

Adoption in Greece's child protection system: Adoptive parents' narratives and cognitions on psychosocial negotiations and therapeutic caregiving

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Abstract

Adoption is conventionally framed as a statutory mechanism for child protection; however, adoptive parents' perspectives reveal it to be a far more complex psychosocial process defined by continuous meaning-making, resilience, therapeutic caregiving, and pervasive uncertainty. This study presents a qualitative exploration of the narratives of twenty-seven adoptive parents. Using semi-structured interviews subjected to thematic analysis, the research examines how parents negotiate the semantic density of adoption as both rupture and repair, and as an intervention that reconfigures family identities.

The analysis identifies three interconnected domains. First, parents conceptualise adoption as a paradoxical act that simultaneously embodies altruism, loss, and continuity. Second, experiences of pre-adoption preparation highlight asymmetrical power relations and experiences of inadequacy within professional systems. Third, post-placement life emerges as a site of ongoing negotiation, where parental identity, attachment, and the child's evolving sense of self are intertwined with service navigation, open contact dilemmas, and the sustained effort required to maintain family bonds. Findings illuminate adoption as a dynamic, reparative and unfinished process rather than a definitive resolution. They underscore the need for reforms in training, policy, and support services that acknowledge the complexity of adoptive parenthood. Specifically, the study argues for support structures that prioritise emotionally attuned accompaniment and trauma-informed approaches, enabling families to adapt to evolving challenges and fostering resilience across the life course.

Keywords

child protection; adoptive parenthood; trauma; rupture and repair; identity; resilience; psychoeducation

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Background and Discourse

Adoption has long occupied a complex position at the intersection of legal intervention, social protection, and familial identity, carrying the dual burden of addressing the vulnerability of children while fulfilling adults' aspirations to assume the parental role. In international discourse, adoption is predominantly framed as a child-protection measure, designed to rescue children from the deleterious consequences of institutionalisation and prolonged exposure to early adversity [1]. Research consistently demonstrates that institutional care can have lasting consequences, including impaired attachment, reduced resilience, and complex trauma in children and adolescents [2]. Within this context, adoption is recognised as both preventive and therapeutic, offering stability, nurturance, as well as the environment in which relational bonds can thrive [3].

The Greek situation is particularly instructive. Historically marked by resilience on institutional care, Greece has undertaken a gradual – though uneven – shift toward family-based alternatives [4]. Recent legislative reforms have aimed to align child welfare with European practices, but structural challenges still hinder early placement, leaving a large number of children in long-term care [5]. Against this drop, the voices of adoptive parents in Greece are worthy of close consideration, as their accounts reveal the conflicts between aspiration and bureaucracy, care and constraint [6]. The qualitative investigation of these experiences both deepens an otherwise undeveloped academic field but also brings into the forefront the lived experience of those families whose voices are often obscured by policy and legal abstractions [7]. Debates around adoption inevitably overlap with broader discussions on identity formation, kinship, and social and cultural conceptions of parenthood [8].

Adoptive Parenthood

Raising an adopted child presents distinct complexities compared to biological parenthood. Recent research has increasingly focused on adoptive parenthood, aiming to address longstanding gaps in empirical data [9,10]. Adoption is a multifaceted process that encompasses a range of interpersonal dynamics, emotional transitions, and sustained interactions with institutional systems. Within this context, adoptive parenting introduces unique psychological and practical challenges that can influence parents' emotional well-being and shape their caregiving approach.

Adjustment to adoptive family life is influenced by a constellation of protective and risk factors. These include *child-related variables* (e.g., behavioural and emotional difficulties), *parent-related attributes* (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy), and *service-related components* (e.g., pre-adoption preparation, post-adoption support) [11]. Central to the process of family adaptation and cohesion is the psychological negotiation of three core losses: the biological parents' separation from their child, the adoptive parents' experience of infertility, and the adoptee's disconnection from their origins. [12,13].

