Adoption in contemporary India: Insights from the lived experiences of adoptive mothers

Charu Jain, Waheeda Khan

Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, SGT University, Gurgaon, Haryana, India

Abstract

Background: Adoption is a profound and life-changing decision that offers families the opportunity to grow in unique and meaningful ways. In India, adoptive mothers face distinctive emotional, psychological, and societal experiences that can shape their adoption journey. However, there is limited research exploring the inner experiences of adoptive mothers, which hinders the development of informed policies and support mechanisms tailored to their needs. **Objective:** This study aimed to explore the inner experiences of women who have adopted a child in India, providing valuable insights for improving the adoption process and enhancing the wellbeing of adoptive mothers. **Materials and Methods:** This study employed a qualitative research methodology, with purposive sampling used to select three participants from Indian adoption support communities, specifically for and of heart babies and the People's Group for Child Adoption in India. Data collection took place between May and June 2024 through in-depth, semistructured interviews. The data were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights. **Results:** Five key themes emerged from the participants' narratives: (i) Adoption processes and challenges, (ii) emotional processing and wellbeing, (iii) family dynamics and support, (iv) personal values and beliefs, and (v) societal and cultural influence. The findings highlighted that these experiences align with the 4Ps of Psychopathology and the biopsychosocial model, underscoring how psychological and social factors can act as precipitating and perpetuating influences on adoptive mothers' mental and physical wellbeing. **Conclusion:** The study emphasizes the need for psychologists, policymakers, and sociologists to consider these findings when designing interventions.

Keywords: Adoption, case study, qualitative analysis, mothers, parenting

Introduction

Adoption is the permanent transfer of parental rights and responsibilities from a child's biological parents to adoptive parents, creating a new familial unit to care for the child.[1] Approximately 29.6 million children in India are estimated to be stranded, orphaned, or abandoned. CARA (Central Adoption Resource Authority) reported 3580 in-country and 449 intercountry adoptions in 2023–24.[2]

Address for correspondence: Ms. Charu Jain,
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, SGT University,
Gurgaon, Haryana, India.
E-mail: phdcharujain@gmail.com

Access this article online	
Quick Response Code:	**Website:** http://journals.lww.com/JFMPC
	DOI: 10.4103/jfmpc.jfmpc_861_25

The prevalence and nature of adoption systems vary widely across countries, reflecting unique cultural, religious, and legislative influences. Historically, countries like China have played a significant role in international adoptions. However, as of 2024, China has largely ceased intercountry adoptions, permitting only specific cases involving relatives.[3]

Similarly, South Korea's adoption rates remain low, influenced by Confucian beliefs prioritizing biological ties and the 2012 special adoption law requiring adoptive parents to register children under their name. In Japan, while awareness of the adoption system has improved, the cultural preference for biological children has resulted in just 544 finalized plenary adoptions out of 45,000 eligible children in 2015. In contrast, other countries have made notable steps in adoption facilitation. For example,

How to cite this article: Jain C, Khan W. Adoption in contemporary India: Insights from the lived experiences of adoptive mothers. J Family Med Prim Care 2025;14:5115-21.

the Philippines finalized over 7000 adoptions in a single year, supported by government-backed adoption programs. Singapore allocates significant funding for foster care mediation, ensuring that 70% of children needing social protection are raised in individual homes.[4] Meanwhile, India has emerged as one of the top countries of origin for intercountry adoptions, with 223 Indian children adopted by U.S. families in 2022. Governed by CARA, India's adoption system is well organized, but cultural and religious factors continue to influence adoption practices.[5]

Despite the presence of numerous prospective parents awaiting adoption in India, a prevailing stigma surrounding adoption continues to dissuade many from pursuing this option. Each adopted child may grow up in an environment that meets their specific needs and characteristics. It is critical that all families who are given the opportunity to adopt are able to overcome the challenges that come with the process.

