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**To cite this article:** Nerea Martín, Daniel Felipe Barrera-Aguilera & Susana Corral (2023): Communication about Origins and Search in Adoption: A Parental Perspective, Adoption Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/10926755.2023.2228770](https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2023.2228770)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2023.2228770>



Published online: 28 Jun 2023.



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## Communication about Origins and Search in Adoption: A Parental Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Adoptive parents' role is to accompany their children in the process of integrating issues occurred before the adoption, so that adoptees reach a meaningful narrative. This research explored adoptive parents' perspective on communication about origins and search. Thirty adopters with children between 14 and 26 years old took part in interviews analyzed following Thematic Analysis. Results showed a perception of openness in communication and an adequate comprehension of their children, sometimes hindered by the seemingly little importance their children give to their origins, or the reduced communication about them. Moreover, it was found that, sometimes, parents are the ones showing more interest in the search for origins.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 September 2021  
Revised 29 May 2023  
Accepted 20 June 2023

### KEYWORDS

Adoption; communication about origins; search; adoptive parenthood; thematic analysis

Origins are considered a broad concept that not only involve the biological family, but also other factors such as the country of origin, the cultural heritage, and all the experiences that occurred before the adoption (Homans, 2006; Pylypa, 2018; San Román, 2013). One of the most important tasks for adoptive parents is, precisely, to accompany their children in the process of integrating and elaborating the above-mentioned elements, so that they reach a complete and meaningful story of their own life (Berástegui, 2010; Mendenhall et al., 2004).

In a similar vein, Jociles and Charro (2008) highlight the importance of respecting child's origins to promote positive feelings towards their origin and identity. Likewise, Kirk (1964) posited the Shared Fate Theory, which emphasizes the essential role of adoptive parents. This theory focuses on three aspects, namely, the recognition of the differences between adoptive and nonadoptive parenthood, the importance of empathy and the role of communication in the family. Thus, when such differences are acknowledged, adopters can see empathetically that their children may be going through unique experiences tied to their adoption.

In this context, openness in communication about adoption and origins within the adoptive family becomes a central aspect. Openness in communication has been thoroughly discussed in the literature by Brodzinsky (2005). This author defines it as the extent the information about adoption is shared in the family in an atmosphere that promotes the expression of emotions associated to it. According to Berástegui (2012), communication about adoption is a process that evolves over time. Thus, parents are often the ones who, initially, take the lead when it comes to approaching origins while, when children grow up, they have a more active role.

In their study, Berástegui and Jódar (2013) found that the topics related to origins that are least approached are those that refer to the separation of the biological family and to physical and racial differences. In contrast, topics such as the adoption itself or the country of origin are generally dealt with in the early years as they are not perceived to generate many difficulties. However, the literature emphasizes that what is essential is, rather than the specific information that parents may have about their children's history, the positive emotional tone and the communicative openness shown to them (Berástegui & Gómez-Bengoechea, 2007; Palacios, 2010). In this sense, it is recommended that parents do not lie to the child and be honest with him/her, that they adapt their narrative to the developmental stage of the adoptee, his/her own questions or comments (Afin, 2014). The most appropriate thing is to help them find positive aspects, even if they are scarce, and help elaborate the more complex ones (Mirabent & Ricart, 2012).

Several authors have emphasized the importance of adopters' ability to go beyond the behavioral and emotional difficulties of their children and understand what feelings they may be going through (Berástegui & Jódar, 2013; Tyrrell & Dozier, 1999). In this sense, adoptive parents should acknowledge their child's emotions, while feeling comfortable and not overwhelmed by these emotions. Thus, adoptive parents with that predisposition will be more prone to successfully accompany their child in the integration of his/her origins and history of adoption (Neil, 2003). Likewise, adopters should be confident in managing their emotions, as well as capable of anticipating and accepting the needs of their child. Neutrality and indifference, brought about by not knowing what to say or not giving origins much importance favors an estrangement between adopters and their child (Tyrrell & Dozier, 1999).

Similarly, literature captures the importance for adoptive parents in terms of analyzing beliefs about problems and their possible solution; also, the need of expanding, validating and processing positive and negative feelings regarding origins; as well as the disposition to encourage reflection about visual, sensory, or episodic memories (Mirabent & Ricart, 2012; Vetere & Dallos, 2012). As noted by some authors, such as Colaner et al.

(2021), adoptive parents should put into practice emotion coaching, that is, parents should be prone to help the child calm down, and to let him/her express himself/herself, through words of comfort, reassurance, physical contact, or caresses. These strategies will prepare the child to deal with intense feelings by internalizing and incorporating such strategies to his/her own repertoire.

Even though there is a consensus regarding the benefits for adoptees to know about his or her origin and the accompaniment (Mirabent & Ricart, 2012), some adopters experience that accompaniment as one of the most difficult challenges they face (Brodzinsky, 2011; Neil, 2012). The existence of difficulties to deal with origins can be explained by factors associated to adoptive parents' previous history, the such as infertility grief and loss, by the story of the couple or the adoption process itself, or by feelings prompted by the origins of their child, for example, fear, insecurity or rejection (Berástegui & Jódar, 2013; Jones & Hackett, 2007). Adoptive parents may have the fantasy that talking or approaching origins stirs up the past, destabilizes, or brings suffering (Kohler et al., 2002).