Adoptive parents also navigate a series of stress-inducing experiences, including bureaucratic hurdles, rigorous assessment protocols, discrepancies between the imagined child and the child received, intercultural dynamics, and societal stigma. These challenges are often compounded by unresolved trauma, unrealistic expectations, attachment difficulties, and complexities surrounding the sensitive task of adoption disclosure [14,15].

Beyond providing care and stability, adoptive parents often assume a therapeutic role. Through consistent, emotionally attuned, and responsive caregiving, they can help reframe traumatic experiences, reduce behavioural difficulties, and support children's neurobiological recovery [16,17]. This therapeutic dimension underscores the transformative potential of adoption and highlights the importance of tailored support systems that empower adoptive families to navigate challenges and sustain resilience throughout their journey.

Despite a growing body of literature and the international recognition of adoption as a cornerstone of child protection systems, the lived experiences of adoptive parents in Greece remain underexplored. Existing research has primarily focused on legislative reform, institutional practices, or child outcomes, often leaving parental perspectives subsumed under policy or legal frameworks. This study seeks to address this gap by prioritising the experiential dimension of adoption and by examining how Greek adoptive parents interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to this experience. By foregrounding their narratives, the study's aims were: (a) to identify the themes emerging from parental testimonies; (b) to examine how these themes interact with broader social and institutional processes; and (c) to explore how adoptive parents' narratives shape the discourse of adoption. Central to the research design was the conviction that qualitative testimony is indispensable for capturing the subtleties of these processes [18]. The issue, therefore, is twofold: the invisibility of adoptive parents' perspectives in Greek academic discourse, and the lack of a systematic qualitative framework to reflect those perspectives [19].

Methodology

Method

A qualitative design was employed as the most suitable approach to delve into the complexity of human experiences, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and meaning-making [20]. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of how adoptive parents interpret adoption, providing access to relational, emotional, and social nuances that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. In addition, it aligned with best international research practices with vulnerable populations, where prioritising participants' voices and authenticity is of paramount importance [21]. Semi-structured interviews formed the core data collection method, ensuring both consistency across participants and flexibility for them to narrate their experiences freely.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, based on the assumption that specific categories of individuals are likely to provide rich and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under study [21]. Recruitment took place through adoption agencies and informal community networks, enabling trust and encouraging participation [22]. Prospective participants received detailed study information, provided written informed consent, and were assured of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence [23].

The sample consisted of twenty-seven adoptive parents drawn from both formal associations and informal networks. The sample was deliberately heterogeneous with respect to age, gender, socioeconomic status and geographical region, ensuring a diversity of voices [24]. This variation enriched the data by capturing both common challenges and situation-specific experiences. Inclusion criteria were: (a) having completed a legal adoption, (b) having adopted a child between the ages of 0-6 years, and (c) having lived with the adopted child for at least one year to ensure sufficient depth of experience for reflection.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in full accordance with recognised ethical standards [25] and received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of our Institution. Given the sensitivity of adoption and the potential for recalling traumatic experiences, special care was taken to safeguard participants' well-being. All transcripts were fully de-identified with names and other identifying information removed or altered to preserve confidentiality.

Analytic Approach

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke [26-28], informed the analytic process since it offers a flexible yet systematic process for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within the dataset. These codes were reviewed, compared, and grouped into provisional categories, with convergence and divergence examined across participants. Themes were then refined iteratively through repeated engagement with the data, ensuring that they remained coherent, distinctive, and reflective of the participants' narratives. The process balanced descriptive clarity with interpretive depth, allowing insights to emerge about both individual experiences and broader adoption discourses [27].

Data Collection Tool

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their suitability in eliciting personal and complex experiences [21]. Open-ended questions allowed flexibility to follow participants narratives. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, a strategy that facilitated participation across regions and reduced logistical barriers and time pressure. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent and thereafter transcribed verbatim.

Reflexivity

The researcher adopted a reflective stance, recognising their role as active and interpretive participant in the research process [21]. Reflexivity involved continuous attention to how the researcher's background, assumptions and interpretative lens shaped the collection and analysis of data [26,27]. The recognition of this interpretative role enhanced the credibility of the findings, by highlighting the co-constructing nature of knowledge in qualitative inquiry.