Although adoption typically serves as a mutually advantageous arrangement for both parents and their adopted children, it frequently entails various challenges or attachment-related difficulties that prospective parents must consider.[1]

The journey to motherhood is a deeply transformative process, marked by both challenges and joys. While biological and adoptive mothers share some common environmental changes, adoptive mothers face unique challenges due to their lack of exposure to the hormonal changes associated with childbirth.[6] Instead, they navigate a complex path filled with anticipation, uncertainty, and societal scrutiny. The proadaptive period often involves emotional processes such as fantasies, seeking support, claiming, and bonding, interwoven with feelings of apprehension, helplessness, judgment, and fear. Despite these struggles, it is also a time of hope, fulfilment, joy, and love as adoptive mothers prepare for their new roles.

The transition to adoptive motherhood is characterized by a distinct set of experiences that continue into the postadoptive period. Adaptation involves bonding with the child, adjusting to new roles within the family, and managing the ongoing legal and societal challenges of adoption. While adoptive mothers describe love, happiness, and relief, they also encounter persistent uncertainty, isolation, and judgment. Unlike biological mothers, who often have a clear timeline for their transition, adoptive mothers endure an indeterminate waiting period, knowing their children are out in the world yet not with them. This unique emotional and psychological landscape sets adoptive mothers apart and shapes their adaptation to motherhood.

Research highlights additional stressors faced by adoptive mothers, including accepting infertility, navigating the intrusive adoption evaluation process, dealing with cultural differences, and managing societal stigmas. These challenges are compounded for special populations, such as single women and lesbian families, who may encounter additional barriers in their journey to adoption. As advancements in reproductive technology reshape family-building options, modern adoptive mothers face complex decisions that intersect with traditional adoption challenges. A deeper exploration of their transitional processes and unique experiences is crucial to understanding and supporting adoptive mothers in the modern context.[7]

This study seeks to understand the complex realities of adoption through the analysis of three specific cases: A single mother raising twin adopted children, a divorced mother parenting a 20-year-old adopted daughter, and a disabled mother nurturing an adopted son and daughter. The justification for choosing these cases is their embodiment of underexplored adoption-related experiences, particularly in India.

To explore the unique transitional processes, experiences, and challenges of adoptive mothers, with focus on their emotional, psychological, and social adaptation to motherhood, two objectives were established for this study:
(i) To examine the emotional and psychological experiences of adoptive mothers.
(ii) To identify the unique challenges faced by adoptive mothers.

Materials and Methods

Ethics
The study was ethically approved by the Screening Ethics Committee (SGTU/FBSS/ECC/2024/34). Both oral and written informed consents were obtained from all the participants before enrolment.

Study design
Qualitative research methods enable researchers to investigate the intricacies of a phenomenon by examining the meanings ascribed to it by individuals or groups (Creswell, 2003).

This study seeks to examine the psychosocial wellbeing of single mothers who have adopted female children. Qualitative methods provide the most appropriate means to achieve this goal by collecting data that reflect women's experiences with adoption. The importance and understanding of these experiences are fundamentally social, developing through interactions within a human community.

Case study research entails the analysis of authentic experiences within their natural context (Yin, 2013). This methodology is relevant to the objective of examining the psychosocial wellbeing of single mothers who adopt as it facilitates an in-depth analysis of their experiences amid the intricacies of their actual situations.

Participant selection
Participants were recruited through adoption support groups, namely, *For and Of Heart Babies* and the People's Group for Child Adoption in India (PGCAI). An informational message detailing the purpose of the study was disseminated via social

media platforms, and interested individuals voluntarily contacted the researcher upon reviewing the study's objectives.

Inclusion and exclusion

To be selected for this study, participants must have adopted a child at least once in their lifetime and are required to possess at least a bachelor's degree to adequately comprehend each question in the interview framework. Two exclusion criteria were established: (i) The participant has not undergone any form of infertility treatment and (ii) the participant unwilling to provide consent. Three diverse participants were selected for this study through purposeful sampling.

Data collection

This study utilized an interview guide for semistructured interviews, encompassing perspectives on decision-making, mental health, social support, and coping mechanisms. The interview guide was tested prior to the formal interviews, encompassing interview style, duration, logical structure, and probing questions related to the research topic. The researcher conducted interviews with three women [Table 1] from Delhi NCR who had adopted a child prior to the interview. All three women came from the middle class and could afford the lifestyle.

