.

Trauma

Generally speaking, trauma can be defined as "a psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing" (What is Trauma? 2017). Licensed clinician, adoption advocate, adoptive mother, and American author Nancy Verrier (1993) proposes that the act of adoption is a two-part, devastating, debilitating experience for the adoptee wherein the first part is the experience of separation and abandonment by the birth mother and second is the experience the child endures with being handed over to strangers. Similarly, Cairns (2013) argue that the act of being adopted should be regarded as a traumatic event in the life of child since it highlights loss and separation with the potential to generate feelings of rejection.

For many adoptees, realizing their life began with a traumatic event wherein they lost all biological ties, specifically with the birth mother, can be challenging to process and create positive meaning from. Subsequently, many adoptees deal with a continued emotional burden of loss and grief. Grieving the loss of birth parents and the many factors for why one was adopted can lead to psychological distress, feelings of not belonging, behavior issues, and perpetual feelings of "differentness." This feeling of "differentness" is especially prevalent among transracial adoptees (TRA). In response to this, Godon, Green, and Ramsey (2014) investigated how different experiences of adult TRAs adopted into White families influence their perception

of their adoptive communities, ethnic identities, and psychological distress or well-being. Researchers used a mixed-methods approach which utilized online surveys and semi-structured interviews. The study sample was comprised of 109 adult TRAs between the ages of 18 and 37 who were asked questions related to identity, community, race, search and reunion, and psychological distress.

Results from the study revealed that most of the TRAs experienced racially-based isolation growing up as well as distress negotiating between birth and adoptive groups. Most of the TRAs viewed their adoption as positive given the negative assumptions they had about the potential fate of growing up with their birth parents. No significant emotional or social distress related to TRAs' desire to search for birth parents were found; however, participants' interview responses shed light on the many challenges and dilemmas adult TRAs faced throughout all parts of their adoption journey. Finally, patterns within the data suggested that direct contact with biological family members enhanced the adult TRAs sense of affirmation and belonging or that a sense of belonging may promoted search and reunion (Godon, Green, & Ramsey, 2014). These results point to the lifelong influence adoption can have on adult TRAs and the importance of acknowledging and interacting with one's biological background before adulthood.

Attachment

Throughout the last decade, there has been a growing number of theories and research on understanding trauma from an attachment point of view (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2011). According to Bowlby (1969), as cited in Mahmood and Visser (2015) attachment is a "deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person across time and space." Similarly, James (1994) acknowledges attachment as "a reciprocal, enduring, emotional, and physical affiliation

between child and caregiver" (p. 2). For children to form a secure attachment, a primary

caregiver must meet the infant's physical, psychological, and emotional needs. If the needs of the

child are met by a primary caregiver, the child will have a secure attachment style and possess

the ability to manage intense feelings or emotions in a positive, healthy way (Mahmood &

Visser, 2015). Without a secure base, a child does not feel safe to freely explore their outer world

and develops problematic schemas and expectations of relationships and interactions (Mahmood

& Visser, 2015). Kalus (2016) asserts that the loss of relationship with the child's primary

caregiver can manifest itself later in life as difficulty establishing close emotional ties, excessive

dependence, or aggressive behavior.

Although no research exists that states all adoptees will experience psychopathology or

attachment issues in their lifetime, the process of adoption represents a risk factor for insecure

attachment in adulthood (Feeney, Passmore & Peterson, 2007). Furthermore, the adoption

process is often long and arduous, sometimes requiring the adoptee to experience multiple

placements with multiple caregivers before settling into their adoptive family. These transitions

ultimately affect the adoptee's ability to form secure attachments, thus, increasing the probability

of psychological distress in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships throughout their

lifetime.

