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Zsanett Adámi-Rózsa

Adoption Communication
The Construction of Family Communication Climates and Adoption Entrance Narratives in Open Adoptive Families in Hungary

Ph.D. dissertation

Supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Petra Aczél

Full Professor

Budapest
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I. Research background and justification of the topic

The family is one of the most defining social units, it is constructed not only on legal, biological, and political grounds, but also on symbolic, communicative, and emotional ones. In the 21st century, the concept of the family is being continuously re-evaluated: a growing number of children grow up in single-parent, blended, or adoptive families. The social legitimacy and self-representation of alternative family structures have been reassessed since the 1970s, when the structuralist view of the family gave way to a transactional one. Communication plays a key role in this process: family identity is created through acts of storytelling as much as through legal or biological ties (Colaner, Halliwell & Guignon, 2014; Colaner & Soliz, 2017).

The family is every person's primary social arena, and for most children, family communication is the primary source of information, even on such complex and emotionally charged topics as adoption. It is the parents who decide when and in what form they talk about the topic, and how they construct the story through which the child comes to know his or her own origins (Brodzinsky, 2006; Wrobel et al., 2003; Adámi, 2023a). The stories of adoptive families often represent different perspectives: in one family, the life-changing arrival of the child comes to the fore, in another, the message that adoption is just as legitimate a family form as one based on blood ties. Communication and family research describes these narrative constructions with the concepts of family communication patterns and identity narratives (Harrigan, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011; Colaner & Soliz, 2017).

The dissertation rests on two theoretical pillars. The first is Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) developed by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002a, 2002b, 2006), which describes communication within the family along two basic dimensions. Conversation orientation reflects the extent to which the family encourages open, two-way communication, while conformity orientation reflects the extent to which the family emphasizes unity, hierarchy, and adherence to norms. The combination of the two dimensions yields four family communication climates: consensual (high conversation and high conformity orientation), pluralistic (high conversation and low conformity orientation), protective (low conversation and high conformity orientation), and laissez-faire (low on both dimensions). The application of this model to adoptive families (Horstman, Colaner & Rittenour, 2016; Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010) is a novel approach.

The second pillar is the adoption entrance narrative (AEN), that is, the parental account in which parents tell the child the story of how he or she came into the family, of his or her origins and adoption (Harrigan, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011; Hays, Horstman, Colaner &

Nelson, 2016). The AEN is not merely information transfer but a fundamental component of the adopted child's identity formation and socialization. The dissertation complements these two frameworks with the Family Adoption Communication (FAC) model developed by Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, and McRoy (2003) and with Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management theory, and situates them within the transactional (communicative) conception of the family (Galvin, 2006; Suter, Reyes & Ballard, 2011).

The subject of the research is open adoptive families. Under the Family Law Book of Act V of 2013 on the Civil Code, open adoption is an adoption in which the prospective adoptive parent and the birth parent know each other, and the birth parent consents to the adoption of the child by this specific person (Katonáné, 2018; Pozsik & Adámi-Rózsa, 2025). The topic is also of public interest: in Hungary, the number of approved adoptions increased between 2022 and 2025, and in 2025, 1,416 children were placed with families (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2026). How parents tell the story of a child's origins directly affects the child's identity, relational security, and self-esteem (Colaner & Soliz, 2017).

The research gap can be identified at three points. First, the international literature (Wrobel et al., 2003; Harrigan, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011; Hays et al., 2016; Colaner & Soliz, 2017) is predominantly built on the retrospective recollections of adopted children, while the empirical study of entrance narratives actively constructed by parents is lacking. Second, the relationship between family communication climate and the construction of AENs has not previously been examined empirically, although both frameworks are key factors of family storytelling. Third, empirical research on this topic, based on a Hungarian sample, is practically nonexistent. Within adoption research, the communication-science perspective is markedly under-represented compared with psychological and sociological approaches (Adámi, 2023b; Adámi-Rózsa, 2025b), even though Brodzinsky (2006, 2011) emphasized early on that the primary challenge of adoptive families is precisely communication: sharing the adoption story with the child.

The fundamental aim of the dissertation is to explore how adoption entrance narratives are constructed in adoptive parents' accounts and how they relate to the family communication climate. The starting point of the research is that talking about adoption is not mere information transfer but a communicative process and act, deeply influenced by the family's communication patterns: openness, conformity, the possibility or absence of dialogue. The aim is twofold: on the one hand, to offer a theoretical framework linking AENs and family communication

patterns, and on the other, to serve as a practical tool for parents, counselors, and professionals. The central thesis of the dissertation is that structural openness (the legal and relational framework of open adoption) is not identical to narrative openness, that is, to the way the family actually tells and communicates the story of the adoption.