Analysis

Superordinate Theme: Making Family Through Adoption - From Meaning-Making to the Work of Becoming Parents

The qualitative analysis indicated that adoption as described by parents was experienced simultaneously as a highly personalised and socially controlled process. The process of becoming parents was characterized as an act of constructing family, shaped by the symbolic meaning of adoption, the organizational patterns of pre-adoption processes, and the daily practices of parenting following the adoption. The next sections elaborate upon the superordinate theme by highlighting three interrelated subthemes, placing parents' voices at the forefront while situating them within the broader research discourse.

The Semantic Density of 'Adoption'; Kinship, Rupture, and Repair

Parents consistently described adoption as more than a legal procedure; it was experienced as a profound reconfiguration of kinship and belonging. This sentiment is clearly articulated in one parent's reflection, *"I wanted to give him a chance to have a family, but for me, it felt like being born again."* For some, adoption represented an altruistic act, a way of protecting a vulnerable child from the perceived harms of institutional care. One parent explained that *"taking her in was not charity, it was an act of claiming her as ours"*, a statement that encapsulates the tension between altruism and kinship repair. This conceptualisation underscores the double valence of adoption: simultaneously remedial, in that it addresses rupture, and generative, in that it constitutes new familial ties [29].

At the same time, parents acknowledged the losses that accompany adoption. Children entered families not only with histories of neglect or adversity, but also with deeply rooted familial identities. One participant described this as *"a shadow family always present in the room"*. Such expressions highlight the semantic density of adoption, which was experienced as both closure of one relational world and the opening of another [30].

To articulate their role, parents often drew upon metaphors of repair describing their task as *mending, sewing together, or re-rooting*. These metaphors suggest that adoptive parenthood was framed less as substitution and more as transformation:

an effort to integrate past losses into a coherent future. Importantly, participants resisted framing adoption solely as a response to absence. As one father stated, *"I am not filling a gap left by someone else, I am building something new with my son."* This perspective affirms adoption as an active process of kinship-making.

The dialectic of rupture and repair was further complicated by concerns over adoption disclosure and identity. Parents acknowledged that their children's sense of self was deeply shaped by the adoption narrative, and emphasised the importance of transparency and open dialogue about origins [31]. Such openness served as a medium of veracity and succession, ultimately supporting children's identity work [32]. This commitment in honesty is reflected in one mother's account, *"he knows that I didn't give birth to him. He knows everything about his adoption; we talk openly about it."* Another echoed this ethos, linking transparency to emotional continuity and belonging: *"I can't take a different stance from the promise we made to her and to ourselves-that we will stand by her so she can feel that her life has wholeness. She needs to know her identity."*

Yet, alongside the commitment to openness, parents expressed ambivalence - particularly regarding contact with birth families. Some feared emotional displacement or rejection should their children seek out biological kin later in life. As one mother candidly shared, *"for now, I've kept it at a distance. I'll think that when the time comes, I'll help her as much as I can, but I hope she loves only me."* Others emphasized the evolving nature of disclosure, *"not right now, but it's on our minds and we're seeing how things unfold. At some point, the children definitely need to know where they came from-what their roots are."* For others, concerns were less about rejection and more about the potential destabilization of the child's emotional balance, though these anxieties could also reflect parents' own projections. One father described this unease as deeply embedded, *"she carries that anxiety deep within her subconscious. She knows, but she doesn't want to hear it. I believe we've given this particular thing more value than it actually has. What truly matters is your everyday relationship with the child."*

Taken together, these reflections reveal that adoption is not a univocal category, but rather a multi-layered phenomenon saturated with meanings, contradiction, and moral stakes. Parents continuously negotiated between truth and rear, belonging and fragility, openness and self-preservation. Adoption thus emerged not as a singular event, but as an ongoing relational project-one that demands reflexivity, dialogue, and resilient commitment [33].

Psychological and Social Processes in Pre-Adoption Preparation

Parents' narratives of the preparatory phase revealed it as both empowering and constraining. On the one hand, structured training and assessment processes provided strategies for anticipated challenges, such as bonding difficulties or navigating professional services. On the other, these same processes were often experienced as exposing parents to asymmetrical power dynamics that often left them feeling scrutinised [34].

