The Lens Journal
A journal of perspectives for young researchers

Adoptive Motherhood and Maternal Ambivalence: A Qualitative Exploration

Stefania Sigismondi

Abstract

Cultural narratives have long portrayed mothers as perfect, disregarding the intricate nature of motherhood. In reality, motherhood entails a vast array of positive and negative emotions. Maternal ambivalence, the coexistence of conflicting emotions in the mother-child relationship, is a prevalent yet often unacknowledged experience. Although research has investigated maternal ambivalence in biological mothers, the distinct experiences and challenges of adoptive mothers have been overlooked. Thus, this paper aims to explore how the unique experiences of adoptive motherhood influence maternal ambivalence in comparison to biological mothers. This qualitative study examines how the unique circumstances of adoptive motherhood influence maternal ambivalence compared with those of biological mothers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four adoptive mothers who adopted children without congenital abnormalities. Inductive thematic analysis revealed that adoptive mothers encountered specific challenges, including navigating cultural and racial differences, complexities in the adoption process, and preserving heritage and identity for their children. Despite these unique experiences, adoptive mothers expressed maternal ambivalence in ways that paralleled those of biological mothers. Notably, an unexpected theme of gratitude emerged within the thematic analysis. The adoptive mothers conveyed a profound sense of gratitude for the opportunity to become parents—especially those who faced infertility—which may serve as a protective factor in navigating the complexities and ambivalence associated with their journeys. The findings suggest that while adoptive motherhood introduces particular challenges, unique from those of biological mothers, adoptive mothers experience maternal ambivalence similarly to biological mothers. This study expands on the understanding of maternal ambivalence, emphasizing the need for increased societal recognition of the complex realities of all mothers. Further research is warranted to explore the experiences of adoptive mothers across diverse backgrounds to identify support strategies tailored to their unique necessities.

Keywords: maternal ambivalence, adoption, adoptive motherhood, motherhood, mother-child relationship

I. Adoptive Bonds: Nuances of Maternal Ambivalence in Adoptive Mothers

Adoption serves as a bridge between the needs of abandoned children and the wishes of individuals and couples seeking to form families. Adoption and related practices—such as fostering and guardianship—have been widespread throughout history (Rueter et al., 2009). However, it was not until 1851 that adoption was recognized primarily as a means to protect the welfare of children, rather than as a method to preserve a family lineage or to form alliances between families (Cole & Donley, 1990; Zamostny et al., 2003). The modern legal adoption process establishes a practice where the legal relationship between a parent and child is transferred to another individual or individuals (Zamostny et al., 2003).

Worldwide, over 150 million recorded orphans have been abandoned or separated from their parents due to a multitude of complex social, economic, and health-related issues, highlighting the crucial role of adoption in child welfare (Children's Statistics 2023).

The adoption journey is complex, addressing not only the needs of children but also fulfilling parental wishes. It involves a deep understanding of adoptive children's unique emotional and developmental needs (Singer et al., 1985). Although discourse regarding the most suitable parenting practices has become progressively common, there is a continuous emphasis on understanding specific parenting strategies tailored to the needs of adoptive children (Singer et al., 1985). This focus underscores the similarities and differences between raising biological and adoptive children, highlighting the considerations adoptive parents must take to raise their adoptive child just as they would with a biological child (Rueter et al., 2009). This expectation, however, overlooks the unique complexities intrinsic to the adoptive parent experience, including emotional stresses (Brinich, 1990). For example, unlike biological mothers, adoptive mothers navigate the emotional journey of not only becoming a mother but also forming a bond with a child that is not biologically their own (Brinich, 1990). These concerns become relevant when examining maternal ambivalence, which describes the array of feelings many mothers face; maternal ambivalence describes the coexistence of love and resentment a mother may feel toward her child and motherhood as a whole. (Takševa, 2017). Adoptive mothers grapple with their own sets of ambivalences such as the excitement of forming a new family, the concerns about bonding with the child, societal acceptance, and other difficulties.

The nuances of adoption make it evident that the adoption process is not simply a legal practice but rather an emotional experience for all those involved in the adoption triangle—the child, biological parents, and adoptive parents (Cole & Donley, 1990). The significance of maternal ambivalence in adoption lies in its ability to deepen the understanding of motherhood, broadening the perspective to include various ways to love, care, and connect within a family (Brinich, 1995). Recognizing these conflicting emotions is pivotal for ensuring the emotional well-being of the child and adoptive mothers (Brinich, 1995).

II. Literature Review

The existing literature has predominantly focused on maternal ambivalence in biological mothers, leaving a distinct gap of understanding for adoptive mothers. This literature review will explore the findings regarding maternal ambivalence and the knowledge of adoptive mother-child dynamics.

Most existing literature on maternal ambivalence highlights the importance of challenging the ideology of ideal mothering. Cultural narratives have long portrayed mothers as perfect, disregarding the intricate nature of motherhood (Takševa, 2017). In reality, motherhood entails an array of emotions, sometimes leading to the coexistence of conflicting feelings, known as ambivalence (Takševa, 2017). Maternal ambivalence is a feeling that most mothers will encounter (Featherstone & Hollway, 1997). While negative emotions are present in Sevón's 2007 study, she determined that these feelings do not undermine mother's love for their children. Sevón adds to Takševa's findings by demonstrating that these opposing emotions are not detrimental, but rather add authenticity to understanding the mother-child relationship. Although these findings were focused on biological mothers, their insights may be relevant to adoptive mothers as well since both biological and adoptive mothers share common motherhood experiences and challenges. However, future research is needed to determine the extent to which these findings apply to the unique experiences of adoptive mothers.