A significant part of the adoption is the process of delving into the adoptee's origins, also known as the search for origins. Freixa and Negre (2010) highlighted the importance of adopters accompanying adoptees in such process. According to Brodzinsky (2006), a supportive attitude by adoptive parents makes adoptees feel more secure to search for their origins and contact their biological relatives. In this vein, the narrative used by the family to approach origins may impact adoptees' integration of origins and the desire to search for them. More specifically, adoptees from families who openly talk about origins are more likely to try to contact their origins or biological family (Mendenhall et al., 2004).

Search for origins is usually tied to the attempts to find and contact the biological family, but it should be considered a broader concept since, frequently, what most adoptees and their families want is to know about their origins (Martín & Corral, 2022; Palacios, 2009; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011), as and all the experiences occurred before their adoption (Homans, 2006; Pylypa, 2018; San Román, 2013). According to Irhammar and Cederblad (2000), search occurs at two levels, namely internal and external. Internal search refers to the lack of information and the questions adoptees ask themselves, which are not often shared with others; in contrast, external search is linked to obtaining answers to the questions adoptees have asked themselves throughout the years. These two levels are directly associated with communication about origins. On the one hand, communication about origins is influenced by the number of comments shared, and on the other hand, the actual questions, shared or not, and eventually searching for origins depend on how the family members place themselves when communicating about them.

Literature on the search describes it as a quite emotional process (Amorós et al., 1996). Koskinen and Böök (2019) pointed out that the search process can increase communication about origins as well as feelings of belonging to the adoptive family among adoptees. Frequently, adopters and adoptees associate the search process with uncertainty, hope, freedom, frustration, and, in some cases, adopters show empathy for the biological family (Jones & Hackett, 2007; Neil, 2009).

Considering all the above mentioned, it seems important to gain knowledge about the adoptive parents' perspective. Specifically, there is a need to delve into the challenges and achievements adopters experience and the strategies they use (Neil et al., 2018). For that reason, it is essential to continue studying adoptive parents' stance.

The aim of this research is therefore to explore the perspective of adoptive parents on communication about origins and search within their family, and especially, with their children. Therefore, a qualitative approach, which has been frequently used in the field of adoption seems adequate (Fronek & Briggs, 2018; Lyttle et al., 2021; Neil, 2012).

## Method

### Participants

A total of 30 adopters took part, 26 mothers and 4 fathers, aged between 44 and 65 ( $M = 53.97$ ;  $SD = 5.12$ ;  $Mdn = 54.5$ ). Most of the participants were married (76.7%;  $n = 23$ ), two of them being a couple, only 10% ( $n = 3$ ) were divorced, and 13.3% ( $n = 4$ ) were single or widows. Forty percent ( $n = 12$ ) of the participants had one child, all of them having been adopted; 50% ( $n = 15$ ) had two children, of which 83.3% ( $n = 25$ ) were adopted; there were three (10%) participants who had three children, of which 66.7% ( $n = 6$ ) were adopted. The sample had an overall 51 children; of which 43 (60.8%) were adopted. Ninety percent ( $n = 27$ ) of the parents belonged to transracial families.

Participants' adopted children were aged between 14 and 26 ( $M = 16.09$ ;  $SD = 3.78$ ;  $Mdn = 17.5$ ), and 79.1% ( $n = 34$ ) were girls. Regarding age, 79.1% ( $n = 34$ ) of these adoptees were under 18. Most of these children had been internationally adopted, most of them came from China (53.5%;  $n = 23$ ), while others came from Nepal, Ethiopia, Peru, Chile, Poland, Colombia, and Russia (27.9%;  $n = 12$ ). Fourteen percent ( $n = 6$ ) had been nationally adopted in Spain. All of these adoptions were closed, with no communication between adoptive and birth family members.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria to participate in the study consisted in having at least one adopted child older than 14 years old. This inclusion criterion was applied to the oldest child in those cases with more than

two adopted children. In addition, participants should be adopters who completed the adoption process through Spanish institutions.

### ***Procedure and materials***

Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview designed specifically for the study. All interviews were conducted individually. The interview was organized in two main sections, the first one referring to communication about origins and the second one related to search for origins. Participants were recruited *via* an online form, so that researchers could contact them and inform them about the details of the investigation. This form was sent to various Spanish associations that bring together adoptive families or linked to adoption. In addition, the research team turned to its network of contacts to recruit adoptive parents. At this point, it should be noted that authors links to adoption are derived from their research activity. A total of 49 adopters showed interest in participating. Finally, interviews were arranged with 30 adoptive parents. The remaining 19 adopters did not fit within the inclusion criteria, either because they had not completed the adoption in Spain or because their adoptive children were under the cutoff age established.

At the beginning of each of the interviews, the researcher conducting the interview (the first author) negotiated consent. All participants gave their permission to record the interview. The interviews were carried out in Spanish, by telephone and with an average duration of 50 min. Regarding the ethical issues, it should be noted that the study has the approval of the University Ethics Committee.

### ***Strategy of analysis***

All interviews were transcribed for later analysis. For this analysis, Thematic Analysis (TA) was employed. This qualitative approach is flexible, and it allows almost any research question as well as to any ontological, epistemological, and theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2013). According to these authors, TA can be applied to develop a detailed description of a phenomenon, a certain aspect of it, or to carry out a constructivist analysis which can capture ideas and concepts that underlie the explicit content.

