

Identity Construction as a Mother: A Comparative Study between Adopted and Non-Adopted  
Women

Meritxell Pacheco Pérez, Laia Garcia Sala & Marta Canal Ortega

Facultat de Psicologia, Ciències de l'Educació i de l'Esport Blanquerna, Universitat Ramon  
Llull, Spain

Author Note

Correspondence should be addressed to Meritxell Pacheco, FPCEE Blanquerna, Universitat  
Ramon Llull, Cister 24-34, 08022-Barcelona, Spain, E-mail: [meritxellIPP@blanquerna.url.edu](mailto:meritxellIPP@blanquerna.url.edu)

### Abstract

From a constructivist perspective we studied the experience of motherhood in a comparative study with 15 adopted women and 15 non-adopted women, all of them also biological mothers. We used the social self grid and it was analyzed by means of the program RECORD 5.0 and also through content analysis. Results show similarities and differences between the two groups in the construction of identity as a mother. Although in both samples the self as a mother is constructed similarly to the self in their couple relationship this is more evident in the case of adoptive daughters and the difference is statistically significant. The meanings attributed to their own motherhood are similar in both samples and have to do with enjoying motherhood. Nonetheless, in the adoptive sample there are more constructs related to control and doing things right and in the biological sample there are more constructs referring to naturalness and devotion. Moreover, in the adoptive sample there appears a higher presence of cognitive conflicts and lower self esteem, and both results tend to significance.

*Keywords:* Constructivism, adoption, identity, motherhood, attachment, self-esteem, cognitive conflicts.

## Identity Construction as a Mother: A Comparative Study between Adopted and Non-Adopted Women

It is necessary to know more about adoption in order to help children and families, as well as professionals working in this field. Adoption is a relatively new research area and much of the research has focused on childhood (see e.g., Brodzinsky, 2011), although more recently, investigations have tended to progressively focus on adolescents.

However, there are fewer investigations focusing on adult adoptees. This period of a person's life is important because it becomes the moment when people generate a life project (Erikson, 1980). Studies with adult adoptee populations have focused mainly on psychological adjustment (e.g., Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000; Cantor-Graae & Pedersen, 2007; Cubito & Obremski, 2000; Hoksbergen & Laak, 2007; Passmore, Feeney, Peterson, & Shimmaki, 2006; Rogat, 2008; Tieman, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2005, 2006; Van der Vegt, Van der Ende, Kirshbaum, Vehulst, & Tiemeier, 2009; Von Borczyskowski, Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2006) and on adult attachment (Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2007; Fischman, 1996; Lamanna & Susan, 2001; Irhammar & Bengtsson, 2004; Paperny, 2004). The first group of studies conclude that adult adoptees are at a higher risk of maladjustment than non-adoptees, specifically at risk of mental health problems and difficulties in intimate relationships. Variables such as parental care, acceptance of the experience of belonging to the adoptive family, and adopted status in itself are also highlighted as predictors of emotional arousal. Pre-adoption stress factors such as abuse are also related to mental health disorders. Moreover, being adopted involves the fact of feeling abandoned by the biological parents, whether as a result of the abandonment in itself or due to other circumstances that imply a sense of loss such as the illness or death of progenitors. It becomes, undoubtedly, an important stress factor directly related to attachment and identity construction (Toomey & Eker, 2009). With respect to the group of studies focusing on adult attachment, it is concluded

that insecure attachment is more frequent in adoptees than non-adoptees. Consequences directly related to insecure attachment such as identity conflicts, sensitivity to issues of loss, fear of being unwanted, fear of being abandoned and difficulties in confidence seem to be present.

Lately, there have been many studies related to identity, but specifically focused on transracial identity, and the majority of them with a population of Korean adoptees in America (Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008; Kaanta, 2010; Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2007; Samuels, 2010; Song & Lee, 2009; Tuan & Shiao, 2011). All of them agree on two relevant issues which contribute to positive transracial identity: the need to belong and ethnic identification. Thus, these studies suggest that adoptive parents must contribute to the ethnic connection, by encouraging both aspects. The need to belong is a necessity for anyone, but even more so in an adopted person.

Nevertheless, there is only one relevant study focused on adult adopted women's perception and their family relationships; this is the one by Negre, Forns and Freixa (2007), which concluded that adopted women experience motherhood and family relationships in the same way as non-adopted individuals. Despite this, more research about adult adoptees is needed, which is why we focus our research interest on them, specifically on motherhood. Our study adds a phenomenological point of view to the hypothesis posed by Negre et al. (2007), trying to go deeper into adopted women's personal meaning about their identity construction, and especially focusing on the construction of a specific aspect of identity as being a biological mother.