While studies by Takševa and Sevón have formed the foundations for understanding maternal ambivalence for biological mothers, a more focused exploration into the aspects of adoptive motherhood is vital for understanding the possible differences between the two. The exploration of this field necessitates an understanding of the adoptive child's perspective

as their emotional experience can impact the mother-child relationship. Brinich's study emphasizes Takševa's findings stating that adoptive mothers experience feelings of maternal ambivalence. Nevertheless, in his study, Brinich focuses more on ambivalence experienced by the adoptive child, stating that adoption arrangements can - and often do - introduce specific challenges for the adoptee; the children often struggle because having "two sets of parents makes it relatively easy for him or her to direct loving and hateful feelings towards different sets of parents" (Brinich, 1995). Essentially, the study focuses on children's feelings of ambivalence towards their adoptive and biological parents rather than focusing on maternal ambivalence, creating a distinct gap in understanding of ambivalence for adoptive mothers. Priel's study further discusses adoptees' ambivalences by describing their internal representations of their birth and adoptive mothers. The study revealed that adoptees' representations of their adoptive mothers are less "benevolent" and more "punitive " than those of non-adopted children (Priel, 2000). In other words, Priel et al. discuss that the adoption experience adds a negative dimension to their internal representations which may in turn impact mother-child relationships. Their findings highlight certain differences between adoptive and biological mother-child relationships; still, they lack focus on maternal ambivalence and the impact of adoption arrangements.

Although understanding the adoptive children's emotions is essential for interpreting adoptive mother-child relationships, a closer investigation of the emotional dynamics in adoptive families sheds light on the unique challenges that could affect maternal ambivalence. In their study, Singer et al. suggest that the quality of mother-infant relationships nearly parallels that of non-adoptive families. Additionally, the study discovered that these relationships are even stronger when the adopted child shares the same racial background as the adoptive parents as interracial adoptive mother-infant pairs often face more insecure relationships compared to same-race pairs (Singer et al., 1985). Fundamentally, Singer et al. claim that adoptive mother-children relationships align closely with those of biological mothers, suggesting that feelings of maternal ambivalence would be similar. They also propose that interracial adoptive mothers' emotions, including feelings of ambivalence, could potentially be impacted differently. These similarities are supported by Rueter et al. who demonstrated that family interactions in adoptive and biological families are "more similar than different." Vital components of mother-child relationships, including communication, warmth, parental control, and more, were found to be similar in these families (Rueter et al., 2009). However, it is valuable to note that more conflict emerged between parents and adopted children (Rueter et al., 2009). Rueter et al.'s study, however, lacks specific research investigating maternal ambivalence in adoptive mothers and how it may impact their adoptive mother-child relationship; further research in this field may help explain why there are more conflicts present in their relationships.

Nonetheless, Brinich's 1990 study emphasizes the unique and additional ambivalences in adoptive parents' attitudes. Adoptive parents, specifically those who struggle with infertility, frequently accept certain aspects of their adopted child and reject others, something that biological parents are incapable of doing as the features "for better or for worse" are genetically theirs (Brinich, 1990). He introduces the "adoptive parents' matrix" which explains the features adoptive parents compare their adopted child to "unconscious or conscious fantasies regarding the child they could not have" (Brinich, 1990). He describes how feelings of ambivalence are present due to the ability to disconnect specific features from themselves and imagine a biological child (Brinich, 1990). His study introduces an aspect of ambivalence specific to adoptive parents, solidifying a warrant for future research to ascertain whether adoptive mothers face significant differences in feelings of maternal ambivalence.

Overall, research regarding feelings of maternal ambivalence in adoptive mothers does not exist yet. The two aspects - maternal ambivalence and adoptive motherhood - have both been discussed and studied, however, the intersection has not, creating a prevalent gap in the field. This study aims to provide insights into how the distinct experiences of adoptive motherhood shape mothers' experiences with these complex emotions. This paper aims to address the question: Through

semi-structured interviews and inductive thematic analysis, how do the unique experiences of adoptive motherhood influence maternal ambivalence compared to biological mothers?

III. Method

3.1 Overview of Method

The research was conducted utilizing a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews combined with inductive thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This methodology framework is ideal for uncovering detailed and complex data about the subjective experiences of individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through the understanding of the existing field, I hypothesized that adoptive mothers experience more maternal ambivalence compared to biological mothers. This hypothesis is based on the idea that the unique circumstances and challenges involved in adoptive motherhood might lead to differences in maternal ambivalence.

Before discussing the methodology, it is crucial to state the assumptions that support this research. Firstly, it is assumed that all mothers—biological or adoptive—experience maternal ambivalence at some point (Lakshmin, 2022). This assumption enables the study to focus broadly on maternal experiences without separately exploring individual differences among participants. Secondly, it is assumed that maternal ambivalence is normal and consistent across cultures (DiStefano, 2003). While recognizing that cultural differences can influence emotions, this assumption allows the study to generalize findings across diverse contexts, thereby simplifying the analysis.

3.2 Cohort Selection

My study focuses on a specific cohort of four heterosexual adoptive mothers of varying ages, with children of varying ages and without congenital abnormalities. This selection was intended to minimize the variability in maternal experiences that could arise from different health conditions and backgrounds (Golombok, 2004). The broad age range was due to the limited availability of adoptive mothers known to the study that fit the criteria, making it necessary to include participants of any age. Before the interviews, participants were required to sign a consent form that clearly outlined their rights—including the option to withdraw from the study at any point—to reduce pressures during interviews (refer to Appendix A). The form also required participants to affirm that they met the specific criterion (refer to Appendix A). Participants consented to the interview being recorded with their information being kept anonymous through randomly assigned numbers (1-4). Refer to Table 1 for the final cohort selection demographics.