Assessments were frequently described as emotionally taxing-*"proving that we were good enough to love a child,"* highlighting the paradox of having to validate affective capacities through bureaucratic procedures. While parents generally accepted the necessity of safeguarding, they often questioned the extent of intrusiveness. As one parent put it, *"sometimes you would say, is it really possible that I have to go through all these things?"* This sense of disproportion became especially pronounced when compared with biological parenthood, which requires no equivalent vetting [35], as designated by the statement, *"why do we have to undergo mandatory evaluation to determine our suitability to become parents, while biological parents do not?"* Such reflections reveal a persistent unease with the institutional framing of adoptive parenthood, where love and commitment must be formally assessed before they are legitimised.

Training evoked ambivalence. Some parents valued its preventive role, noting that structured sessions on attachment, trauma, and developmental delays provided essential knowledge and reassurance. One mother stated, *"The resources were valuable and equipped us with practical tools that continue to support our parenting journey."* Others found the training generic, insufficiently tailored to the realities of institutional care and inattentive to trauma. One mother noted that, *"the training content was not adequately tailored to the specific needs of children residing in institutional care and the topic of trauma was entirely absent."* A recurrent critique centred on the lack of personalised content addressing the unique circumstances of each child. As one parent poignantly stated, *"no training can prepare you for the first night when the child looks at you like a stranger"*. These testimonies reveal a gap between professional frameworks of adoptive parents' preparation and the lived realities of adoption [36] highlighted also by the statement *"they told us one thing, we lived another. You can never truly be ready."*

Power asymmetries were a recurrent theme. Parents remembered the sense of being placed in a supplicant role, at the mercy of agencies to accept and advise them, which at times weakened their sense of autonomy. As one parent described, *"there was anxiety and fear. Fear. They were pulling the strings."* capturing the emotional toll of feeling powerless. Another recalled the psychological pressure of evaluation: *"you go there thinking, dear God, I hope I don't say something wrong and they reject me."* Ironically, some parents acknowledged that the rigorous scrutiny ultimately strengthened their sense of legitimacy once they were approved: *"we also considered the opposite perspective. It is also a protective mechanism, and its implementation becomes not only justified but essential."* Despite early discomfort, some parents recognized the value of the process: *"at first, the social worker was somewhat intimidating, but over time we came to understand why she was so demanding."* This ambivalence illustrates how preparation could simultaneously undermine and reinforce parental legitimacy [32].

Alongside formal processes, informal peer networks emerged as a vital source of support. Parents emphasised the relief of sharing experiences with others who "understood," describing such spaces as liberating and mutually supportive. These groups counterbalanced the isolating effects of insti-

tutional oversight and highlighted the relational dimension of preparation, where hopes, readiness, and authority were continually negotiated [37,38].

Representations and Narratives of Parenthood Post-Placement

The first months following placement were described as liminal and unsettled, neither a continuation of preparation nor yet the settled fabric of family life. Parents depicted the arrival as both joyous and destabilising: *"suddenly, we were parents. I didn't even realise how it happened."* For some, this transition entailed turbulence and loss of former routines: *"essentially, we put our lives on hold, set everything aside, and said we would focus entirely to figure out what to do."* Yet, others emphasised its reparative potential: *"it's exactly what I had imagined-that sweet harmony I can have with another person. And how deeply reparative it is, even for my own growing up."*

These narratives reveal duality: adoption was simultaneously the culmination of longing and a site of uncertainty, particularly regarding the child's capacity to trust and attach [29]. As one mother shared, *"she didn't trust me for a very long time. Affection wasn't even on the table, but I understood that it wasn't about me."* Where biological parenthood is culturally scripted as immediate and embodied, adoption was experienced by many as incremental, contingent, and fraught with interpretive effort-further complicated by adverse experiences and the effects of institutionalization. One participant explained, *"the first months were dramatic. His biological background is one part, and then the other is the institution."* Building on this, a father remarked, *"let's be honest-having a child out of the blue is really difficult. A child who has different rules, fears, so many issues, because they were also in an institution. It took a time for him to accept me."*