A study conducted by Feeney, Passmore, and Peterson (2007) examined how adoptee

status impacts attachment security as compared to non-adoptees and how attachment security

predicts relationship outcomes. Researchers used a sample size of 144 adults (N = 144) adopted

in infancy and a comparison sample of 133 adults (N = 133) who grew up with their biological

family and asked them to complete two questionnaires over a six-month-long period. The first

questionnaire was taken at the beginning of the study and assessed background variables (e.g.

age, gender, relationship status, etc.), attachment, and parental bonding. Participants then

completed a second questionnaire six months later which measured attachment, relationship

attitude, and relationship functioning. Analysis of the results suggested that adoptees were

overrepresented in the insecure attachment styles (particularly fearful) and expressed greater risk

of forming insecure attachment styles than their comparison participants. This data not only

supports that the attachment perspective is relevant to adoptees, but it also substantiates the

importance of parental bonding for adoptees in childhood as this is a powerful predictor of how

attachment styles develop.

Barcons, Abrines, Brun, Sartini, Fumadó, and Marre (2014) further examined the

attachment pattern of 168 internationally adopted children in Spain. Participants included

adoptees ages 7-11 that had spent a minimum of two years under the care of their adopted

families. Researchers used semi-structured interviews to assess the child's attachment patterns

with family members, friends, and teachers. The assessment covered eight domains including, (a)

coherence, (b) reflective functioning, (c) evidence of secure base, (d) evidence self-esteem, (e)

peer-relationships, (f) sibling relationships, (g) anxieties and defenses, and (h) differentiation of

parental representation. Of the adopted children studied, 58.9% (n = 99) obtained a secure

attachment pattern, while the remaining 41.1% had an insecure attachment pattern. Insecure

attachment patterns were distributed into three categories: 25% (n = 42) insecure-avoidant

pattern, 13.1% (*n* = 22) insecure-ambivalent pattern, and 3% (*n* = 5) disorganized attachment

pattern. Results from this study show insecure attachment patterns were considerably higher than

those of samples in previous studies and that children from Eastern Europe are twice as likely to have insecure attachment patterns than children from other continents.

Identity formation

The humanistic quality of understanding one's self within a social system is necessary to function within society yet serves as a lifelong process of discovery for all. For many, self-identity is constructed and tested from birth until late adolescence and then reshaped throughout the lifespan. For adoptees, limited biogenetic history and wide range of biopsychosocial experiences starting at birth become challenging barriers to identity formation before adulthood. For example, Corder (2014) suggests adoptees must accept having a dual identity, which can be difficult if little is known about the birth parents or if what is known is mostly negative. Furthermore, the development of identity becomes challenging for adoptees as aspects of their histories may be unknown, making it difficult to construct narratives linking the past, present, and future (Friedlander, 2003).

In the field of psychology, theories surrounding the development and constructs of self-identity became popular in the 1950s. Since then, extensive research and scholarship has been published on how one comes to formulate a sense of self. Most commonly accepted and used within the United States are the theories of developmental psychologists Erik Erikson. Erikson theorized that human development occurs through a series of eight psychosocial stages wherein an individual strives to resolve inner psychological conflicts while battling with the conflicting needs of society. For Erikson, he believed one's identity is shaped by how one seeks to improve these conflicts from infancy to adulthood. In like manner, Erikson commented that

self-identity is associated with a person's attempt to figure out who they are, what they value

most, and their place in the world (Kalus, 2016).

Talwar (2010) suggests that identity is a complex set of intersections that are forever

shifting and changing. For adoptees, the concept of identity shaping becomes more complex as

they have to integrate information from two important environments - their biological family and

their adoptive family (Kalus, 2016). Grotevant and McRoy (1990) pose that "lack of access to

facts concerning birth origin, lack of contact with birth families, and, sometimes, compatibility

problems within the adoptive families may provide adoptees with little basis for self-knowledge

and a poor foundation for their identities" (as cited in Robertson, 2001, p. 76). While not all

adoptive identity research claims adoptees have a significantly higher risk of poor self-identity

development, a majority of data confirms that adoptees feel they must make sense of unique

experiences related to adoption compared to non-adopted persons. A review of two qualitative

studies indicates that adoptees are forever building and reconstructing their identities and making

new sense of the multiple worlds they have lived in (not always by choice). Additionally, these

studies revealed common themes develop across adoption narratives.