Two researchers (first and second authors) independently coded a sample of the interviews, attending to the semantic level of the data and developing codes that captured the explicit meaning of the participants' narratives. Thus, a coding framework was agreed which was used in the analysis of subsequent interviews, distributed equally among the researchers, adding a few more codes to the framework during the process. These new themes were proposed as the analyses was being conducted and were shared and profiled within

**Table 1.** Terms used to illustrate the frequency of occurrence.

Term used	Frequency of occurrence
All	30 participants
Almost all-Majority of	26–30 participants
Most-Many	20–26 participants
Some-Part	15–20 participants
(About) Half of	13–15 participants
A few	6–13 participants

the team, always based on their relevance and interpretive potential within the total number of interviews. In the coding process, the 6-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. First, a detailed reading of the interviews was carried out, so as to get familiarized with the data; secondly, a set of initial codes was generated, which identified some relevant and interesting characteristic in the data for the analysis; third, through the identification and formation of patterns or meanings, themes were generated; the fourth step involved reviewing the topics to move on to the fifth step, which was related to defining and labeling the topics. The sixth step consisted of writing the results. Indications about the terms used to illustrate the frequency of occurrence, that is, the number of participants in the categories explored through the analysis are presented in Table 1.

## Results and discussion

Results gather the perspective of participants on how they communicate about origins, specially, with their children, as well as the way in which they experience their search for origins. When describing the results, both the transracial condition of participants' families and the age of their children were considered when it seemed relevant. That is, transracial vs. non-transracial, and young adults over 18 vs. children under 18. Origins and their approach arose as significant aspects of the post-adoption period. Once the interviews were analyzed, three interrelated but differentiated themes were identified. All themes and subthemes are displayed in Table 2.

### *How do adoptive parents relate to origins?*

This theme captures participants' perspectives on how origins are perceived and faced by the members of their family.

### *How do parents experience them?*

When talking about origins, participants described feelings of gratitude toward birth parents. These kind of feelings regarding origins probably

**Table 2.** Identified themes.

Subthemes	Themes
How do parents experience them?	How do adoptive parents relate to origins?
How do parents perceive their children experience them?	
Adoption in context: support and shortcomings	How do adoptive parents communicate about origins?
How is it described by the adoptive parents?	
What resources and strategies have adoptive parents deployed?	Search for origins
The perspective of adoptive parents	
How do parents see adoptees?	
The biological family through the eyes of the adoptive parents	

have a positive impact on how origins are approached within the family due to a caring emotional tone (Palacios, 2010). The vast majority of participants felt satisfied with the adoption and described it as one of the best things they had done in their life. As noted in the literature (Amorós et al., 1996), most participants shared an emotional view of origins rather than a cognitive one. Some of these emotions or feelings can be classified as positive and some others as negative. Among the latter, some participants reported feelings of sorrow toward the story of relinquishment and the lifelong impact of it in their children. Regarding positive feelings, some of the participants tied their children’s origins to a feeling of affection, highlighting the connection they have with them due to all the gratifying experiences origins have yielded.

Participants also referred to the role of their partner, or the absence of it in the case of single-parent families. The vast majority of participants described a feeling of shared perspectives regarding origins and how to approach them, using expressions such as “going hand in hand”. In this sense, many of the participants pointed to a similar evolution within the couple in the way they deal with origins. However, they, mostly female participants, recognized taking the lead more often than their partner. This fact is in line with the literature as adoptees seem to value communication about origins with their mothers slightly more positively (Aramburu, 2014; Farr et al., 2014). One of the participants described this as “I believe that I have taken the initiative in all this, we have done many things together [...], going out with other families, spending a weekend away, things that the four of us have done as a family. But, it was mainly me the one channeling all the information” (Woman, 51 years old). This is consistent with what adoptees might feel. Martín and Corral (2022) found that young adult adoptees placed mothers at an emotional level in the approach of origins, as they found them to be more prone to explore and share emotions related to origins.

With respect to single-parents, against what it could be expected (Sohr-Preston et al., 2017), the majority of participants depicted a feeling of comfort with not having a partner with whom to share the process of approaching origins. They even noted that it might be easier being a



single-parent, “what I always think is that it is much easier because I have no one with whom to disagree” (Woman, 53 years old). Despite the general positive feeling of being a single-parent in the context of adoption, some participants mentioned a few negative aspects, “the most difficult thing was having to play the role of mother and father, so that I go insane, I have to get angry and I have to calm myself and calm him (son), all at once” (Woman, 51 years old).

Regarding their children, all participants felt they understood where they stand with respect to origins and story of adoption. The aspect in which participants differed was the degree of understanding towards their children, as well as the degree in which they are conscious about the feelings their children may be going through. Among the range of possibilities, some participants noted fully understanding the position of their children. Some others pointed to a very high comprehension towards their children, only limited by not having lived themselves any experience like the ones experienced by their children. Results showed that part of the parents, most of them of adolescents, described their children’s feelings toward origins as two sided, that is, as no apparent concern about origins and, at the same time, with the desire to know something about their biological parents:

she knows from the beginning where she comes from... because she came when she was 3 years old, so ... the times we have commented on it, I have told her that... in China is, well, looking for a needle in a haystack, then, no ... she doesn’t have ... she has no need, simply “I (daughter) would like to know what my mother was like, or what my father was like” but nothing else. (Woman, 55 years old).