The researcher conducted digital recordings of interviews and supervised their transcription. Interviews occurred in diverse environments, such as respondents' residences, and workplace. When in-person meetings were impractical, one interview was conducted using Zoom, a real-time online platform. Each interview session lasted roughly 60 to 90 minutes per participant. Furthermore, the researchers upheld a stance of respect and impartiality while seeking to identify issues of particular concern to the interviewees. Names of the interviewees were substituted with pseudonyms in the transcripts to maintain confidentiality.[8]

Procedural steps

This study aimed to ensure reliability while minimizing bias. To reduce the likelihood of misinterpreting interview data, the researcher listened to each recording a minimum of three times to ensure consistency and recorded reflections following each review. Moreover, comprehensive memos were maintained to promote reflection and identify any implicit assumptions, thus preserving an inductive methodology in the research.

A peer reviewer offered critiques on the coding of the study's results, emphasizing the accurate representation of participant perspectives, scrutinizing implicit assumptions, pinpointing unsupported assertions, and interrogating alternative interpretations of the findings. During the research process, the second author, an expert in qualitative methods, offered guidance on methodologies and limitations, with recommended revisions integrated into the research methods and writing as necessary.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within the interview data. It entails the systematic organization and categorization of qualitative data to identify recurring patterns, ideas, or concepts pertinent to the research question or objective. The Atlas TI software was used to check the transcripts, and each item was given a code and placed into a distinct theme. The model proposed by Clarke and Brawn was adopted.[9]

Results

Three women were selected through purposive sampling. Table 1 presents the demographic information for each woman. The average age of the three participants is 43.6 years (SD = 9.86). All three participants possess high educational qualifications (graduate and postgraduate) and belong to middle ($n = 2$) and upper-middle ($n = 1$) socioeconomic strata. Among the three participants, one of them is unmarried, the other is married, and a third participant is divorced. Additionally, all three individuals are raising two children, a boy and a girl, of which only the divorced single mother has a biological son and an adopted daughter.

110 initial codes were derived from the interviews and classified into five principal themes. The five primary themes identified during data collection are: Adoption Processes and Challenges, Emotional Processing and Wellbeing, Family Dynamics and Support, Personal Values and Beliefs, and Societal and Cultural Influence [Supplementary Table 1].

The following quotes are selected to illustrate participants' key perceptions and experiences regarding adoption [Figure 1].
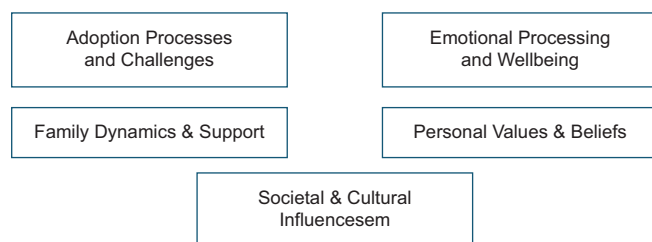
Theme 1: Adoption processes and challenges

The analysis of adopted mothers' discourses [Supplementary Case Studies] indicates that their roles in parenthood and social contexts, along with their individual capacities to engage in parental behaviors, coalesce around the primary theme of Adoption Processes and Challenges. This theme captures the complex experiences of these mothers, highlighting both systemic and personal dynamics in adoption.

Within the 35 codes identified in this primary theme, three exhibited a greater degree of grounding in the data than the

Table 1: Biosocial demographics of the sample in qualitative interview (n=3)					
Participant's code name	Age	Education level	Socioeconomic level	Marital status	No. of children
XY	37	Graduate	Middle	Unmarried	2 (Adopted twins)
MN	39	Graduate	Middle	Married	2 (Adopted)
PQ	55	Post-Graduate	Upper Middle	Divorced	1 Biological, 1 Adopted

| Adoption Processes and Challenges | Emotional Processing and Wellbeing |

| Family Dynamics & Support | Personal Values & Beliefs |

| Societal & Cultural Influencesem |

Figure 1: Themes derived from the thematic analysis

others [Table 2]: Proactive preparations, lack of understanding and empathy, and communication and disclosure.

Proactive preparation encompasses the cultivation of parenting skills and the enhancement of problem-solving abilities via online platforms. It involves the diligent pursuit of information regarding the adoption process, which includes exploring various lists and available options, as well as seeking practical advice and emotional support from seasoned adoptive parents. Additionally, it entails consulting external sources for informed guidance.