The empirical investigation is guided by three research questions:

> RQ1: How are family communication climates articulated in the discourses of open adoptive families (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2002b, 2006)?
>
> RQ2: What recurring patterns can be identified in adoption entrance narratives across the different climates (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Harrigan, 2010; Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011; Hays et al., 2016)?
>
> RQ3: How do the narrative roles of mothers and fathers differ in communication about adoption, and how do parents regulate narrative access in the different family communication climates (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Harrigan, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011; Colaner et al., 2014; Colaner & Soliz, 2017; Hays et al., 2016)?

The first question builds on the assumption that the family's communication climate determines how, when, and in what form communication about adoption appears in everyday family life. The second question asks how families in different climate types structure their stories, which themes they foreground, and which emotional or stylistic elements they use (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). The third question rests on the observation that parents may fulfill different communicative roles within the family (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Schrodt, Witt & Messersmith, 2008; Fivush, Bohanek & Duke, 2008): mothers typically build more detailed, emotionally richer narratives, while fathers more often structure or frame the stories.

The research is thus situated at the intersection of family communication, adoption communication, and narrative storytelling, integrating previously isolated research directions. The novelty of the dissertation lies in being among the first to empirically examine the construction of AENs in relation to the dimensions of the family communication climate, from the parental rather than the adoptee perspective, using a Hungarian sample.

II. Methods applied

To answer the research questions, the communication patterns of open adoptive families and the adoption entrance narratives they construct were analyzed. Since the research seeks to understand complex communicative phenomena unfolding in a real social context, its approach is fundamentally qualitative and inductive-thematic, both exploratory and descriptive. In addition to the qualitative data, a supplementary quantitative analysis was carried out to assess the families' communication climates and to ensure that the qualitative results could be systematized and compared.

Sample

The target group of the research consisted of families living in Hungary who adopted through open adoption. In each of the 15 families involved (30 parents), at least one child was between 7 and 14 years of age. This age range is particularly relevant because school-age children can interpret the narratives addressed to them and engage in self-reflection, whereas before their 14th birthday, they cannot yet initiate an official search for their origins, which could radically alter the construction of the adoption story. Families were selected through purposive sampling, partly using the snowball method: the Gólyahír Foundation, which operates alongside the Gólyahír Association, published the research call in August 2024. The inclusion criteria were: (1) the family adopted at least one child through open adoption, (2) the child was between 7 and 14 years old, (3) both parents agreed to take part in the interview, complete the questionnaire, and write the story. The sample does not represent the entire adoptive population of Hungary, but it fits the exploratory, descriptive nature and theory-building intent of the research.

Data collection

Data collection took place between October 2024 and February 2025 in a multi-phase, combined model with three complementary data sources:

1) Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP) questionnaire (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b). Of the 26 items, 15 measure conversation orientation and 11 measure conformity orientation on a five-point Likert scale. Parents completed the questionnaire in my presence, on individual answer sheets but jointly. Based on the subscale means, parents and then families were classified as high or low relative to the sample median and assigned to one of the four climate types. Given the

small sample size, the questionnaire was used as a classifying, orienting instrument within a qualitatively dominant design, not as a basis for strong psychometric inferences.

2) Semi-structured interviews with both parents together, lasting between 60 and 150 minutes, in person for three families and online (Microsoft Teams) for twelve. The interviews explored the family communication environment, parental roles, coping strategies, and the nature of communication about adoption. Recordings were transcribed using the Alrite speech recognition software, and each transcript was manually checked.

3) Written adoption entrance narratives. After the interviews, mothers and fathers were asked separately, without consulting each other and without any length limit, to write down the story as they had told their child about the adoption up to the time of the interview, parts they wished to emphasize could be marked in bold or capitals (Owen, 1984; Hays et al., 2016). A total of 25 written narratives (13 maternal and 12 paternal texts from 13 families) were received.

Data analysis

The interviews were analyzed according to the principles of reflexive inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). To ensure coding reliability, a co-coder was involved (Neuendorf, 2017): three randomly selected interviews were coded independently, after which a joint code system was established through a comparative discussion. On this basis, I, as the principal researcher, coded the interviews from the remaining 12 families in an Excel-based data table. The analysis of the interviews yielded nine main thematic codes; in the full sample (N = 15), a total of 1,804 coding units were recorded.