In this sense, we want to know if there are differences between adopted and non-adopted women in the perception of their identity construction as a mother. As we know that experiences as a son or daughter consistently influence the construction of the relationship as a mother/father, it is necessary to know more about the experience of motherhood in the case

of biological mothers that are adoptive daughters. Although it would also be interesting to explore the experience of being a father, we focus on women since the process leading to giving birth is experienced as more stressful by women than by men (Östberg, Hagekull & Wettergren, 1997; Rodrigo & Palacios, 1998). In this respect, it has been found that during the process of becoming a mother, adopted women have many more thoughts about personal origin and about their own biological mother than in the case of biological daughters (Negre et al., 2007).

Consistent with this, adoption is a social situation that is triggered by one's biological parents' abandonment. These parents are usually unable to take care of their child due to social issues, health problems or their own death. When this happens, orphanage or foster care becomes the option to provide these children with appropriate care. And this is the question that remains inside the brain and heart of an adopted person: *Why was I abandoned? Didn't my parents love me? Then, do I deserve to be loved?* (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Marantz, 2011). The answer to this question is not an easy one, and it is relevant to identity construction. If we look at the beginning of this emotional and developmental process, we will need to bear in mind the importance of attachment (Bowlby, 1973) defined as a secure basis that provides the child with enough security to explore his/her environment. To do so, the mother, or main caregiver, becomes a guide, a differentiated and preferred figure who teaches the child what to expect from adults. This leads to an internalization of the way of relating with adults and it contributes to configure the Internal Working Model (IWM), a model of the human being's interpretation of reality. That is to say, attachment experiences throughout life contribute to modulate IWM. These are mental models of self, others and the future, based on the meaning that the child attributed to his early experiences. The IWM begins to develop before the first year of life and is formed by emotions, feelings and perceptions (Siegel, 1999). As Botella and Corbella (2005) assert, these models contain

memories, beliefs, goals and strategies that are rooted in early experiences and are both organized around the evaluation of the responsiveness and availability of the attachment figure as well as the perceived probability that oneself can lead to helping behaviors in others. According to this, an abandoned child probably construes the fact that adults are not trustworthy.

From a relational constructivist standpoint (Botella, 2006; Botella, Herrero, Pacheco, & Corbella, 2004;), the identity construction process is relational. A human defines him/herself on the basis of meanings constructed by means of relationships with others in an intersubjective way.

In the case of an adoptee, identity includes meanings about adoption that will be included in their relational positions. For the adoptee, early separation between parent and child results in negative consequences for the creation of the attachment relationship (Rygaard, 2008). We can observe it in practice when fear of abandonment arises in adopted children in an everyday-life situation of separation such as going to school. In this sense, adoptive parents can help to mitigate these consequences by creating a corrective relational experience. As Dallos (2006) said, it is possible to build an attachment relationship with significant figures other than biological parents. If the relationship between adoptive parents and their children is positive, it will be more probable that the meaning of 'adopted' does not provide feelings of discomfort such as embarrassment (Saetersdal & Dalen, 2000). In the same way, Grosso and Nagliero (2004) also understood identity as a resolution of the relational process with others. Thus, they highlighted two elements to be considered in the adopted person's construction of the self: the need to belong and the need to be different from others.

Up to this point, the reader should notice how relations constitute agents of meaning for the construction of personal identity. So, questions arise: which relational meanings are

co-constructed in adopted people, and in the case of women who were adopted when they were children, how will the fact of becoming a biological mother be constructed?

Becoming an adult means to construct a narrative that integrates the fact of being adopted. Bearing in mind that the bond that a woman builds with her child becomes a reflection of their own IWM we need to consider that in the case of adopted women it includes meanings related to adoption. Surely motherhood involves different meanings to all mothers but it is important to know how this is different for mothers who had been adopted

### **Aim of the Research**

Due to the lack of research regarding motherhood construction in adoptive populations and from a constructivist standpoint, the aim of our research is necessarily exploratory. In order to know more about the psychological meanings attributed to the self as a mother of women who had been adopted, that is to say, to their role with respect to motherhood, we can specify the aim of our research as follows:

Firstly, we wanted to find what are the self roles more correlated to self as a mother

Secondly, we tried to find similarities and differences between the construction of the self as a mother in the case of biological mothers who are adopted daughters and in the case of biological mothers who are biological daughters. That is to say, we explored constructs attributed to the self as a mother.