[Mother XY]: So, I did that, and I spoke to that tarot lady and told her everything. Then she said that I should wait and not change it to sibling. Right now, so the thing was because it had already been 2 and a half years waiting, the reference you get are based on the registration date. So, I waited. January also I waited, February also I think somewhere around March or April, I asked her again- Can I can I change now? I still have this feeling. I still want the babies. So, can I change it? So, she said yes to changing it.

[Mother MN]: I researched, and I got to know that there are multiple lists on CARA and you know there is special needs. There is IP list. Now there is a new introduction of 7-day portal. So, I got to know all that information.

Lack of understanding and empathy arises from a constrained awareness of the emotional difficulties encountered by individuals traversing the adoption journey. This encompasses a lack of adequate acknowledgment of the intricate nuances inherent in the emotional odyssey of adoptive parents and the comprehensive adoption experience.

[Mother MN]: People don't understand anxiety and stress related to adoption. This might be because you all don't know. You all don't know the stress behind it, but there is a lot of stress involved. Even in this process may not be visually seen. In the form of a pregnancy, but it all is there.

Alternative viewpoints regarding the Adoption Processes and Challenges were articulated in relation to *Communication and Disclosure*. It underscores the significance of transparent dialog and the exchange of experiences with others.

[Mother PQ]: You know, we never hide anything from my son, and my daughter always knew she is adopted. Right from the beginning, it was always told. The important thing is that the

Table 2: Most prominent and recurring codes derived from participant transcripts and corresponding main themes

Main themes	Codes
Adoption processes and challenges	Communication and disclosure
	Lack of understanding and empathy
	Proactive preparation
	Understanding the adoption process
	Unexpected challenged and complexities
Emotional processing and wellbeing	Adaptability and flexibility
	Internalised stigma and self-doubt
Family dynamics and support	Family support and influence
	Social support and connection
Personal values and beliefs	Career adjustments
	Progressive attitude
Societal and cultural influence	Challenging societal norms
	Lack of awareness and sensitivity

child level of understanding changes. So, at each level you must keep saying it and the child understands it in a different way.

Theme 2: Emotional processing and wellbeing

The study revealed that adoptive mothers often highlighted the significance of adaptability and flexibility, while also reporting experiences of internalized stigma, self-doubt, and caregiver burnout.

Adaptability and flexibility encompass the ability to persevere and remain open-minded throughout the adoption process. This entails adjusting expectations, changing plans as needed, and accepting various paths to parenthood while remaining open to unexpected challenges.

[Mother MN]: I got a message from a friend that there is a baby boy who is on the IP list and I think you should go ahead and reserve it. And I was like, but I was looking for siblings. And, you know, I was hoping one of them is a girl. Like, listen, you can do it again. You can again apply. You can get your second child. But right now, this is an opportunity. Grab it.

Adoptive mothers described experiencing *Caregiver Burnout*, marked by overwhelming exhaustion, a diminished sense of self-identity, and the neglect of their personal needs.

[Mother PQ]: At some point I decided to take a break and quit my job, and I was like, you know, happy to focus on that and freelance and all that. So, focus on the kids at home and manage the home front and. Do my work through freelance, so that thing did happen that I. It's been much, much later, much, much later, and I realized that I had just kind of become a just Become too much. I got too listening into the role and it becomes just a moment I had forgotten about my own life and myself and everything.

Adoptive mothers reported experiencing *Internalized Stigma and Self-doubt* that makes them feel uncertain and self-conscious.

This includes difficulties with societal perceptions and personal insecurities related to their role as mothers, as well as moments of uncertainty regarding their decision to adopt, especially during trying times.

[Mother MN]: And in the evening I get a message from her saying that I don't think I can sign your letter because I don't think you can physically take care of a child. I can't call you up and tell you that. So, I'm just messaging it to you, so please don't ask me too many questions or push me to do this for you. Yeah. Initially it came up as a shock. Yeah, because, I told you, see, I'm used to being judged, I just wrote a message to her. 'So, if I would have conceived, you would have asked me to abort the child, right?'