Table 1. *Demographics of Adoptive Mother and Adopted Child*

Participant #	Race	Relationship Status	Number of Biological Children	Number of Adoptive Children	Race of Adopted Child	Age at Adoption
1	Asian	Married	1	1	Asian	Toddler
2	Caucasian	Single	0	1	Asian	Infant
3	Caucasian	Married	0	2	Asian	Toddler, Preschooler

Participant #	Race	Relationship Status	Number of Biological Children	Number of Adoptive Children	Race of Adopted Child	Age at Adoption
4	Latina	Married	0	2	Asian	Infant, Infant

Note. Relationship status = at the time of adoption, age at adoption = age of child when adopted, infant = 0-1 years old, toddler = 1-3 years old, preschooler = 3-5 years old

3.3 Interview Methodology

The semi-structured interviews were designed around open-ended questions (refer to Appendix B) that allow the adoptive mothers to explore their experiences and perceptions. The questions were derived from the 'Maternal Ambivalence Scale' (refer to Appendix B) to ensure they are credible, unbiased, and ethical (Martín-Sánchez et al., 2022). These questions investigated various aspects of adoptive motherhood—such as the initial adoption—and feelings of ambivalence. Semi-structured interviews were vital to foster an open dialogue and conversational atmosphere with participants, influenced by MacCallum's 2003 study. The one-on-one interviews were conducted on video calls and in person. Refer to Table 2 for example questions (refer to Appendix B for all)

Table 2. *Examples of Pre-planned Interview Questions*

I. Can you describe your path towards deciding to, and adopting a child?

II. When you think about your experience with motherhood, do you feel positive and negative feelings?

III. Have you felt feelings of frustration, anger, and/or indifference toward your child at any point?

IV. Is being a mother something you've always wanted?

   A. Have you ever felt as though you rejected motherhood?

   B. Have you wanted to change your mind about the decision to become a mother?

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential in this study. All participant data will remain confidential and anonymous. The questions were examined and phrased in a manner that is sensitive to the emotional well-being of participants to ensure

that they were comfortable; they were also informed of their right to decline answering any questions they preferred not to. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, immediately before and after the interviews, as well as two weeks later.

3.5 Data Recording and Analysis

The interviews were recorded and manually transcribed to ensure accuracy and a smooth analysis process. Inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Inductive thematic analysis is a qualitative research method where themes are derived directly from the data itself, without being constrained by preconceived categories or frameworks (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Firstly, the interview transcripts were reviewed and open coding was conducted, which involved assigning codes to the data based on content and meanings. Next, axial coding was performed where the codes were grouped into categories based on similarities. Finally, selecting coding was done where the core themes were identified and related to each other. Refer to Figure 1 for a detailed flow chart. These themes were then interpreted to explore how the unique circumstances of adoptive motherhood influence maternal ambivalence. Acknowledging the limited research in this field, the inductive approach aligned strongly with the exploratory nature of the research. This approach allowed for data-driven and nuanced analysis of individual descriptions.

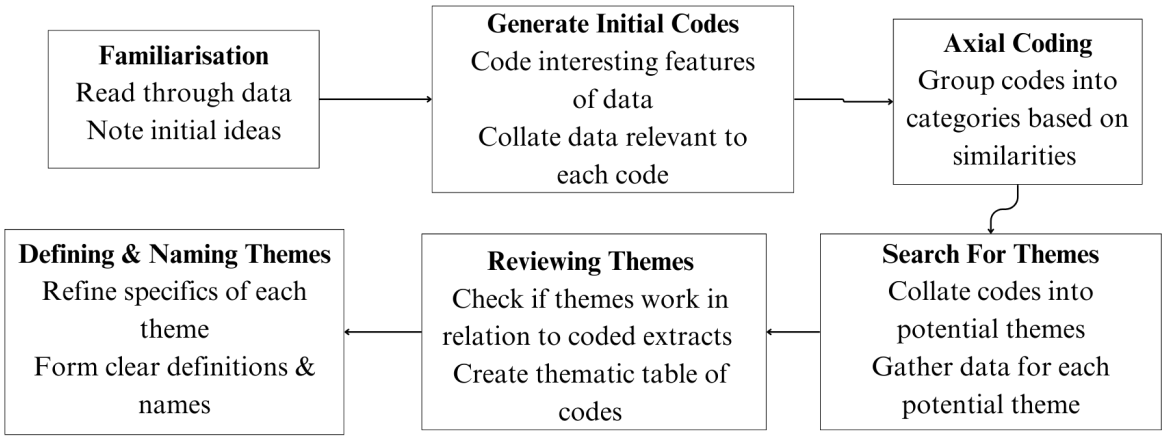

Figure 1: *Inductive Thematic Analysis Flow Chart*

IV. Findings

The analysis of the interview transcripts from the four adoptive mothers (refer to Table 1) resulted in 69 free codes (refer to Table 3), naturally grouped into six themes: I) fertility issues as a motive for adoption, II) complexities of the adoption process, III) cultural and racial considerations, IV) bonding experiences, V) emotional challenges & ambivalence, VI) coping with motherhood & gratitude.