Thirdly, we explored the quality of self-esteem and the quality of what we called *self-esteem as a mother*. The latter is understood as the participant's perceived adequacy of herself as a mother (Pacheco, 2006). We compared both measures between the two groups (adopted and non adopted).

Finally, we studied the presence of cognitive conflicts in the construction of different significant roles of the self, including *me as a mother*. We compared the number of cognitive conflicts between the two groups.

## Method

This study follows a cross inductive design and we use a comparative method.

### Participants

To establish the sample, we carried out a theoretical sampling in which the selection criterion was of convenience. We matched up adopted and non-adopted women according to age, socio-cultural level, and age of becoming a mother for the first time. It was very difficult to access the sample of adoptive daughters that are now adult due to the fact that in Spain adoption was not very common until early 2000 and it was usually a phenomenon that was hidden. In total, there were fifteen women who were biological mothers and adoptive daughters (mean age: 39.5; SD: 6.2) and fifteen women who were biological mothers and biological daughters (mean age: 38; SD: 2.1). The inclusion criteria for both groups were: having or having had a stable partner, and also having at least one biological child. The only exclusion criterion was the presence of diagnosed psychopathology.

### Measures

To assess the construction of significant relational positions, we worked with a version of the Repertory Grid (RG) (Kelly, 1955/1991), the Social Self Grid (Butt, Burr, & Bell, 1997). We analyzed the results of the grid by means of the computer program RECORD 5.0 (Feixas & Cornejo, 1996).

Following the grid designed by Butt et al. (1997), we asked participants to include the self in five different types of relationships as elements of the grid, in order to facilitate access to relational construction of different self roles of the interviewed women. They could include both intimate relationships (friends, family, relatives ...) and other more superficial or sporadic relationships (with neighbours, teachers, co-workers ...) as well as groups of people (i.e., extended family) or social situations (i.e., at work). Moreover, we also added six elements: the self (*me now*), the ideal positioning (*ideal me*) and, according to the aims of the



research, *me as a mother's<sup>1</sup> daughter, me as a father's daughter, me as a partner, and me as a mother*. The participant's position as a daughter is divided into two, due to the fact that the attachment process is constructed differently with the father and with the mother (Dallos, 2006).

The original instruction to elicit the elements was as follows, but as stated before, according to our research aims we asked for the elicitation of only five different types of relationship:

Think of a number of people with whom you have some kind of relationship. Try to think of about eight or nine different ones. They can include casual and temporary relationships as well as good ones, but they should all be relationships where you have a fairly clear sense of what YOU are like when you are with that person. As well as specific people, you can include groups of people or social situations if this feels appropriate. (Butt et al., 1997, pp. 18)

Although in the design of the grid we included different types of self-roles as grid elements, we analyzed more deeply the elements directly related to our research objectives which were provided by the researchers.

The constructs were elicited by participants by means of the dyadic comparison of elements and, furthermore, we provided the construct: Secure vs. Insecure because it is a construct closely related to our research objectives. As a rating scale, we used a seven-point Likert scale. The mean of constructs was fourteen in the case of adoptive daughters and twelve in the case of biological ones. The process of elicitation ended when saturation was reached.

## **Procedure**

We held an interview with each participant, which included questions about biographical data and the administration of the social self grid.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that in the case of adoptees when we refer to their mothers/fathers (i.e., elements: *me as a mother's daughter, me as a father's daughter*) we are referring to adoptive mothers/fathers, not to the biological ones.

We used exploratory and qualitative content analysis in order to analyze the meaning of grid constructs related to self as a mother. We used Cohen's kappa Coefficient in order to determine inter-rater agreement about codifications ( $k=0.99$ ).

The grid measures that we used in our research were:

- Pearson's Correlation between the elements related to attachment: *me as mother's daughter*, *me as a father's daughter*, *me as a partner* and *me as a mother*. We also explore the correlations between each of these relational positions and the element *ideal self*.

- Constructs attributed (extreme scores: 1 or 7) to each relational position related to attachment: *me as mother's daughter*, *me as a father's daughter*, and *me as a mother*. For example, the self definition of me as a mother is obtained from the constructs on which that position is extremely rated.

- Self-esteem: Pearson's correlation between the elements: *self* and *ideal self*.

- Self-esteem as a mother: Pearson's correlation between the elements: *me as a mother* and *ideal self*.