Richards (2018) used semi-structured interviews with adoptive parents and a creative

journal activity with eleven Chinese female adoptees (aged 5-12) to explore the significance and

creation of familial narratives in intercountry adoptions in England. The creative journal activity

challenged adoptees to illustrate, write, and add photos and other small artifacts about how they

construct their identities and belongingness within an adopted family. Moreover, the study

focused on adoptive parents' compulsion to provide genealogical heritage to their adopted

children. Results from the collected narratives and parents' responses indicated that adoptees'

narratives and their family story are ever-evolving and not fixed because all stories and

experiences of one's biological heritage are co-constructed and influenced by the social and

political context in which they are told. Richard (2018) further suggested these stories ultimately

shape adoptees' identity and their sense of connectedness to the world. Thus, this study aimed to

illuminate the narratives of adoptees and their adopted parents and emphasized further

understanding of how intercountry adoptions are framed by social and political context.

Adding to the current literature on intercountry adoption and identity formation is a study

by Darnell, Johansen, Tavakoli, and Brugnone's (2017). Their qualitative analysis aimed to

explore identity and lived experiences of sixteen adult intercountry adoptees, between twenty

and forty-seven years of age, from a biopsychosocial perspective. Researchers collected data for

a year from semi-structured in-person, online, and telephone interviews. The interviews

consisted of eight open-ended questions that targeted the experiences of being a transnational

adoptee to American parents. Results concluded that intercountry adoptees might experience

various social and psychological struggles when addressing their adoptive identity (Darnell,

Johansen, Tavakoli, & Brugnone, 2017). Moreover, researchers were able to highlight various

support systems that encouraged adoptive identity such as, acknowledging a sense of difference,

processing birthdays, and knowing one's biological history.

Both studies mentioned previously illustrated the complexities of adoptee's experiences

throughout the lifespan and the need for exploratory ways to investigate and understand their

stories and perspectives. Additionally, both articles analyzed the biopsychosocial aspects of

intercountry adoption and how this impacts intercountry adoptees identity. Lastly, both studies

suggested providing adoptees the understandings of their genealogical heritage and the

opportunities to freely examine their complex narratives early on enhance the healthy development of identities across the lifespan.

Art therapy

As stated by the American Art Therapy Association (2017), art therapy is an integrative mental health profession that utilizes active art-making, the creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship. Since the mid-20th century, art therapy in the United States has been a growing field that serves to enrich the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art making. During the creative process, a trained and licensed art therapist utilizes an array of artist mediums and verbal communication to offer the client an alternative outlet for self-expression. The process of self-expression obtained through the use of art therapy fosters self-esteem and self-awareness, improves cognitive and sensory-motor functions, promotes insights, reduces psychological distress, among others (American Art Therapy Association, 2017). To date, art therapy is an inclusive practice that can be utilized with individuals of varying ages, abilities, needs, and backgrounds. Furthermore, it can be used in a variety of mental health settings that offer individual, group, couple, or family support.

Arts-based researchers have indicated art therapy as an effective means of addressing distorted or underdeveloped concepts of self. Sean McNiff (2009), art therapist and arts-based researcher, states, "art can be a powerful meeting point as well as a primary source of identity in itself" (as cited in Parisian, 2015, p. 131). Through the creative process, clients can acknowledge the many aspects of themselves which can lead to further analysis, discussion, and insight. Furthermore, McNiff implies that the creative process allows clients to create a tangible

representation or interpretation of their inner and outer worlds as seen through their artwork.

Another benefit of art therapy as a practice is that it serves as containment of all visual

expression of thoughts and feelings (Heckwolf, Bergland, & Mouratidis, 2014). Thus, the formal

elements of visual expression (e.g. lines, shape, color, composition) become the safe place to

contain symbolic content that can hold deep meaning and intense feelings for clients (Heckwolf

et al., 2014).

Traditionally, psychotherapy consists of a therapeutic relationship created by a dyad

between therapist and client. Heckwolf et al. (2014) noted that the space created between

therapist and client serves as a holding environment which utilizes acceptance, empathy, and

respect as a way to establish a trusting relationship. Uniquely, in art therapy, the therapeutic

experience is expanded to a dynamic space created between the angles of a triad: the artist (the

client), the observer/helper (the therapist) and the "art product" (Goren-Bar, 1997, p. 411).