Awareness about the feelings of their children may be explained by the child’s internal and external search (Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000). If children are more immersed in an internal search it would be more difficult for parents to be aware of their feelings, as it is usual for adopted children not to share their reflections and thoughts about their adoption (Aramburu Alegret et al., 2020; Reinoso & Forns, 2012). In addition, it may depend on the level of reflective functioning that the parent may have (Lo & Grotevant, 2020), that is the degree in which the parent is attuned to the mental state of their child (Fonagy et al., 1991). According to Rutherford et al. (2013), parents who are higher in reflective functioning are more prone to empathize with a distressed child.

The above can be also understood by the curiosity most adopted children and emerging adults experience about seeking information regarding their origins (Wrobel et al., 2013; Wrobel & Grotevant, 2019). However, many do not share this curiosity due to fears or concerns of hurting their adoptive parents’ feelings, which may decrease as they become adults (Martín & Corral, 2022).

### *How do parents perceive their children experience them?*

Mostly, participants described how they perceive their children relate to origins. More specifically, they delved into how origins have impacted their children's lives. As explained by Pavao (2005), origins impact adoptees' lives in different ways. For example, one of the participants, who belonged to a transracial family, illustrates it as follows: "when you start being called: "Chinese, you are whatever", then you start to have difficulties at school, in the feeling of belonging... that time marked a new stage in matters of relationships, school, behavior..." (Woman, 54 years old).

In this fashion, about half of the participants stated that their children felt rejection toward their origins as a consequence of how they had been treated by others. This was the case specially among international adoptees and transracial families in which adoption can be experienced negatively and cause rejection (Langrehr et al., 2015; Martín & Corral, 2022). Other feelings generally pointed out by the participants, like those reported by various authors (Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2019; Godon-Decoteau & Ramsey, 2018; Neil, 2012), were naturalness, curiosity, or sorrow aroused by their story of relinquishment. Some participants noted an absence of interest in their children regarding origins. One of the participants commented on it:

Really, she has always been very clear, she didn't want to, I do not know, it sounds bad but the truth is that she has never wanted to know anything about there, many times her father has said: "come, sit down, let's talk", "no, I (daughter) don't want anything" ... no, she doesn't want to search, she doesn't want to... (Woman, 48 years old).

In this sense, in the case of adoptions carried out in China, which are more than half within the sample of this study, the reluctance of adoptees to search for information about their origins may also be associated with the difficulties to locate and contact the biological parents, which, in turn, can arouse little or no interest in seeking information about their origins.

Framed in this theme, most participants spoke about the evolution in how their children relate to their origins. More specifically, some participants with children under 18 described an initial feeling of curiosity during childhood that decreases during adolescence. In contrast, some other participants, both parents of adoptees over and under 18, typically pointed to an evolution in the opposite direction, that is, a scarce interest in origins that increased or increasing once they reached adolescence. Palacios (2007) explains that it is as adoptees grow up when they exteriorize more frequently their thoughts about origins.

### *Adoption in context: support and shortcomings*

Out of the family system, almost all participants shared some claims. In the educational context, a great majority of participants, no matter the age of their children or their transracial condition, stated that they have

encountered a notable lack of training and information on adoption among teachers and in schools. According to participants, this lack of training has paved the way for their children to be trapped in an educational context whose demands do not adjust to their specific emotional needs, but, at the same time, load them with expectations that frequently overwhelm them or make them feel excluded or discriminated:

These children are punished for what happened to them, because they cannot meet the expectations that society sets for them (...) at school, in sports, with friends, in general, anywhere. That happens to my son, there are days when he cannot go to school, he somatizes everything, his stomach, his head, he has diarrhea and doesn't go to school, he can't, he feels insecure (...) this child has to do much more effort than other children to attend and to pass in school. (Man, 60 years old).

Because of these situations, most of the participants, regardless of transraciality or age, explained that they have carried out training and awareness actions for teachers through talks or teaching materials that they have offered them. Even if, teachers often appreciated those resources, the situation described continues highlighting the need to rethink the functioning of the educational system in attention to diversity. In fact, some of these parents have chosen to favor home learning environments that allow their children to develop in contexts that are not experienced by them as “hell” (Woman, 53 years old). In this regard, Weistra and Luke (2017) defend the importance of working in public education around adoption to improve the social understanding around the experience of adoptive families, to dismantle the unrealistic and idealized images built around adoptive parents and to reduce stigmatization that leads to exclusion and discrimination. Therefore, almost all participants reported that information about adoption should be socialized through social and community awareness campaigns in the school curricula.

Similarly, most participants, mainly those of transracial families, described that in the social context their children are often exposed to hurtful or mean comments hidden in humorous narratives that transmit prejudices and stereotypes, which inevitably influences mental health and family functioning (Weistra & Luke, 2017). This is the reason why they have chosen to limit certain interactions and relationships, as well as why they have prepared their children to face an implicit and latent racism that abounds within the community. The impact of this reality is discussed by Martínez and Muriedas (2019) when they say that racism appears as a determinant component to explain the “being from here or there”. In addition, part of the participants highlighted that, even though sometimes it is difficult to appreciate racism, it is usually frequent and habitually contribute to link adoption to abandonment:

They have prejudices that I don't want my daughter to experience: "but why did you have to adopt in China if you could adopt in Russia to have a child who would look more like you?", it was the first question and immediately made me distance myself, and I told my husband: "they are wrong". (Woman, 55 years old).