Table 3. *Summary of Thematic Analysis Themes related subcode codes*

#	Themes	Primary Subthemes	Free Codes

I	Fertility Issues as a Motive for Adoption	N/A	Health, concern, sad, fear, worry, anxiety, disappointment, hope, plan, family, family formation, doctors
II	Complexities of the Adoption Process	A) Logistical Challenges B) Health Concerns C) Discouragement	Concern, confusion, waiting, long-time, helping, support, community, finance, international, randomized, frustrated, responsibility, reflection, logistics
III	Cultural and racial considerations	A) Societal Perceptions B) Heritage and Identity	Identity, identity, connect, biological, differences, appearance, evident, frustrations, impact, judgments, comments, worth, racism, connection, culture, bonding, background, heritage, family, disconnect, embrace-culture, roots
IV	Bonding Experiences	N/A	Adjustment, change in lifestyle, worry, confusion, natural, immediate, support, disconnect, frustration, concern
V	Emotional Challenges & Ambivalence	N/A	Happiness, frustration, concern, disappointment, discouragement, no regret, confusion, lack of knowledge, joy, guilty, lonely, worry, scared, excited, exhausting, tired, overwhelming
VI	Coping with Motherhood & Gratitude	N/A	Family, support, communication, thankful, grateful, no regret, friends, community, relaxation, acceptance, happiness

4.1 Fertility Issues as a Motive for Adoption

Fertility issues were the initial catalyst for three out of the four participants, with some struggling for years. These medical and emotional barriers led to a reevaluation of their approaches to family building. This theme illuminates the emotional journey from confronting fertility challenges to eventually embracing adoption. Refer to Appendix C1 for additional relevant quotes.

Participants described a frustrating period of trying to conceive naturally before considering adoption.

"We tried having kids for a year and a half, or more. We realized it was not as easy as we thought. We explored other options but very lightly because we were inclined to adopt from the first moment."
(Participant 4)

While infertility was a predominant factor in the decision to adopt for Participants 1, 3, and 4, Participant 2 decision to adopt was unrelated to infertility but rather opting as a single woman, showcasing a diverse range of rationales that lead to adoptive motherhood.

"It was something that I had thought about for a very long time, but me being single was stopping me."
(Participant 2)

4.2 Complexities of the Adoption Process

The path to adoptive parenthood involves both logistical and emotional challenges. Participants detailed the inherent administrative hurdles, health concerns, and ceaseless timelines throughout their already difficult journeys, introducing a unique dimension to motherhood. Three primary subthemes emerged within the theme: A) logistical challenges, B) health concerns, and C) discouragement. Refer to Appendix C2 for additional relevant quotes.

4.2.1 Logistical Challenges

Surpassing the logistical aspects of the adoption process, particularly for international adoptions, was a major subtheme. Participants described their arduous adoption processes, underscoring the emotional and financial investments required in the adoption journey.

"... a very lengthy and tedious process. If I had to line up the paperwork, it could reach from this wall to that wall… We had to go through home studies, we had to be interviewed. China even has regulations that you can't be too fat, you can't be mentally ill. We had to vouch and say that we were sane."
(Participant 1)

Expanding on this idea, participants described the scrutiny that adoptive parents face by comparing it to the experiences of biological parents.

"To adopt you have to get approval from other people. They asked me if I believed in corporal punishment. You get assessed on whether you're going to be a good parent. Whereas if you give birth, nobody assesses you."
(Participant 1)

Participants 2 and 3 described their journeys as expatriates, stating the international aspects were likely the most challenging.

"The biggest one [challenge] was just the logistics because we did an international adoption. We're from the United States, and we adopted two girls from China at two different times. And so, when you do that, you're governed by three countries [US, China, Singapore]. And there's just a tonne of red tape."
(Participant 3)

4.3 Health Concerns

The adoption process also included health concerns regarding unknown medical histories.

> *"Of course, there is always the fear about the child's background. What if they had a trauma before? This always crosse mind."*
> (Participant 4)

Participants also expressed that these concerns played a role in their decision-making.

> *"We concluded that we were happier to adopt from China even if they were a different race than us because at the time there were a lot of issues with fetal alcohol syndrome in Russia. You really can't detect it, then it shows up when the child is older and we weren't sure if we would be able to handle that."*
> (Participant 3)

4.4 Discouragement

Another aspect that contributed to decision-making was the discouragement they faced. These complications and scrutinizing adoption processes left participants discouraged and frustrated.

> *"We were really discouraged. We waited about two years, and this is why my two kids are eight years apart. This is why we changed the option from a girl to either male or female. Discouraged and frustrated. If we had stuck to our options of just having a girl, we would have had to wait for at least three more years."*
> (Participant 1)

4.5 Cultural and Racial Considerations

The theme of cultural and racial considerations underscores the unique experiences of adoptive mothers, navigating the intersection of race, culture, and identity. Three participants are part of interracial mother-child pairs. Two primary sub-themes were formed: A) societal perceptions, B) heritage and identity

4.5.1 Social Perceptions

The societal perceptions and external noticeability of adoptive families posed unique challenges for the participants.

> *"There was a family in my neighborhood that both parents, Caucasians, adopted two boys from Korea. When you look at them, you immediately know that you know, they are not their biological kids…. It's easier for us because I am Chinese and my husband is Caucasian. So at least we have one parent that we can identify with our Chinese boy. It's not that obvious.*
> (Participant 1)

Participants also discussed the frequent insensitive inquiries from community members, demonstrating a crude curiosity.

> *"She would just drive me crazy…. she would make comments like, you can't possibly love this child as much as a real child. It's not your real child. Very frustrating."*
> (Participant 3)

"People will come up and say oh how much did she cost you? Was she cheaper because she's Vietnamese and not Chinese? That kind of thing. That was super frustrating."
(Participant 2)

4.5.2 Heritage and Identity

Maintaining cultural heritage and openly discussing adoption from an early age were frequently expressed as priorities by all participants. They aimed to give their children a greater sense of identity and belonging to their adoptive and biological cultures.