The written AENs were coded using the same procedure: the three stories were coded independently with the co-coder, and the remaining 22 stories were analyzed by me using the jointly developed code system. The narrative analysis rested on eight thematic codes (including the waiting period, arrival home, and the first days, rituals, practices, and methods, emotions in communication). The corpus contained 420 units of analysis and 499 code occurrences. The analysis relied on family-level binary presence (x/n), code density, and exploratory comparison, as well as on dyadic analysis (12 parental pairs: both / mother only / father only / neither), which made it possible to compare maternal and paternal narratives in terms of length, thematic richness, emotional saturation, and structure.

The comparison of climate groups was based on the consensual and pluralistic families, no family in the sample was classified as protective or laissez-faire. In two families, the classification of the two parents differed (in one, the mother was consensual and the father protective, in the other, the mother was consensual and the father pluralistic). These discordant cases were analyzed as separate, contrastive cases because assigning them to an aggregated group would have blurred the actual difference between the two parents' orientations.

Ethical considerations and researcher reflexivity

The research was conducted with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of Corvinus University of Budapest (KRH-065-2025-REC-Zsanett-Adámi-Rózsa). All participants were informed in writing about the purpose and procedure of the research, parents signed a consent form, and the data were stored anonymized and password-protected. I treated my own position as part of the methodological reflection: I am an adoptee myself, which is why I deliberately focused only on adoptive parents in the research. This partial involvement enabled a dual perspective, empathy together with critical distance, supported by reflexive self-monitoring and regular consultation with the co-coder.

Limitations of the methodology

The purposively recruited convenience sample of 15 families limits generalisability, the research did not examine the children's narratives or their longitudinal development. The joint completion of the questionnaire differs from its usual individual completion, so the measurement records a jointly constructed family self-interpretation. Online data collection may have introduced bias into the interview process owing to the scarcity of non-verbal communication, and the written AENs were heterogeneous in genre (some became diary-like or reflective texts addressed to the researcher). The coding, although agreed with a co-coder, is not free from researcher subjectivity.

III. Results of the dissertation

The results of the dissertation can be summarised in relation to the three research questions as follows.

1. Open adoption does not override family communication climates, it operates as a stress test for them (RQ1)

The literature often carries the implicit assumption that open adoption, as an institutional and legal framework, necessarily goes hand in hand with increased communicative openness within the family (Brodzinsky, 2006; Colaner et al., 2014). The results showed, by contrast, that open adoption does not create a new, uniformly "open" communication climate that would replace earlier patterns. The sample comprised 8 pluralistic, 5 consensual, and 2 parentally discordant families. Open adoption appeared as a distinct situation that made the organizing elements of the climates (conversation and conformity orientation) particularly visible, precisely along the topics it generates (information control, relational boundaries, autonomy, identity, access to the story of origins). This is consistent with the tenet of the FAC model that open adoption primarily creates communicative opportunities which families use differently (Wrobel et al., 2003; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011; Hays et al., 2016). Openness is therefore much more a structure of communicative opportunity than a communicative state.

2. Structural openness is not identical to narrative openness

The central, overarching empirical proposition of the dissertation is that legal openness does not guarantee narrative openness. In the families studied, the narrative accessibility of adoption-related information did not follow automatically from open adoption, it was jointly regulated by parental interpretation, the family communication climate, and narrative roles. This is empirically supported by the fact that two families classified as consensual by the questionnaire submitted no entrance narrative, because, by their own account, they do not talk to the child about the adoption. The absence of an AEN thus indicates that FAC creates a communicative opportunity, the family communication climate provides a communicative medium, but an AEN only comes into being if the family wishes to interpret and convey the adoption in narrative form as well. The FAC–FCP–AEN relationship is not linear.