Due to situations as the ones described, some adoptive parents in transracial families noted feeling tired of constantly having to explain the physical differences with their children or having to frequently endure speeches of charity, pity and victimhood around their adoption, a claim also highlighted by Villa et al. (2013). These authors explain that these situations raise important questions about kinship, biology and belonging that are crossed by phenomena of racial, ethnic, political and economic discrimination. Some of the participants, with no differences between transracial or non-transracial families or the age of their children, revealed that they feel lonely and misunderstood. Additionally, they consider essential that the extended family should be trained in how to approach and face questions about the origins of their children, so that they can accompany and participate in their processes of search (Freixa & Negre, 2010).

This feeling of dissatisfaction is fueled by the perception of a lack of accompaniment and support from the institutions of the public administration throughout the adoption process. Results indicated that some participants, regardless of transraciality or age, have experienced the adoption processes as exhausting and not very empathetic, largely because they have felt alone, unprotected and resourceless. Weistra and Luke (2017) noted that adoptive parents, in the absence of post-adoption support and containment at the institutional level, come to feel isolated and misunderstood. For most of the participants, the quality of family, professional, and institutional support determines the way in which the search management processes are generated, the degree of difficulty and the feelings and experiences of the adoptive parents and their children (Villa et al., 2013):

At the institutional level I am absolutely alone since there is no information on what it means to be an adoptive family mother, on the complications that there may be, on what is the psychology of a boy or a girl who has been abandoned or who has had adverse circumstances, that is a total and absolute abandonment of the administration. (Woman, 51 years old).

Framed in this context of shortcomings, adoptive parents' associations have become an important source of training and emotional support for the participants of all conditions and throughout the post-adoptive period. Most of them state that these associations have allowed them to expand and strengthen their support network, as they allow them to connect with others who share their experience as adoptive parents. In addition, they help them deal with the complexities of processes such as that of

the search for their children's origins, which translates into a greater sense of tranquility and security within a scenario that, as it has been said, lacks firm support from other institutions. These groups provide them with meaningful emotional support to discuss personal concerns and exchange information in a safe environment (Bryan et al., 2010; Weistra & Luke, 2017):

Associationism in general helps understand reality with all families and well, because that's how you are reading every day, especially when you start, and then you relax ... you read a lot, you get informed, and that also gives you peace of mind and security of how to face the issues (Woman, 55 years old).

Part of the participants also spoke about the importance of the support provided by family members, friends, or neighbors, since this favors the construction of a climate of greater acceptance, normality, understanding, and unconditionality that cushions the various difficulties that may appear: "the truth is that with the family..., all the support in the world, and then with the people around us, my daughter has never, never had any problem for being adopted" (Woman, 53 years old). This aspect is defended by several authors (Rosnati et al., 2013; Weistra & Luke, 2017), when they highlight that the experience of adoptive parents is more positive when extended family and friends support the adoption, as it is proposed as a predictor of well-being and as a resource to face the challenges posed by adoption.

### ***How do adoptive parents communicate about origins?***

This theme involves the perception of the participants on how communication about origins occurs within the family, that is, how they and their children deal with it and the different strategies employed to approach origins.

### ***How is it described by the adoptive parents?***

An extended feeling among participants was that talking about origins is something "natural" within the family. Mostly, participants (regardless of the ethnicity or age of their children) considered talking about origins as an important aspect for the family. When it came to quantify how often they speak about origins participants shared various perspectives, half of parents pointed to very frequent conversations about origins while about the other half pointed to scarce conversations about them, even if they considered it a natural issue to talk about.

In addition, almost all participants, as Berástegui (2012) pointed out, alluded to an evolution in the way they communicate about origins. On

the one hand, a majority of the participants reported that, during childhood, they were the ones who initiated conversations about origins; and as their children grew older, it was them starting the conversations about their origins.

On the other hand, among those participants who explained that conversations about origins were frequent, a great majority of them described that as their children grow up, the way in which they approach origins has changed, that is, as recommended by Afin (2014), they have adapted the content and depth of the conversations to the developmental stage of their children. One of the participants explained it as follows:

I think that in the end it evolves and we mature throughout the process also depending on her (daughter) age, and her demands [...] it is true that when she was little, well, you have more control of what it is what she knows, what you give her ... now she is growing, is gaining autonomy, as it should be, independence ... then, I feel like a little more on the sidelines. (Woman, 55 years old).

Some participants reported difficulties when talking about their origins with their children. This was because they felt a certain degree of sadness, frustration, or uncertainty, either because of the questions their children asked or because they did not have enough information to give them (Homans, 2006). According to Aramburu et al. (2020), adoptive parents tend to underestimate their children's sense of connection with their origins as a way of avoiding facing a potentially overwhelming situation.

When adoptive parents are prone to openly talk about origins it seems probable, as our participants reported, that children experience positive feelings, such as, comfort (Berástegui, 2012). Discomfort was also mentioned by part of the participants, no matter the developmental state of their children or the transracial condition, either for not being internally prepared to approach certain issues related to origins or for having origins already quite integrated, so that conversations about origins are considered excessive: "he doesn't like to talk about it much and ... I think that is also like bringing it up again, he has assimilated it, so, why talk about it more? That is his approach" (Woman, 51 years old).