"...She was very eager to know about her origins. It's something you have to manage, and it's hard. She was very young and not mature enough….It was also uncomfortable knowing that we weren't her 'real' or biological family and explaining that… It's not really racism, but more identity. We try to be strong, but sometimes I feel that it's not enough. I see them struggling with these problems but we can't really change anything. We really try to embrace our Hispanic culture the most we can, they also want to know about their Chinese ancestry."
(Participant 4)

On the other hand, others (Participants 1 & 3) mentioned that their children didn't have much of an interest in their heritage.

"Actually, neither of them [daughters] ever wanted to go back to China. One of them was kind of a little bit curious and we've been really open about it."
(Participant 3)

4.6 Bonding Experiences

As participants entered the realm of adoptive parenthood and tried to create a nurturing environment for their children, bonding experiences varied.

"In the beginning he didnt want me. He did not want me to be a part of his life. He was only attached to his [not biological] brother and [adoptive] father. We were worried, he wasn't used to it. He kept crying, he wouldn't eat, and he could speak a few Chinese words."
(Participant 1)

However, this experience is not universal for all adoptive parents.

"The second we put her in my arms. She was like she looked right at me and was set."
(Participant 2)

4.7 Emotional Challenges and Ambivalence

All participants described adoption as a challenging and unpredictable experience filled with interconnected joy and struggle. The unique components of this path to motherhood, including the experiences and challenges in the themes above, underscore the complex emotions part of adoptive motherhood. Refer to Appendix C3 for additional relevant quotes.

All participants explained the duality between the challenges and joys of parenthood.

"Of course—the non-stop crying, the food throwing, not caring about school, not studying; that's all the frustration that comes with being a parent. But there are lots of joys too, like the first smile, the first walk. It's all part of the experience."
(Participant 1)

"There is a spectrum. Some days you feel tired, frustrated, confused, and overwhelmed with problems because of your children, especially when they're teenagers. And yes of course, some days I think to myself, what was I thinking? But it comes in flashes, it's not constant."
(Participant 3)

Other participants highlighted the difficulty of raising a child and the toll that took on their mental states.

"I was warned that I would feel guilty about stuff, but I did not expect it to be quite so lonely, because suddenly when you're a single mom with a baby, now your social life comes to a complete halt."
(Participant 2)

"It's this frustration, discouragement, sometimes even anger. It [child] is like having a restriction sometimes."
(Participant 4)

4.8 Coping with Motherhood & Gratitude

Despite the challenges and ambivalence in the adoption journey, an unexpected theme of gratitude emerged from the data.

"He brings mainly happiness because this is like a completely different kid than our biological son… he only brings happiness."
(Participant 1)

When reflecting, participants mentioned how the challenges positively shaped them.

"Looking back, I don't think that they were problems. Our life has shaped us in many ways. So this is another thing that happened in our life."
(Participant 4)

Despite the negative feelings and difficulties, all participants emphasized that they have never regretted their decision to become a parent.

"I have never regretted that. I mean, at the end of the day, we all made the decision to be mothers, to be fathers."
(Participant 1)

V. Discussion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study aimed to investigate the influence of adoptive motherhood on maternal ambivalence compared to those of biological mothers. The key findings suggest that despite the distinct circumstances and processes of adoptive motherhood, adoptive mothers experience maternal ambivalence in similar ways to biological mothers. These findings disprove the initial hypothesis that adoptive mothers would experience more maternal ambivalence compared to biological mothers due to the unique circumstances involved.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

5.2.1 Unique Challenges

The cultural and racial considerations, issues of heritage and identity, and complexities of the adoption process all contributed to the unique experiences of adoptive motherhood and likely maternal ambivalence among the participants. These challenges are not typically experienced by biological mothers and may have intensified the feelings of ambivalence for adoptive mothers. These findings suggest that the distinct experiences of adoptive motherhood introduced specific challenges that increased negative emotions—such as frustration, disappointment, and discouragement.

5.2.1.1 Cultural and Racial Complexities

The study identified several themes that demonstrate the unique experience of adoptive mothers, where the theme of 'cultural and racial considerations' (III) was a prominent one; three participants navigated the complexities of raising a child from a different cultural background to their own. The findings of Singer et al. (1985) discovered that interracial adoptive mother-infant pairs faced more insecure relationships compared to same-race pairs. Additionally, adoptees part of interracial families often experience discrimination more intensely than same-race adoptees (Reinoso et al., 2012). Their findings underscore the layered challenges faced by interracial families, not only within their private lives but also in society. Participants in this study expressed frustration and difficulty in navigating this aspect of their relationship, especially when it came to social perceptions, judgments, and connection to their child's heritage; they shared experiences of feeling scrutinized by their community and struggling to find ways to honor their child's culture while also hoping to create a sense of belonging for their children. These experiences highlight the complexities that may have contributed to maternal ambivalence for the mothers, as they balanced the joys and challenges of balancing cultural and racial differences.

5.2.1.2 Adoption Process Complexities

Another unique aspect of their journeys was the adoption process itself, including logistical and emotional uncertainties. These difficulties have been previously highlighted in works from Cole & Donley (1990), showing an added layer of complexity to the adoptive motherhood experience. The participants in this study described periods of intense frustration and discouragement due to the extensive process where they often felt scrutinized. Brinich's 1990 study corresponds with these sentiments by explaining how the adoption process can introduce emotional dysregulations due to waiting, hoping, and longing for a child; he adds that this often exacerbated these feelings of frustration and discouragement, thus possibly contributing toward negative emotions and ambivalence.