3. The thematic organization of AENs shows different tendencies across climates, but neither climate produces a uniform narrative pattern (RQ2)

Within the corpus, different tendencies of thematic organisation emerged between pluralistic and consensual climates, for instance with regard to dialogicality, temporal scope and thematic diversity. In pluralistic families a reflective, context-sensitive and child-centred organisation of communication appeared more frequently, in which the child's interest, questions and emotional state determined when the story was evoked, here the challenge was not the

prohibition of talk but the good construction of it. In consensual families, communication occurred in a more structured rhythm, along the principles of “proper timing” and “age-appropriateness”, built on answers to the child’s questions. Nevertheless, neither climate type produced a uniform, typical AEN pattern: expanding, dialogic, and more restricted, condensed stories occurred in both. Six of the eight thematic codes appeared in every family in both climate groups (pluralistic: 7/7; consensual: 4/4). The largest descriptive difference emerged in the coding of answers to the child’s questions (pluralistic: 6/7; consensual: 2/4). Narrative detail, emotional articulation, and repeatability, therefore, cannot be derived automatically from either the fact of open adoption or the climate type (Harrigan, 2010; Colaner & Soliz, 2017). The result refines linear models of the “openness = good communication” type (Brodzinsky, 2006, 2011; Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010) and interprets narrative access as a variable, negotiable, and at times restricted resource.

4. A consistent mother–father asymmetry: narrative carrier and narrative companion roles (RQ3)

The dyadic comparison of maternal (N = 13) and paternal (N = 12) narratives indicated a consistent asymmetry. Maternal texts were generally longer, contained more thematic elements and explicit emotional labels, more often started from an emotional and relational point of departure, and more often carried the continuity of the story and the explanations intended for the child, the dissertation describes this role as narrative carrier. Paternal texts were mostly shorter, more episodic and event-centered, with emotions appearing implicitly, embedded in action or conveyed through humor. The dissertation interprets this as a narrative companion role. Themes appearing in only one parent’s text occurred predominantly in maternal texts, which points to a narrative division of labor within the family (Fivush et al., 2008). The difference cannot, however, be interpreted as an independent causal effect of the parents’ gender, because it is bound up with the length, genre, and addressee of the texts and with the parents’ communicative roles.

5. Maternal narrative presence operates as different role qualities: narrative gatekeeper and narrative facilitator

One of the most important results of the research is that maternal narrative presence takes on different role qualities in the different climates. In consensual climates mothers in several cases appeared as narrative gatekeepers: conversation orientation and continuous presence did not mean an equal distribution of narrative entitlement, because the depth and timing of information

remained hierarchically regulated. In pluralistic modes of functioning, mothers more often became narrative facilitators, who actively initiated, mobilized tools, and expanded the narrative in response to the child's questions. The two concepts are the author's own, they are interpretive role types reconstructed in the sample, not gender roles generalizable to all adoptive mothers. The result shows that the role of "mother as main narrator" does not in itself carry openness: the regulation of narrative access (gatekeeping or facilitation) can be treated as an independent dimension that does not automatically merge into the concept of conversation orientation (Petronio, 2002; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

6. Theory-refining and mid-range model-building contribution

The dissertation developed an integrative interpretive framework that understands open adoption as a lasting communicative context, a contextual activator: a situation that activates and amplifies the underlying logic of family communication climates and parental narrative roles without in itself determining their direction or quality. This framework contributes to the empirical refinement of FCPT and the FAC model, and is summarised in the communication model of the family adoption narrative. In this conception, the adoption entrance narrative is not a closed story but a dynamic, role-dependent family communication practice shaped by feedback and jointly formed by parental role interpretations, the child's initiatives (or their absence), and the dynamics of family communication. The result is among the first in the Hungarian literature to empirically link the construction of the AEN to the theoretical framework of the family communication climate.

7. Practical applicability

The results can be directly used in the communicative support of open adoptive families: in adoption preparation and follow-up programmes, in the communication curricula of the health visitor network and teacher training, and for helping professionals (family support workers, psychologists, teachers), so that family communication about adoption is treated not as a normative expectation but as a supportable process adapted to the family climate and the child's age (Adámi-Rózsa, 2024). Building on the empirical results, a communication-support card game entitled "Rólad. Róluk. Rólunk." ("About You. About Them. About Us.") was developed for the 7 to 14 age group, its prototype was given to the participating families, who reported that the game helped verbalize emotions, expanded the narratives, and reduced the tension of conversations about adoption. This confirms the dissertation's finding that open communication about adoption is not a one-off event but a sustained narrative practice.

8. Directions for further research

As a continuation of the research, the following are warranted: a larger mixed-methods study in which protective and laissez-faire climates also appear, cross-cultural comparison, since the legal and cultural meaning of openness differs across countries, a longitudinal approach following the transformation of the AEN in adolescence and young adulthood, the inclusion of the children's perspective with age-appropriate methods, impact assessment of communication-support tools, and the extension of the interpretation of open adoption as a communicative activator to other family situations concerning identity and origin stories (blended families, donor-assisted reproduction, migration family histories).

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