Utilizing both the client-therapist relationship and artistic creation, art therapy allows for an

alternative exploration of the client's inner world (Parisian, 2015). In comparison to talk therapy

which depends heavily on using words to relay information, art therapy allows clients the

opportunity to process within the silence of art-making. In other words, the artistic creation of

inner thoughts and feelings come first, and words come second. While verbal exchange may or

may not occur, the emphasis is not necessarily upon fostering verbal interactions but instead

focuses on a release of emotions through the sensory experience of engaging with art materials

(McGann, 2006).

An important implication of art therapy is understanding the role of the art therapist in the

therapeutic process. Firstly, the art therapist sets up an environment that invites and supports

genuine investment in the art-making process (McGann, 2006). Art therapists establish this by

offering and supporting clients with the proper art materials that serve both their interest but also

fulfill their individual needs. This process of knowing what the client needs occurs through

continuous, non-judgmental assessments by the art therapist wherein they observe the art-making

process by the client. Secondly, during the creative process, Robbins (1987) believes it is the

duty of the art therapist to hold, organize, and reflect what is being visually expressed by the

client which in return allows the client to play with unresolved polarities and representations to

find new integrations and solutions (as cited in Heckwolf et al., 2014). To do this, the art

therapist becomes a safe and calming presence throughout the entire process who may or may

not facilitate discussion around the art-making process or the artistic creation depending on client

needs. Most importantly, the art therapist sees the creative process and the artistic creation as the

two key areas where clients can depict and make sense of a range of thoughts and emotions.

Art therapy has shown to be an inclusive practice and effective treatment for individuals

that have endured traumatic experiences and are living with various mental health disorders

through promoting expression of all aspects of one's self regardless of background, history, or

presenting symptoms (American Art Therapy Association, 2017). Heckworlf et al. (2014)

suggested that "artwork provides a guide for conscious verbal process where reflection on the art

helps to bring into awareness defended (preconscious) thoughts and feelings for the client" (p.

331). Equally as important, the actual process of art-making allows the client the freedom to

express rejected aspects of themselves that help creates and recreate identity (Beaumont, 2012).

A study by McGann (2006) used art therapy to investigate the effects of societal racism

and intra-family color prejudice in young women of color ages 12-18 struggling with emotional

disturbances at a day treatment program. Besides offering discussion on internalized racial oppression, three case studies were presented which demonstrated art-making as an effective treatment modality for challenging negative self-perceptions. In all the case studies, clients struggled to connect their perceived selves or desired selves to how they looked (e.g. physical characteristics such as eye color, skin color, or the shape of their nose). Over two years, clients engaged in art therapy activities and utilized an array of materials, mainly clay and mixing paints, to encourage exploration of their self-identity. Throughout the art-making process, clients were able to work through negative identifications of their self-identity caused by society racism and intra-family prejudice. Additionally, clients reported the art-making lead to acknowledgment, identification, and empowerment of their ethnic identity. Studies such as this demonstrate how art therapy has been used as an effective therapeutic intervention which allows clients to safely integrate conflicting aspects of self-identity and thus, leads to a sense of empowerment.

With extensive knowledge and training in both the arts and mental health, art therapists can develop and utilize a range of art therapy interventions that serve varying multicultural backgrounds. As Talwar (2010) notes, art therapy is less about interpreting or "accurately" creating an art piece and instead, utilizing artistic expressions as a way to depict, reference, or symbolize a client's unique experiences. Furthermore, art therapy creates a meeting ground for intersectionality, where all the complexities of self-identity are welcome. From this perspective, Parisian (2015) illustrated a long-term case study of a first-generation Filipino adolescent who struggled with identity formation and adjustments. Parisian's (2015) case study shared the

outcomes of using weekly art therapy inventions with the client over a year-and-a-half period in a therapeutic day school.