5.2.2 Commonalities Between Adoptive and Biological Mothers

Even when considering the unique challenges, this study's results suggest that adoptive mothers expressed similar concerns, coping mechanisms, and emotional challenges akin to biological mothers in the existing literature. For instance, the theme of 'emotional challenges and ambivalence' (V) that emerged revealed that the adoptive mothers expressed feelings of joy and fulfillment, while also experiencing frustration, guilt, self-doubt, and annoyance, which are all

common emotions of maternal ambivalence. These experiences mirror those described by Takševa (2017) and Sevón (2007) in their studies with biological mothers. Their studies found that biological mothers experienced a range of contradictory emotions, with the coexistence of positive and negative feelings (Takševa, 2017; Sevón 2007). This theme suggests that the existing understanding of maternal ambivalence in biological mothers could expand further to adoptive mothers as well. Furthermore, the findings that all participants experienced maternal ambivalence several times are consistent with the current understanding that maternal ambivalence is a normal experience for most mothers and that it is experienced at some point in motherhood (Featherstone & Hollway 1997).

5.2.3 The Role Of Gratitude

An unanticipated theme of gratitude emerged from the study. Despite the extensive list of challenges, adoptive mothers expressed a profound sense of gratitude for the opportunity to become parents and for their children, particularly those who struggled with infertility. This gratitude was closely tied to the theme of 'fertility issues as a motive for adoption' (I), which describes the emotional barriers adoptive mothers surpassed. When viewed alongside the theme of 'coping with motherhood & gratitude' (VI), a novel result arose: gratitude and appreciation seemed to act as protective factors, helping adoptive parents navigate the complexities, difficulties, and ambivalence with greater resilience and perspective. The findings of this study suggest that the profound gratitude expressed by adoptive mothers may serve as a counterbalance to the challenges and negative feelings previously mentioned that are associated with their unique paths. This gratitude could be attributed to the distinctive journey they underwent to become parents, which often involved infertility, uncertainty, and both fiscal and emotional investments (Nickman, 2005). This presence of gratitude as a protective factor could explain why adoptive mothers in this study experience maternal ambivalence in similar ways to biological mothers, supporting findings by Rueter et al. (2009) that suggest adoptive and biological parents form comparable mother-child relationships.
Furthermore, adoptive parents have been noted for their resilience in times of adversity while still retaining positive attitudes, mutual support, and open communication (Carta, 2019). These attitudes, particularly of gratitude and resilience, highlight the transformative potential of adoptive parenthood (Nickman, 2005). This finding expands upon the existing understanding of maternal ambivalence, suggesting that their unique experience may contribute to a more emphasized sense of appreciation.

This study explored the complexities and emotional experiences of adoptive motherhood revealing both unique challenges and commonalities with biological mothers. While the cultural, racial, and logistical complexities unique to adoptive motherhood may have intensified feelings of ambivalence, these findings also shared similar emotional responses, such as frustration and joy, with biological mothers. The unforeseen finding of gratitude highlights a unique aspect of their paths; this theme may counterbalance their difficulties and ambivalences, aligning with existing studies suggesting that adoptive mothers experience comparable mother-child relationships (Rueter et al., 2009). These insights extended existing literature by illustrating how the specific paths to motherhood can shape emotional experiences and coping mechanisms, thus offering a broader perspective on the universal feeling of maternal ambivalence.

VI. Conclusion

The journey of adoptive motherhood is unique and filled with complex challenges, profound emotions, and transformative experiences. This study has shed light on the nature of maternal ambivalence among adoptive mothers, revealing that despite the unique circumstances of their path to motherhood, they likely experience ambivalence in the same way as biological mothers.

6.1 Implications

The findings of this study have implications for adoptive mothers, adoption agencies, social workers, and therapists. By providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of maternal ambivalence in adoptive mothers and how their experiences align and differ from those of biological mothers, this study could inform professionals in developing more targeted and effective support services for adoptive mothers. Adoption agencies might consider implementing specialized support programs to address the emotional complexities identified. Social workers and therapists could benefit from integrating these insights into their practices, potentially enhancing their programs to discuss maternal ambivalence. Further knowledge in this field highlights the complex nature of motherhood, challenging the stigma and cultural narratives that depict mothers as perfect (Takševa, 2017). By indicating that adoptive mothers experience maternal ambivalence in very similar ways to biological mothers, this study could help reduce the perceived divide between adoptive and biological mothers (Miall, 1987). This study adds to the existing literature calling for inclusivity for all mothers in support services.

6.2 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of maternal ambivalence among adopted mothers, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The small sample size of four adoptive mothers allowed for a detailed investigation of their experiences; still, this may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of adoptive mothers. Moreover, the study focused on a specific cohort of heterosexual adoptive mothers who have adopted children without congenital abnormalities. This criterion was placed to limit outliers in the data as their experiences have specific challenges; however, this selection may restrict the applicability of the findings to adoptive mothers with children who do have congenital abnormalities and adoptive mothers from different backgrounds. Cultural and age differences were not studied between participants—due to the limited participant size—which may have impacted their perspectives and paths. The participants in the study were also part of the middle to upper class, which may have reduced the economic challenges that could be part of the adoption process for other adoptive mothers. The study's conclusions are based on a specific sample and may not generalize to adoptive mothers with different demographics, cultural backgrounds, or adoption circumstances. Additional research with larger, more diverse samples and quantitative methods is needed to draw more definitive conclusions.

6.3 Future Research

There is still room for further exploration in the field of adoptive motherhood and maternal ambivalence. Expanding the scope of research to include a larger and more diverse sample of adopted mothers could yield a more detailed understanding of how different factors such as race, socioeconomic status, age, and culture intersect with the experience of maternal ambivalence. Longitudinal quantitative studies that follow adoptive mothers over time could provide valuable insights into how maternal ambivalence levels evolve over periods and differ between adoptive and biological mothers. Ultimately, by continuing to explore this field, researchers can create a more supportive and empowering environment for all families who may be struggling with the complexities of adoptive motherhood and maternal ambivalence.