In order to assess cognitive conflicts, we analyzed implicative dilemmas (Hinkle, 1965; Ryle, 1979):

- Analysis of implicative dilemmas by means of the Repertory Grid Test (Feixas, Ávila, Saúl, & Sánchez, 2001). Implicative dilemmas are a type of cognitive conflict that can be detected by the grid, analyzing constructs with Pearson's correlation. Implicative dilemmas appear when a personal characteristic that the person wants to change (discrepant construct) is associated with another feature that s/he wants to preserve (congruent construct). The desired change in the discrepant construct is blocked because it involves the risk of an unwanted change in the congruent construct. In the analysis of implicative dilemmas correlations over 0.20 are considered to be relevant, because although this correlation is not statistically significant, it is regarded as clinically significant.

The final conclusions of this research are the result of the consideration of each data source independently, as well as the triangulation between them.

## Results

### Construction of the self as a mother: Analysis of the Repertory Grid Test

We observed some differences between the construction of the relational position as a mother by biological mothers who are adoptive daughters and by biological mothers who are biological daughters.

Considering the relationships from which mothers construct their self as a mother, Figure 1 shows the percentage of cases in which Pearson's correlation between the element *me as a mother* and other elements of the grids is greater than 0.50. We can see that although in both samples their self as a mother is constructed mainly from their couple relationship (self as a partner) this is more evident in the case of adoptive daughters. This difference is statistically significant when applying the Mann-Whitney U test (2- tailed) in order to compare the correlations between these two elements in biological daughters and the adopted ( $U= 60$ ;  $p= 0.03$ ).

With respect to the other variables, when applying the Mann-Whitney U test to the correlations of the elements *me as mother's daughter* and *me as father's daughter* with the element *me as mother* there were no significant differences between adoptive and biological daughters. That is to say, there is no significant difference in terms of the self roles in relation to their parents from which they construct their motherhood: *mother's daughter* ( $U= 103$ ;  $p= 0.69$ ), *father's daughter* ( $U= 85.5$ ;  $p= 0.26$ ).

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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Regarding the qualitative analysis of construct content, in general terms results are similar in the case of adoptive and biological daughters (see Figure 2). According to Figure 2, we can see that, in both cases, there is a predominance of coding in the relational area (63.8% in the case of adoptive daughters, and 65% in the case of biological daughters), and a similar relevance attributed to the emotional/cognitive and moral areas.

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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We can observe that the content of constructs is similar in both samples. In the relational area, in both cases there are constructs related to *devotion*, *naturalness*, and *affect/love*, but it is surprising that in the case of adoptive daughters there is the topic of *control* (9.9%), completely absent in the grid for biological daughters. In this sense, in the case of biological daughters, meanings attributed to *naturalness* (20.5%) and *devotion* (27.3%) are more relevant. With regard to the moral area, although topics are similar in both cases and are closely related to trying to do the right things, in the case of adoptive daughters the *good person* construct (5.5%), completely absent in the biological sample, appears. The content related to the emotional and cognitive area is also similar in both groups; the most outstanding meaning is that related to having a lively and positive attitude concerning motherhood.

### **Assessment of *self-esteem* and *self-esteem as a mother***

With regard to the second aim of our research, to assess *self-esteem* and *self-esteem as a mother* and to compare our two samples, we have observed some differences. Only 13% of the sample of adoptive daughters shows satisfactory self-esteem (significant Pearson's correlation between the elements: *self* and *ideal self*;  $p < 0.05$ ), in contrast with 67% of biological daughters. When applying the U test we can see that the difference in self-esteem between the two samples borders on significance ( $U = 25$ ;  $p = 0.059$ ).

Concerning what we call *self-esteem as a mother* (cases in which Pearson's correlation between their position *me as a mother* and *ideal self* is positive and significant;  $p < 0.05$ ) the sample of adoptive daughters have slightly higher self-esteem than mothers that are biological daughters (53% vs. 47%). However, when applying the U test we can see that the difference in self-esteem as a mother between the two samples is not statistically significant ( $U = 38$ ;  $p = 0.364$ ).

### **Assessment of cognitive conflicts**

In reference to the objective of our research regarding the assessment of cognitive conflicts, we regarded each implicative dilemmas indicated by means of the Repertory Grid Test (Feixas, Ávila, Saúl, & Sánchez, 2001) as a cognitive conflict. Considering the number of dilemmas in each sample, we can conclude that 60% of the sample of adoptive daughters has some conflicts, although in varying degrees and intensity, whereas there are cognitive conflicts in only 20% of biological daughters of our sample. When applying the U test we can see that the difference in the presence of cognitive conflicts between the two samples tends to significance ( $U = 26.5$ ;  $P = 0.055$ ).