Theme 3: Family dynamics and support

The analysis showed that *Family Support and Influence* is extremely crucial. Adoptive mothers depended a lot on support and advice from their families. Having a caring and supportive family, along with accepting adoption as a valid way to become a parent, helped them build confidence and strength.

[Mother MN]: My in laws are not very interested in my sex life it. Clearly tell it was not at all this thing that are you trying. Because indirectly it means the same, right? Are you trying how many times you're trying? Yeah, you're not interested. They were so strong. They are so strong people that even if external relative pressure would come, they would guard us to it.

It was clear from some responses that participants' entire journey was impacted by *Social Support and Connection.*

[Mother XY]: So, I became a part of that group and that would be very reassuring to see Photos of different other babies and people adopting and people getting them home or people celebrating the homecoming day and stuff like that. So, it would, it would feel like, yeah, it will happen for me also.

Theme 4: Personal values and beliefs

Research unequivocally demonstrated that adoptive mothers displayed a *Progressive Attitude* on adoption, indicative of a robust sense of empowerment.

[Mother PQ]: We're fairly progressive and all this, you know. So, I mean like my sister adopted without getting married, she never got married. So, my mom was staying with as she used to stay with my mother, and so she was very welcoming. I never thought that I'm going to hide it from my daughter or not tell because a lot of people don't tell their kids and all that. So, for me to very clear that no, I mean that was never a question.

[Mother XY]: I am unmarried, I didn't care how it happens. If I want to experience pregnancy, I'm okay in taking that route as well plus. I do understand in India it is not normal, but what is normal for me and what comes naturally, whatever thought process comes naturally all through my life, I've seen that many,

many people don't think like this, and they find it very, very odd that. I think like this, so I've been very comfortable with myself because I know I cannot pretend to be someone or try and do something that I'm not.

Theme 5: Societal and cultural influences

Another prominent code that emerged from the research was *Challenging Societal Norms* as women appeared to prioritize their own choices and agency, marking a significant and empowering shift in perspective.

[Mother XY]: I chose their names it felt great. It felt so nice because my mom, my nanny Nana Nani, whole family. Everybody kept saying why are you keeping these names? These are these. These, these names are too complicated. Puri zindagi tumse bolenge ye naam kyu rakhein hain And all of that but, I love these names. I will. I love these names and when I read the post certificate. With their names, with their full names, right with Y (Surname changed) written behind, it felt very, very weird I had goosebumps. It felt it was like somewhere I realize why a name is so important.

[Mother PQ]: It's how you perceive yourself in the in the environment, your significance. And you feel that, you know, only if I give birth to a child, only then I am important as a woman, or you know if I'm a fertile woman. Then I'll be respected. That is how women have. Maybe. Maybe I didn't have that insecurity because I'd had a child when my sister also didn't have anything like that, and another family quite open about that. But even when my divorce, in fact that matter, I didn't ever try to cover it up for from my son or anyone else for that matter.

Lack of Awareness and Sensitivity emerged out as strong code, underscoring the insufficient comprehension and empathy regarding the emotional difficulties encountered by adoptive mothers and the intricacies of the adoption process.

[Mother MN]: Initially, when we spoke about adoption, really, but why do you need to adopt? That was the thing, they use to say, you can try to have your own children. So, the awareness was less.

[Mother PQ]: They don't have any business asking for adoption, but every school is so arbitrary, you know. It's a big nuisance. And it's so funny because the primary school, you know, they remember the class one or 2, they started teaching different kinds of families and all that, and they teach all this. But when it comes to practicing, well, they don't have any clue about it. Every year, both for my son and for my daughter, every year until Class 5 or 6. I had to Go to the school, talk to the class teacher, explain the family context. So that they would be a little sensitive even for my son, I have to say we are separated, we're doing this divorce. And I said every year at this information would not go from class teacher to other class teacher. It doesn't every year, but the school didn't have any process to ensure that.