References

Brinich, P. (1990). Adoption, ambivalence, and mourning: Clinical and theoretical inter-relationships. Adoption & Fostering, 14(1), 6–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/030857599001400104

Brinich, P. M. (1995). Psychoanalytic perspectives on adoption and ambivalence. Psychoanalytic Psychology, 12(2), 181–199. https://doi.org/10.1037/0736-9735.12.2.181

Carta, G., Boldrini, F., De Stasio, S., & Rappazzo, M. C. (2019). Resiliencia, Transición a la paternidad y adopción: Una Encuesta Exploratoria [Resilience, transition to parenthood, and adoption: An exploratory survey]. International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology. Revista INFAD de Psicología, 1(2), 289–296. https://doi.org/10.17060/ijodaep.2019.n2.v1.1698

Children's Statistics. SOS Children's Villages. (2023). https://www.sos-usa.org/our-impact/focus-areas/advocacy-movement-building/childrens-statistics

Cole, E. S., & Donley, K. S. (1990). History, values, and placement policy issues in adoption. In D. M. Brodzinsky & M. D. Schechter (Eds.), The psychology of adoption (Online ed., pp 273-294). Oxford Academic. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195048926.003.0015

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Featherstone, B., & Hollway, W. (Eds.). (1997). Mothering and ambivalence. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131015

Golombok, S., Murray, C., Jadva, V., MacCallum, F., & Lycett, E. (2004). Families created through surrogacy arrangements: Parent-child relationships in the 1st year of life. Developmental Psychology, 40(3), 400–411. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.40.3.400

Miall, C. E. (1987). The stigma of adoptive parent status: Perceptions of community attitudes toward adoption and the experience of informal social sanctioning. Family Relations, 36(1), 34. https://doi.org/10.2307/584644

Nickman, S. L., Rosenfeld, A. A., Fine, P., MacIntyre, J. C., Pilowsky, D. J., Howe, R.-A., Derdeyn, A., Gonzales, M. B., Forsythe, L., & Sveda, S. A. (2005). Children in adoptive families: Overview and update. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 44(10), 987–995. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.chi.0000174463.60987.69

Priel, B., Kantor, B., & Besser, A. (2000). Two maternal representations: A study of Israeli adopted children. Psychoanalytic Psychology, 17(1), 128–145. https://doi.org/10.1037/0736-9735.17.1.128

Reinoso, M., Juffer, F., & Tieman, W. (2012). Children's and parents' thoughts and feelings about adoption, birth culture identity and discrimination in families with internationally adopted children. Child & Family Social Work, 18(3), 264–274. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00841.x

Rueter, M. A., Keyes, M. A., Iacono, W. G., & McGue, M. (2009). Family interactions in adoptive compared to non-adoptive families. Journal of Family Psychology, 23(1), 58–66. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014091

Sevón, E. (2007). Narrating ambivalence of maternal responsibility. Sociological Research Online, 12(2), 30–42. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.1527

Singer, L. M., Brodzinsky, D. M., Ramsay, D., Steir, M., & Waters, E. (1985). Mother-infant attachment in adoptive families. Child Development, 56(6), 1543–1551. https://doi.org/10.2307/1130473

Stolley, K. S. (1993). Statistics on adoption in the United States. The Future of Children, 3(1), 26–42. https://doi.org/10.2307/1602400

Takševa, T. (2017). Mother love, maternal ambivalence, and the possibility of empowered mothering. Hypatia, 32(1), 152–168. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12310

Zamostny, K. P., O'Brien, K. M., Baden, A. L., & Wiley, M. O. (2003). The practice of adoption. The Counseling Psychologist, 31(6), 651–678. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000003258061

Appendix A

Informed consent form

This Participant Informed Consent Form has two parts:

- Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you)
- Certificate of Consent (for signatures if you choose to participate)

You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form

Part I: Information Sheet

Introduction

My name is Stefania Sigismondi. I am researching the impact of adoptive motherhood on maternal ambivalence. If you have any questions, at any point in this study, feel free to contact me.. Please take time to decide whether or not you would like to participate in this study.

Type of Research Intervention

Participation in the study will entail completing a 15 to 20-minute interview. The interview will consist of open-ended questions derived from existing literature to ensure that they are reliable and ethical. The questions are intended to explore several different emotions and components associated with maternal ambivalence.

Participant Selection

You, alongside other adoptive mothers, have volunteered to participate in my study. By volunteering to participate, you claim that you're a heterosexual adoptive mother who has a child with no congenital abnormalities. Please check to make sure that you meet these requirements before proceeding.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that you may choose whether or not you want to participate at any point before, during, or after the research process. If you choose to participate, all information gathered, including quotes from interviews, will be kept confidential. The study's results will be published anonymously in the form of my final AT Research paper.

Procedures

If you consent to participate in this research, an interview will be held with Stefania Sigismondi. The interview will approximately take 15 to 20 minutes and will consist of open-ended questions that encourage further discussion.

Risks

If you feel uncomfortable answering a certain question, do remember that your responses will be kept confidential and anonymous to the public. However, should you feel the need to decline to answer a question, you may. Throughout the entire study, there will be reminders regarding the ability to exit and have your data removed at any point, this will be frequently shared with you even after data collection. Although I will know your name, to the public all data will be anonymous. To ensure this, you, alongside the other participants, will be referred to by numbers to make sure data is anonymous yet simple to remove if requested. If you'd like your data to be removed, please reach out to Stefania Sigismondi.