Even though most participants noted not having any difficulties talking about origins, a few participants explained that many times communication about origins has been tied to difficulties (Brodzinsky, 2011; Neil, 2012). A very frequent difficulty highlighted by participants that went beyond the age of their children was the fact of not having answers to certain questions due to the absence of information. Similarly, a majority of the participants pointed to the reality of not knowing what to answer, resulting in a "not very sweet answer" or in an answer that may "hurt" their children. Another difficulty was tied to the ability to detect what the child is expecting from the conversation in terms of emotions and information: "it is true that

when she (daughter) makes those silences and you wonder if she wants it or not, it is difficult, that is uncomfortable and you have to go through it very cautiously” (Woman, 65 years old). Some participants also described that approaching certain topics regarding origins is the actual challenge, for example, in line with Berástegui and Jódar (2013), introducing the word abandonment or talking about the story of drugs or abuse of the biological parents of their children. As described by several authors (Berástegui & Jódar, 2013; Jones & Hackett, 2007), part of the participants noted that all these difficulties frequently arouse fears, bewilderment, sorrow, or pain in them.

### *What resources and strategies have adoptive parents deployed?*

Directly linked with communication about origins and their approach, many participants alluded to the different strategies they have employed, or they currently employ. Some participants referred to them, following Kirk (1964), as work that adoptive parents must do as part of the adoptive parenthood, which is different to the normative parenthood.

In this vein, just as highlighted by Afin (2014), mostly, participants made explicit that it is essential to adapt to the pace marked by the children, which changes as the adoptee grows up, and to activate a “radar” to go beyond their children’s comments and, in that way, set an appropriate rhythm. In this sense, participants, adjusting to the proposal of Brodzinsky (2005) on communication openness, indicated that they have always let their children know their disposition and openness to talk about any aspect related to their origins, so that when they may want to do it, they are aware of such possibility. Similarly, most of the participants explained that adapting to the pace of their children also involves being aware, respecting, and accepting their needs and emotions. Authors such as Neil (2003) outline the relevance of taking into account these factors.

Even if not all the participants highlighted this specific strategy, the few participants who delved into strategies pointed to the importance of contextualizing origins, in both a historical and cultural sense, especially, those who belonged to transracial families. According to participants, framing should occur in two directions. On the one hand, parents reported framing origins for their children so that they can understand their origins and to prepare them for the time they “see them face to face”: “He (son), now, at least, when we speak, we can physically locate, [...]. He knows a little about how that society works ... that way you understand why the child was adopted” (Woman, 51 years old). On the other hand, parents said that they frame origins also for themselves:



There is a stage in which you have to train yourself more personally, because for me one of the reasons why my daughter is here is the one-child policy, then, you have to train yourself more personally, understand what it is, how it was done, to give the most truthful information (Man, 48 years old).

Likewise, a few participants noted that contextualizing origins serves to empower them, so that their children develop a positive identity and image of themselves (Koskinen & Böök, 2019). In this sense, Vetere and Dallos (2012) point out the importance of validating positive aspects; one of the participants provided one example of this: she tries to explain to her daughter the meaning of a piece of paper, possibly left by a member of the biological family, which wishes her a happy marriage in China: “I rely on data, look at that note... Who else? They left no one else that note... in their culture she (biological mother) wanted you to marry and be happy” (Woman, 54 years old). In addition, the promotion of self-acceptance seemed to be an important and typical strategy for participants, specially, regarding physical features which make them different to most of the people around them:

First the cultural one, it is important to accept oneself, to love oneself, I am beautiful with my brown skin and my coppery skin and nobody has to belittle me, I am beautiful just as I am, I work on this with my daughter “you are beautiful like an Inca princess, the beauty is not in the appearance of the white princesses, the beauty is in who you are, in how you feel and you are beautiful... (Woman, 47 years old).

Similarly, in order to promote self-acceptance, favoring a bond with the cultural heritage seemed important for some of the participants of transracial families. That way, these participants recognized including such heritage in the daily life of the family, through music, art, food, literature, costumes, or language.

Literature has repeatedly highlighted the importance of parents’ training and the support given by adoption professionals (Downes et al., 2022). In line with this idea, according to some participants who belonged to all conditions, an additional strategy employed in the approach of origins was realizing the need to work on themselves, that is, working on their own emotions regarding origins and on adoptive parenthood, so that origins are approached in a healthy way. In this vein, a few participants noted that self-criticism is important to revise their own attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts related to their child’s origins and how they are approached within the family.

It is important to note that the positive attitude and disposition generally found among our participants might be linked to their awareness derived from their active participation in associations and to the voluntariness and altruistic nature of their participation in the present research.



## ***Search for origins***

This theme refers to the perception of participants about the search for origins, how they and their children go through it, and how the biological family is viewed in this specific context.

### ***The perspective of adoptive parents***

For most participants, search is essentially related to two factors. On the one hand for transracial parents, to the deep and conscious immersion in the cultural heritage of the country/area of origin, such as geographical, historical, socio-political, cultural and contextual factors. In this vein, almost all participants reported that from an early stage they have tried to build a positive and complete image of their children's cultural roots or heritage. On the other hand, participants of all conditions mostly link origins with the possible contact with some of their biological relatives or even significant primary caregivers from orphanages or foster families with whom they lived previously. This understanding is consistent with that proposed by several authors (Martínez & Muriedas, 2019; Villa et al., 2013), who define the search as the process by which adoptees know, connect, and relate to significant people of their biological family and/or their culture of origin.