Bonding was narrated as a fragile and evolving process, counter to idealised notions of instantaneous connection [30]. Parents described cultivating intimacy as effortful and uncertain. As one parent noted, *"It took us a long time to build the bond and, gradually, you start to see changes in behaviour, in emotional state."* To articulate this slow emergence of connection, parents frequently employed metaphors such as *building, weaving, or gardening* to describe how intimacy had to be cultivated rather than presumed. One participant reflected, *"you can't feel it at first. The child will help you, if you listen, if you tune into them and find where you can connect to build the relationship. There was this anxiety, both from me and from him."* This slow unfolding provoked feelings of guilt and self-doubt, particularly when the initial emotional distance led parents to question their own adequacy [31]. Yet over time, many came to recognise the depth of connection achieved: *"I believe we've achieved bonding to a great extent-and I say this with all the anxiety I carry about my child feeling safe with me."* Another parent captured the emotional gap between expectation and experience with a striking metaphor: *"we simply had a bridge to cross. A biological baby is born and embraced by its mother from the very first moment-it knows that hug. But here, I had to convince her of mine."*

Parents also underscored the therapeutic dimension of adoption, framing caregiving as a process of healing trauma. Children's histories of abandonment, institutionalization, and deprivation had left them with fears, sensory sensitivities, and developmental delays [17,39]. One parent recalled, *"My son wouldn't sleep. He thought if he fell asleep, someone would take him away."* Others described children's fear of everyday experiences - *"They were terrified of water, dogs, even cats... they were totally institutionalized"*-and their emotional and cognitive deficits: *"They hadn't processed neglect. They lacked self-esteem, no vocabulary, no nourishment."* Within this context, boundary-setting and consistency were framed as therapeutic tools: *"Setting limits is difficult, but it gives him stability and safety."*

Stressors were pervasive. Parents reported exhaustion, weight loss, illness, and sleep deprivation during the early months: *"I lost 10 kilos in two months, my husband 7. I remember waking up nine times during the night."* Role strain intensified pressures, as parents struggled to reconcile professional obligations with the "incomprehensible demands" of traumatized children [34].

Systemic barriers further compounded these challenges. Parents lamented inadequate post-placement support, bureaucratic hurdles, and lack of continuity in services: *"They handed me the child and didn't even check if everything was okay."* Others criticized insufficient follow-up: *"Don't tell me you'll check in once a year."* Administrative obstacles, especially around parental leave, were a recurring frustration: *"My wife can't take maternity leave because no one is informed about these things."* Such barriers undermined parents' sense of being scaffolded by broader institutional frameworks [36,40].

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that post-placement was not experienced as a closure but as a period of intense refinement. Parenthood was constituted through the arduous work of forging affective ties while negotiating trauma, uncertainty, and bureaucracy. In this sense, adoptive parenthood was shaped as much by relational repair as by navigating the politics and infrastructures of belonging [41].

Discussion

The findings illuminate the lived complexities of adoption as narrated by parents who described the challenges of navigating the adoption process, the emotional and relational labour of bonding, and the broader social entanglements of adoptive family life. These accounts reflect not only the practical realities of parenting but also the intense emotional processes that define adoptive life.

Taken together, the three subthemes offer distinct insights, yet converge on a deeper structure of meaning-making and adaptation. The semantic weight of adoption -infused with altruism, rupture and repair- shaped the interpretive frame through which parents oriented themselves to the process of preparation [42]. This type of cultural script would then pass through into the expectations of the assessment and training phases, molding readiness and vulnerability [43]. However,

the transition to lived parenthood showed that discursive ideals and institutional programmes could not capture the emotional and practical complexity that followed the arrival of a child into the family [44].