Benefits

Depending on the results of the study, my study will provide adoptive mothers with further insights into how their relationship with their children may differ from biological mothers. By completing this research, I will be able to determine if adoptive mothers face different levels of maternal ambivalence, which could suggest adaptations in parenting styles/mannerisms later on. In addition, it could decrease future and current adoptive mothers' concerns regarding possible increased feelings of ambivalence in their relationship with their child. Such could alleviate fears they may be experiencing, and/or encourage others to proceed with their adoption process. Overall, your participation will benefit adoptive mothers in the years to come.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research.

Confidentiality

All information collected will be confidential, and no one will be made aware of the identity of a participant except for me. Personal and identifying information will not be published in the study. Any quotes will be shared anonymously or altered for the published version of the study. The analysis of data will be published, while the data itself will not be kept after the study is completed.

Sharing the Results

You will receive a copy of the final research paper that this study produces.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

If you do not wish to participate, you are not obligated to. You may choose to withdraw your consent to participate in the study at any point in time.

Who to Contact

Should you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact Stefania Sigismondi.

Part II: Certificate of Consent

Participant Statement

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily consent to be a participant in this study.

Participant signature _____

(Printing your name here indicates your consent to all of the above)

Date _____

[Month, Day, Year]

Researcher Statement (leave blank):

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands that the following will be done:

1. The participant will be asked to complete an interview regarding their experience of adoptive mothers and maternal ambivalence.
2. The participant's answers will be entirely anonymous and confidential. I confirm that the participant was allowed to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.
3. A copy of this ICF has been provided to the participant.

Researcher Page - read aloud before the interview

Thank you for participating in this important study.

Before we begin, I'd like to go over some details.
Participation in the study will entail completing a 15 to 20-minute interview. The interview will consist of open-ended questions derived from existing literature to ensure that they are reliable and ethical. The questions are intended to explore several different emotions and components associated with maternal ambivalence.

If you feel uncomfortable answering a certain question, do remember that your responses will be kept confidential and anonymous to the public. However, should you feel the need to decline to answer a question, you may. Throughout the entire study, there will be reminders regarding the ability to exit and have your data removed at any point, this will be frequently shared with you even after data collection. To the public, all data will be anonymous.

I'd like to acknowledge a concept that is central to our discussion today – maternal ambivalence. This term refers to the mixture of conflicting feelings that many mothers, whether biological or adoptive, experience towards their children. It's important to understand that maternal ambivalence is a **normal** and **widespread** aspect of motherhood. It encompasses a broad spectrum of emotions, from love and joy to frustration and worry. Acknowledging and discussing these feelings can provide valuable insights and contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of motherhood. Your participation today is a significant contribution to this exploration, and I am grateful for your openness and honesty as we navigate this topic together.

Appendix B

Pre-planned questions for semi-structured interviews
Questions were based on the 'Maternal Ambivalence Scale' (Martín-Sánchez et al., 2022)
and were formatted to work as open-ended questions.

1. Could you describe what your family and dynamics look like?
    a. Race, marital status, child's race, when they were adopted, ect.
2. What are some initial expectations you had about adoptive motherhood?
3. How did your feelings about adoption and motherhood evolve?
4. When you think about your experience with motherhood, do you feel positive and negative feelings?
    a. Have you felt feelings of frustration, anger, and/or indifference toward your child at any point?
    b. Are there specific moments where you've felt this way?
    c. In what ways have your feelings of ambivalence affected your relationship with your adoptive child?

   d. **When you imagine yourself with your child, have you felt overwhelmed and insecure?**
   e. How do you cope with or manage feelings of ambivalence?
2. Is being a mother something you've always wanted? Have you ever felt as though you rejected motherhood? Or have you wanted to change your mind about the decision to become a mother?
3. In what ways do you feel that being an adoptive mother is different from being a biological mother?
   a. Have you felt any specific challenges related to adoptive motherhood? (Such as bonding with your child and dealing with societal expectations)
4. When you've had these doubts, did you openly share them with family and friends, did you feel reluctant?

Appendix C

Relevant Quotes Not Included In Findings

C1: Fertility Issues as a Motive for Adoption

> *"We decided to adopt since we simply could not have another kid because of my health."*
> (Participant 1)

C2: Complexities of the Adoption Process

> *"Living in Singapore and being Canadian was challenging—Canadian adoption laws are written for residents, not citizens and I'm a citizen. I actually had to wait for a bill to be passed in Parliament. It took a couple of years, two years."*
> (Participant 2)

> *"You don't know the history. And children are curious about that. I think that when you're a biological parent, you can say, my dad was bald, and my grandfather had cancer, like you have that knowledge of what preceded you. And so as an adoptive parent, you don't have that"*
> (Participant 3)

> *"We have not experienced racism. They [children] grew up in Singapore, a very multicultural environment. Adopting children is so common that I remember one time commenting that this boy that was friends with my daughter looked just like his mom. She looked at me and she said, 'you mean he's not adopted?' I said, 'Honey, most children aren't adopted. Singapore in that way was an easy place."*
> (Participant 4)

> *"Identity has been a big problem. Chinese people speak Mandarin to them and they just don't understand it. They don't feel Hispanic either. "*
> (Participant 4)

C3: Emotional Challenges and Ambivalence

> *"I had that feeling of holy crap this is hard, it's exhausting to have a child. Even if they are wonderful…….You're scared and you're excited and scared and excited. I still feel that way, and now they're adults."*
> (Participant 3)

In describing whether she has felt ambivalence:

> *"For sure, I feel positive and negative feelings. If anything's negative it's just worry. Concern. Worrying is the biggest thing..... I think my worry and concern does weigh on her sometimes."*
> (Participant 2)