Additionally, Parisian shared the implementation and process of using art therapy interventions in family therapy with the client and his parents. Data was collected through therapist observations, self-reporting, and parent feedback. Results indicated an increase in awareness and verbal expression through art-making from the client. Additionally, over the year, the client was able to lower the frequency of unhealthy thought patterns which ultimately allowed him to integrate diverse aspects of his identity. By the end of the case study, the client reported an increase in social functioning with peers and family and successfully graduated from school. Despite the small sample size, this study illustrated how useful integrating art-making into the therapeutic work was for the client who was struggling to understand different aspects of his identity. Moreso, the artwork aided in the discussion of his emotional struggles with his parents as it served as a reference for his identified suffering and confusion.

There has also been a growing amount of research the supports the use of art therapy as an effective treatment method for processing trauma. Art therapist Anita Rankin and counselor Lindsey Taucher (2003) saw a need to establish more structured and inclusive methods of addressing trauma symptoms in adult clients using expressive, narrative, explorative, management, and integrative art interventions. Their research focused on using a task-oriented approach to art therapy which incorporated six basic trauma-focused tasks (e.g. safety planning, self-management, telling the trauma story, grieving losses, self-concept, and worldview revision, and self and relational development) as a means to help enhance affective, behavioral, and

cognitive adaptation to trauma. Rankin and Taucher (2003) identified the usefulness of

trauma-focused art therapy interventions as they help:

(1) facilitate expression of current emotional, mental, and physiological states; (2)

produce narration of events, together with feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that occurred

during those events; (3) promote exploration of meaning regarding emotions, thoughts,

behaviors, events, self-perceptions, family dynamics, and other interpersonal relationships

(4) facilitate management of behaviors, self-esteem, affect, stress, physical reactions, and

other symptoms; and (5) promote the integration of traumatic and nontraumatic elements

into life history. (p. 139)

When postulating adoption as a traumatic event, it is helpful to view adoption related

struggles through a trauma-informed lens. Malchiodi (2007) suggests that emotions particularly

stemming from trauma, crisis and loss are hard to articulate, and often words do not seem to

convey their meaning completely. She goes on to state the following:

Because feelings are difficult to relate with words, many people push them inward,

causing depression, confusion, anxiousness, hopelessness, or frustration. Art making can be

particularly beneficial in circumstances where overwhelming or complex emotions need to

be expressed. The process of making art may help people confront emotions, overcome

depression, integrate traumatic experiences, and find relief and resolution of grief and loss.

(p. 133)

Correspondingly, art therapist and adoptive mother Barbara Robertson (2001) believes

that art therapy serves as a container where adoptees can explore fantasies and life experiences

growing up as an adoptee, including both the positive and negative parts. Robertson (2001)

thoughtfully constructed an eight-part art therapy program designed to "provide a structure for

adoptees to tell their life story" (p. 74). In this program, Robertson's art activities help shine a

light on struggles adolescent adoptees face and the complexities involved in identity

development. Robertson (2001) believes a considered art therapy approach can guide struggling

adolescents toward accepting and integrating their adoptive status into a maturing self-concept.

Furthermore, programs such as this propose safe and containing ways for adoptees to make

meaning from their experiences and offer adoptees the freedom to explore the many areas of

their adoptive identity.

Discussion

The concept of identity is unique to every living person. From a young age, humans

begin interacting with the world around them while formulating who they are in response to their

surroundings and experiences. For adoptees, constructing one's life story might be a challenging

task as a result of parts of their past and present might be unknown (Grotevant et al., 2017).

Therefore, for some adoptees, making sense of their relinquishment from their biological kin

turns into a lifelong journey of meaning-making and self-discovery. This literature review aimed

to investigate the development and exploration of adult adoptees' self-identity in addition to the

role art therapy plays in the facilitation of identity development.

In writing this paper, the author viewed the relinquishment of a child from their

biological kin as a traumatic event that sometimes results in a lifelong exploration of making

sense of their adoption, in other words, those early experiences of loss and grief. Therefore, there

was an emphasis on examining and bringing awareness to the lasting social, emotional,

developmental, and psychological effects of the adoption process on adoptees from birth into

adulthood. The separation of adoptees from their birth families and the psychological

homelessness not only contributed to a trauma-like experience but hindered the establishment of

secure attachment that allows them to interact with the outer world freely and safely (Mahmood

& Visser, 2015). In addition, the long arduous complication of the adoption process further

served as a risk factor for adoptees to form stable and secure relationships that resulted in the

increasing probability of inter and intrapersonal psychological distresses due to the amount of

loss and rejections throughout (Feeney, Passmore & Peterson, 2007).