Many of the participants described that through the search, their children face a very important question in their lives that refers to the complex and painful subjective experience of abandonment, “why did they have to abandon me?” (Woman, 55 years old). Various authors (Freixa & Negre, 2010; Martínez & Muriedas, 2019; Villa et al., 2013) state that frequently, as adoptees become adolescents and adults and understand their family and personal reality, they suffer a feeling of loss and abandonment that may or may not intensify at different stages of their lives. In this sense, some participants indicated that, rather than talking about the search for origins, this process of exploration, deepening and contact should be seen as a “reminder” not to lose the roots. Likewise, most participants described that process as essential for the the identity of their children so that they can work on who they are and where they come from. As explained by Berástegui (2010), participants shared that it is a right of their children to complete their personal history and integrate all its elements:

Well for me it means much more than the search for a specific biological family, the search for origins is related to a question of identity, who I am, how I define myself, how I identify myself (...) for us it has always been very important that she understands that her birth family, that her country of origin are good (...) that the search for origins is not a search, but rather that acceptance of who I am and where I come from (Woman, 55 years old).

On an emotional level, this search process has generally implied for participants going through a wide range of emotions derived, to a large extent, from some difficulties they have encountered along the way. Within these difficulties, consistent with those stated by authors such as Freixa and Negre (2010), the limitations to find additional information, referred by participants as something “impossible and improbable”. Similarly, they noted the lack of control regarding where to start the search and how to do it, or the limitations to trust the biological families.

There is a wide range of emotions tied to the search process, ranging from fear to satisfaction. Fear was one of the most generally alluded emotion, which seemed to increase in the face of various aspects. For example, the situations their children may face during the search; the little or no existing information; the feeling of rejection their children may undergo; the lack of emotional support their children or themselves may feel through the process; and less intensely, the possibility that their children would desire to stay with their biological families. Thus, this fear is often compounded with caution, worry, frustration, insecurity and even jealousy, a finding also reported by Villa et al. (2013). However, this fear did not generally diminish participants’ curiosity and their expectations about what the search may bring:

From the fear that, if one day we look and we find something very ugly, I do not want to find a robbery, I do not want to find a deception, that seems terrifying for our children, for biological families, for us, it would be terrifying, but then we are also very curious, well, what would they be like? What will they be like? Will there be other brothers? In what situation will they be? Is there anyone left? Is there no one left? (Woman, 44 years old).

Most participants expressed empathy toward their children’s need to know and learn more about their origins no matter their age. They recognize that doing so is also an outstanding task within the construction of their story as a family that would bring long-term benefits to their children in the development of their life narrative. Hence, they feel satisfied to do so from an open and collaborative position, without recriminations, judgment, or criticism. As noted in the literature (Amorós et al., 1996; Martínez & Muriedas, 2019), searching for origins helps adoptees put together the parts of their history and of themselves, making them feel more complete.

In fact, all the participants stated that they would be willing to accompany their children to their country or place of origin as a sign of support, help and unconditional love. All of them recognized the importance of this event to complete the story of their children, so they described being ready and committed to favor direct contact with their origins. In this regard, Freixa and Negre (2010) emphasize the importance of adoptive

parents accompanying their children in the process of search, always respecting, and accepting their concerns. Additionally, this intention seemed to be maintained whether there is an explicit interest or not of the children to carry out this contact with their origins: “if she tells us: “mom, I want to go find my origins, if I have a mother, siblings or something”, because we are there for that, to help her and do everything possible to make her happy, of course” (Woman, 48 years old). However, despite the remarkable motivation to visit their children’s country or place of origin, part of the participants expressed their concern about the monetary expenses that this trip may entail and their possibilities to deal with it.

In a few cases, the search for origins was essentially initiated and promoted by the participating parents. Participants of both transracial and non-transracial families explained taking actions tracking and exploring information about their children’s biological origins, through professionals in the countries of origin or through friends or acquaintances who have traveled to the places of birth of their children. Similarly, parents, also of both transracial and non-transracial families, reported being in contact with the orphanages or foster institutions with which they had processed the adoption, sporadically sending messages or photos as a way of “not closing doors” (Woman, 58 years old). Parents of international adoptees also described financing study trips for their children to their countries of origin. As it was found by Villa et al. (2013), parents may be motivated to take the initiative of the search, since that way they feel safer to speak to their children about their origins, which, at the same time, helps them to diminish their fears, especially when they have little information.

### *How do parents see adoptees?*

From the participants’ perspective, mainly of those who belonged to transracial families, the experience of their children regarding the search for their origins seems to be polarized. On the one hand, a process that is lived with fear due to the difficulties that it may entail or, even, due to the fear of losing connection with the cultural elements of their country of adoption because of the contact with the cultural roots of origin. On the other hand, a process that is lived with desire, curiosity, and an explicit interest in meeting the members of their biological family, especially parents and siblings, as well as with the territory and the idiosyncratic factors that make the culture of origin unique. In between these two poles, typically, participants perceived an apparent lack of interest from their children toward the search, expressed in the absence of questions about it or the little initiative they show to invest efforts in this process. There were some participants who kept doubting whether it is a radical and definitive lack of interest:

What I perceive is as if they were not experiencing anything bad, because I don't get their questions or concerns, but they may have them. Well, I think they have them that, at some point, they come to their mind (Woman, 55 years old).