With regard to the content of cognitive conflicts, Table 1 shows the content of dilemmas of every participant. In this table, in every pair of constructs that make up a dilemma, the one on the left is a construct congruent with the participant's ideal, whereas the one on the right is a discrepant one; there is a dilemma because there is a positive correlation between them.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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With regard to the content of the dilemmas of mothers who are adoptive daughters, most constructs are related to security and being able to let oneself go in relationships (i.e.,

*insecure vs. secure; diplomatic vs. direct; introverted vs. extroverted; fearful vs. natural; reserved vs. trusting; upright vs. unworried; passionate vs. level-headed).*

Concerning the content of the dilemmas in the sample of mothers who are biological daughters, we can see that, although there is a construct related to security in relationships (*setting conditions vs. unconditional*), the content of the other constructs is more related to one's own positioning in the relationships.

### **Discussion**

First of all, as we have seen, it makes sense to consider that the construct system is a kind of expression of and a way of constructing the internal working model. Moreover, the differences in the construction of motherhood between adoptive and biological daughters and, above all, the fact that adoptive daughters construct their positioning as a mother based on their positioning as a couple, leads us to consider the relevance of attachment relationships in the construction of what John Byng-Hall called *family scripts* (Byng-Hall, 1985). In this respect, in accordance with Byng-Hall, systemic, psychoanalytic and narrative approaches can be integrated into work with families, despite the fact that psychoanalytic and constructivist approaches do not share the same epistemology.

Our results lead us to the conclusion that adoptive daughters construct their position as a mother principally from attachment relationships (partner, mother, and father), and particularly from their couple relationship, although it is more evident in the case of adoptive daughters and the difference is statistically significant. This fact, together with the high level of self-esteem as a mother in adoptive daughters, who on the other hand appear to be a population with low self-esteem, makes us think of the fact that the adoptive daughters of our sample are very likely to construct their position as a mother regardless of how they construct other positions. We may assume that it has to do with the fact that, finding themselves as mothers, the reflection about how their biological mothers treated them is latent, and they win

by comparison. They see themselves as references that do not give up, as we can see in their grid constructs: good person, respectable, fair, responsible, loving, and devoted.

We can also observe that the construction of the role as a daughter is different with their father and with their mother. This result confirms the fact that a person can establish attachment differently with different people (Dallos, 2006), and leads us to keep the distinction between *me as a mother's daughter* and *me as a father's daughter* in future grid designs to assess attachment relationships.

With regard to the qualitative content analysis of constructs, the fact that the result is similar in the case of adoptive and biological daughters confirms previous research where the construction of family relationships appeared to be similar (Negre et al., 2007). Nevertheless, in the case of adoptive daughters there is the topic of control, which would be closely related to their fear of loss and to the difficulty in trusting other people (Roberson, 2006).

The topic of control appears as relevant in the grids of adoptive daughters. This topic does not appear in the sample of biological daughters. This makes us think about how they experience motherhood: in the case of biological daughters, they focus more on living the experience, including the happiness involved (10.2%) devotion (27.3%) and naturalness (20.5%); and in the case of adoptive daughters, they seem to focus also on doing things right (control 9%; responsible 5.5%). It may be the case that, due to their little, and sometimes awful, experience as biological daughters, some adoptive daughters need to make their biological motherhood-related construction system complex. At this point, we could think about the parallelism between internal working models and construct systems in the sense that IWM is a set of embodied and unconscious features as well as semantic labels and in terms of Kelly (1955/ 1991) personal constructs can also be non-verbal, or pre-verbal. In this respect, it is possible that adoptive daughters did not embody enough experiences as biological

daughters and hence they have more difficulties in constructing their representations of motherhood.

Furthermore, the grid analysis also shows more presence of cognitive conflicts and low self-esteem in the adopted women in our sample, these results showing a tendency towards statistical significance. Taking into account too that most discrepant constructs are related to security in relationships, in the case of adoptive daughters, this may express difficulties in their identity construction process (Lamanna & Susan, 2001; Roberson, 2006). In addition, we also observe the presence of cognitive conflicts in three of the fifteen biological mothers. We need to take into account that two of these three women were abandoned by their own mothers, as is also the case in the sample of adoptive daughters. Thus, some identity construction processes of these two biological daughters could be similar to the adoptive daughters.

Despite much more research being needed, results allow us to state that, although adoptive daughters can experience motherhood very satisfactorily, they have many more issues to consider in comparison with biological daughters. It would also be interesting to replicate this study with a sample of men in order to find out whether similar processes occur. For the moment, our results lead us to think that, in the case of psychotherapeutic care with adopted adult women, we should put more emphasis on the processes related to attachment and self construction in meaningful relationships.



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