The data thus underscore that adoption is not reducible to a legal or bureaucratic endpoint, but is better conceptualised as an ongoing, negotiated process of becoming. Parents' accounts destabilise any linear teleology, showing instead that kinship is re-composed through successive acts of meaning-making, resilience, and compromise [45]. The superordinate theme of "making family through adoption" signals precisely this dialectic: families are not simply constituted at the moment of placement but are continuously enacted through daily practices, interpretive struggles, and relational repair.

The first theme, the semantic density of adoption, underscored how participants understood their parenthood as entangled with rupture and repair. This resonates with wider scholarship that views kinship as socially constructed, where adoption simultaneously interrupts biological continuity and re-establishes relational bonds through care [46]. Parents' reflections on altruism, loss, and ambivalence challenge policy framings that valorise adoption primarily as a protective intervention while overlooking its lived ambiguities [47,48].

The second theme, preparation, highlighted the dual role of assessment and training as both empowering and constraining. Preparedness was experienced not as a static competence but as a shifting resource, shaped by institutional scaffolding and personal expectations [49]. Gaps in preparation were not only logistical but epistemic, in that agencies appeared to underestimate the depth of uncertainty inherent in adoption. This supports critiques of standardised training regimes, which, while necessary, often inadequately address the emotional and identity work demanded of adoptive parents [50]. Parents' accounts of power dynamics further illustrate how institutional authority intersects with personal vulnerability, reinforcing hierarchies that can undermine the experiential knowledge of individuals in the parenting role.

The third theme, post-placement parenthood, exposed the challenges of real adoptive life, fragility of early bonds and the strains of navigating fragmented services. Consistent with international evidence, parents described distinctive challenges that extended beyond those of biological families [51]. Bonding was experienced as incremental, not instantaneous, underscoring policies and practitioners to temper expectations of immediate attachment. Service navigation proved both administratively burdensome and existentially destabilising, reflecting systematic failures in the provision of sustained post-adoption support [52].

Across all three subthemes, *uncertainty* emerged as the central thread. In the semantic accounts of adoption, it was tied to identity and belonging. In preparation, uncertainty manifested as ambivalence about readiness and gaps in institutional support. In post-placement, uncertainty took the form of open contact negotiations, role strain, and fragile bonds. Far from being an incidental by-product, uncertainty appears as a constitutive element of adoptive parenthood in the Greek context. Parents' narratives suggest that resilience is

not the eradication of uncertainty but the capacity to endure and work within it [53].

This finding challenges the linearity implicit in many policy and psychological models, instead suggesting that adoption should be theorised as a dynamic process of becoming, in which belonging is continuously negotiated [54]. The integrative insight is that adoptive parenting is as much discursive as it is affective and practical. Parents must continually re-author their identities, interpret the child's past, navigate the bureaucracy of services, and sustain a narrative of belonging that integrates rupture with repair. Adoption, therefore, is best understood as an unfolding practice rather than a fixed event, with important implications for policy, training, and service delivery.

Limitations

While the qualitative design provided deep insight into adoptive parents lived realities, it limits the breadth of generalisability. Reliance on a single cohort, shaped by a specific socio-cultural milieu and constrained sample size, means that findings cannot be uncritically extended across different adoption systems or cultural contexts [21]. Furthermore, the interpretive nature of thematic analysis introduces subjectivity, notwithstanding procedures of reflexivity and consistency. Although safeguards were implemented, qualitative enquiry inevitably embeds the researcher's positionality, which shapes both theme identification and meaning-making. These constraints highlight that the findings are intended to illuminate rather than predict.

Implementation and Future Research

The results reiterate the need to recalibrate adoption services to better reflect lived parental experiences. Training and preparatory programmes should extend beyond procedural competencies, to encompass emotional resilience, identity negotiation, and the management of uncertainty [55]. Post-placement support requires restructuring into a continuous and consistent model of accompaniment, replacing fragmented interventions with sustained guidance that recognises the long-term labour of family-making. Policies must also address the intricacies of open-contact arrangements, ensuring adoptive parents are supported in navigating these delicate relational terrains [56]. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, tracing how meanings, practices, and relationships evolve over developmental periods. Comparative, cross-jurisdictional studies are also needed to reveal how socio-legal frameworks shape parental narratives and family outcomes.

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