This is consistent with what Irhammar and Cederblad (2000) proposed on internal and external search. Regarding internal search, the limited interest shown could be understood as the manifestation of the void mentioned by Amorós et al. (1996), regarding the lack of information and questions posed by adoptees, as well as the awareness of previously experienced losses. Palacios (2007) adds that this type of search, more intense during adolescence, is not necessarily accompanied by observable behaviors, since it is often limited to reflections that adoptees do not share with others. On the other hand, the external search, tied to curiosity and interest, is associated with obtaining answers to questions that adoptees have been asking themselves over the years.

As an additional issue, it is worth highlighting the scarce reference generally made by participants regarding the use of social media and technology as a tool to facilitate contact between adoptees and birth relatives. Although it is an aspect little explored and referred in this research, it is increasingly reflected in other studies (Shier, 2021), so it can be expected that it will be increasingly present in the narratives of both adoptees and adoptive parents.

### *The biological family through the eyes of the adoptive parents*

With respect to the biological family, the adoptive parents state that, in the face of the search for origins and direct contact, in the cases in which it has been established, their attitude has been mainly one of openness to communication about origins and of disposition to maintain contact. This reaction is frequently confirmed in research carried out by various authors (Amorós et al., 1996; Boyle, 2017). A few participants referred to the friendship or affective closeness between them and the biological relatives. According to participants, no matter their condition, this has motivated an opportunity for biological parents to express their gratitude for the context in which their children are growing. In this sense, Villa et al. (2013) confirm that the members of the biological family face this contact with happiness, curiosity, anxiety, gratitude, and satisfaction for being allowed to know what life is like for their biological children:

She shares with me her experiences, those of her children, I share mine with her, and she tells me: "the relinquishment that I did, I feel so satisfied that you are his mother", she told me: "I never imagined this, I thought that I would never see this child again, never, never, I thought, ever ...". (Woman, 47 years old).

A few participants revealed that during the process they perceived an invasive, intimidating, and blaming attitude in some birth family members, asking questions such as: “Where is my son?, What have you done with my son?” (Woman, 56 years old). Challenges that have been reported by authors such as Sánchez-Sandoval (2011), who noted the existence of conflicts between the adoptive and biological parents of the children, which indicates a specific need for prior training or greater monitoring and support for these families.

Most of the participants of transracial and non-transracial families, whose children had had direct contact with their biological families, considered such contact as an experience with a high emotional impact. Amorós et al. (1996) and Boyle (2017) explain that this is not simply a cognitive activity that is limited to gather information, but that there is a strong emotional component, loaded with expectations, mixed feelings, fears, joys and hopes.

In a few cases of all conditions it became necessary to seek professionals who could help monitor the emotional reactions triggered after contact, since the information received and the encounters experienced significantly disrupted the affective world of the adoptee, impacting on their previous and new relationships (Boyle, 2017; Villa et al., 2013). Despite this, it was also acknowledged by participants, in line with Amorós et al. (1996) and Villa et al. (2013), that in the medium- and long-term search is a primary action that allows the assimilation and integration of one's own life story, finding answers to questions that help reduce the uncertainty and anxiety: “What would it be? What would it have been? What would have happened?” (Woman, 51 years old).

### ***Limitations and future studies***

One of the limitations of the present study is that there were significantly more mothers than fathers. For that reason, even if some authors (Rodríguez et al., 2009) highlight a greater involvement of mothers in the upbringing of their children, future studies should try to balance the number of mothers and fathers in their samples. Another limitation is related to most participants having children whose country of origin was China. Future research should try to include a wider variety of countries of origin. However, this can be explained by the numerous adoptions of Chinese girls in Spain (Ministerio de Sanidad Consumo y Bienestar Social, 2019) due to the reality of the country (Ebenstein, 2010) during a certain point in time. This context leads to another limitation, participants had more daughters than sons. It would also be enriching for future research to include the perspective of adoptees, especially in light of our finding that parents tend to initiate the search process as well as the perspective of

parents whose children have reached emerging adulthood. In addition, future research would benefit from a multiperspective approach (Larkin et al., 2019), including the view of the different intervening agents of the family, that is, adopters, adoptees, and siblings.

## Conclusion

This research has contributed to a greater understanding of adoptive parents' perspectives regarding origins and their approach, as well as to closely appreciate their position with respect to the search for origins. In this sense, it has been observed a perception of openness in communication and an adequate comprehension of their children. The latter is sometimes hampered by the seeming little importance that their children give to their origins, or the reduced communication about them. These factors possibly have to do with the internal and the external search (Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000) and the reflective functioning of the parent (Lo & Grotevant, 2020; Rutherford et al., 2013). Moreover, through this study, we can see that, occasionally, parents are the ones who seem to show a more explicit interest in the search for origins. When it comes to make a differentiation between mothers and fathers, mothers seem to be slightly more involved, at least emotionally, in the post-adoptive period. Beyond the family, it seems that the aspects that should improve are numerous, especially, those related to the racism suffered by their children in different contexts such the school. This study also contributes to the visibility of needs of the adoptive family members. Furthermore, it contributes to give a voice to adopters and, therefore, expand our knowledge in terms of the challenges and achievements they experience and the strategies they employ in their daily life when dealing with origins.

## Disclosure statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the University of Deusto Research Training Grants Programme. Our gratitude to the associations that have collaborated with the study, and, of course, to participants.

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