The other salient topic that past and current adoption studies pointed out are the obstacles

and difficulties adoptees faced when it comes to identity formation due to the lack of information

and acknowledgment on their biological and cultural backgrounds (Robertson, 2010). In

response to the issue of adoptee identity development, researches suggested that open

communication and integration of their biological roots and familial history early in the process

help enrich their sense of self and other domains in life (Horstman, Colaner & Rittenour, 2016;

Leon, 2002). Moreover, identities are not only ever-changing and evolving as they are

intersections of life experiences, but also reflect the social and political contexts at the time.

Therefore, researchers also stressed the importance for adoptees to continually investigate,

reconstruct and build their adoption narratives while navigating and making sense of the multiple

worlds they have lived through (Darnell et al., 2017; Richards, 2018).

The author believes that the approach of art therapy is an effective way to support the

exploration of identities for adoptees because they can recognize and analyze the many aspects

of themselves during the creative process then create a tangible interpretation of both their inner

and outer worlds through the artistic representation (McNiff, 2009). Moreover, the incorporation

of arts serves as an alternative mean for the clients to express and interact with their thoughts and feelings that they couldn't verbally or with words (Heckwolf et al., 2014). Art therapy has also shown to be an inclusive practice and useful treatment for individuals regardless of their background, history, or presenting symptoms that have endured traumatic experiences and are living with various mental health disorders through promoting expression of all aspects of their lives (American Art Therapy Association, 2017).

As researchers continue to study and expand upon how adoptees develop self-identity and any challenges related to the adoptive identity, most of the literature to date have focused on how adoption adjustment in childhood and adolescence can impact self-identity but little research has been conducted to explore the unique identity-related challenges for adult adoptees. There's also still a lack of information on ways, approaches, and treatment options to explore adoptive identity. Additionally, there is little existing literature that focuses on using art therapy with persons touched by adoption and even less so on using art therapy with adoptees to explore self-identity. This author found no research or literature on using art therapy as a means to explore adoptive identity in adulthood. Given this, it is clear there is a need for more research on understanding the subjective perspectives of adoptees and what constitutes self identity amongst adult adoptees.

The goal of this paper was to provide readers with a better understanding of adoption practices and how these have the potential to impact adoptees throughout their lifetime. Next, this project aimed to synthesize current research that explores adoptee's perception of self across the life span. Additionally, a goal of the the project was to synthesize the current research and theory as a means of informing evidence-based use of data in clinical practice. The author

considered the potential of art therapy as a viable therapeutic practice that may assist adult

adoptees in a deeper exploration of identity and the development of a healthy sense of self.

Furthermore, this project served as a means to further situate art therapy practices as an

evidence-based practice in research, specifically related to adoptees.

Additionally, there needs to more of an effort in investigating what helps adoptees

formulate and support their ever-evolving self-identity from childhood into adulthood. From an

arts-based perspective, further research should be conducted on utilizing art therapy as an

effective method of making sense of one's background and how this can support healthy identity

formation. More arts-based research will help expand the body of work and further support the

existing information about adoptees, self-identity, and art therapy as a safe and useful tool for

identity issues. Furthermore, the author of this paper is more informed and knowledgeable of the

adversities many adoptees face as a result of the adoption process. The awareness and

understanding she possess motivates her to continue educating herself on this topic, specifically

from the adoptee's perspective. Lastly, this project has lead the author to possess a more

well-informed clinical approach for the future when working with anyone who has been touched

by adoption.

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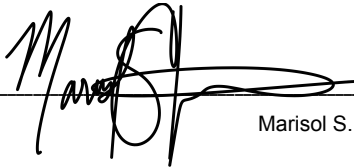**Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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