Discussion

This study reveals the challenges encountered by adoptive mothers during the adoption process. Although none of the women explicitly acknowledged infertility, they were independently confronting challenges related to maternal bonding and connection. This aligns with prior research indicating that while adoption is generally advantageous for most adopted children and their parents, the lack of a biological relationship, coupled with possible emotional, behavioral, and relational difficulties, necessitates that prospective parents consider this option with caution.[1] Mothers similarly indicated that communication and disclosure are pivotal in the adoption process. This is due to the belief that disclosing the adoption is only a small part of the larger communication process, which includes not only the sharing of information but also the feelings, doubts, annoyances, and delights that the adoptee and the adopters have about their adoption status. The study's findings underscored the significance of prior preparation and training for prospective adopters,[10] aligning with our results that demonstrate how proactive preparations facilitate the overall adaptation to the adoption process.

Emotional processing and wellbeing in adoptive mothers is a complex topic due to multiple reasons, including adaptability and flexibility. This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests that couples who are applying to adopt tend to choose the gender of the child based on their own preferences and by considering various factors, such as friendliness, special tendencies, and less responsibility.[11] All three participants reported internalized stigma and doubt associated with the experience of adoption in India, which can be elucidated by Taebi's et al.[12] findings indicating that women perceived greater stigma than men and that the experience of stigma was more distressing than infertility.

The participants asserted that familial dynamics and support are pivotal; for some, intergenerational support, particularly from mothers and sisters, was crucial, while for others, assistance from in-laws and friends was indispensable during the challenges of motherhood, such as being a single mother or having a physical disability. One participant recounted her disappointment in a friend during a time of need, highlighting how the dynamics of support from others affect our decision-making processes. This finding aligns with other studies indicating that the proximity of adoptive family relationships (parent-adolescent, within the couple, and between the adolescent and other family members) and the adoptees' (mal) adjustment are the most significant predictors (with direct effects) of adoptive parents' parenting stress in families with adolescents.[13] Consequently, a greater proximity in familial relationships correlates with reduced parenting stress among adoptive parents.

The findings indicate that the personal values and beliefs of adoptive mothers significantly impact their overall adoption experience. This encompasses decisions regarding independent adoption, openness to marriage without legal responsibility sharing, career adjustments, and the necessity of prioritizing tasks sequentially. These results align with previous research suggesting that all women, irrespective of age, educational attainment, or employment status, have encountered various forms of stigma. Empowered women, irrespective of their education and employment status, were more adept at managing the psychological effects of infertility stigma. Studies indicate that the empowerment of women can enhance self-respect, self-efficacy, and psychological wellbeing.[12] Nevertheless, limited research substantiates our current findings regarding women's experiences of meaning and fulfilment in motherhood due to a shift in perspective and modern era.

At last, our research findings illuminate the societal and cultural influences involved in child adoption and the subsequent experiences, highlighting women's challenges against societal norms and the difficulties faced by those who have adopted or wish to adopt due to a lack of awareness and sensitivity. The societal contexts and norms imposed on women, their interactions with one another, and their self-perception relative to others appear to influence their decisions and experiences.[14]

This study's findings offer a detailed comprehension of adoptive mothers' experiences, systematically classified according to the 4Ps of Pathology—predisposing, precipitating, perpetuating, and preventive factors—and framed within the biopsychosocial model. Each theme underscores the interplay of biological, psychological, and social dimensions in shaping the adoption process [Supplementary Table 2].

The convergence of the 4Ps of Psychopathology with the biopsychosocial model provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted experiences of adoptive mothers. The interaction between biological, psychological, and social dimensions significantly shapes both the adoption journey and the subsequent parenting experience. This complexity highlights the need for comprehensive support systems that include counseling, education, and community engagement to address the unique challenges that adoptive mothers face and improve their overall wellbeing. Biopsychosocial themes [Supplementary Table 1] such as age-related concerns, self-acceptance, social isolation, and resilience, which emerged in this study, align with findings from previous research, both qualitative and quantitative.

It can be concluded that psychological and social circumstances can be precipitating and perpetuating factors that can adversely impact the mental and physical wellbeing of the adoptive mothers.

Interestingly, studies suggest that adoptive mothers tend to experience fewer anxiety symptoms compared to postpartum mothers, with lower levels of psychopathology reported among adoptive mothers.[15] However, this research must also account for inherent biases as adoptive mothers often undergo a distinct and difficult process to achieve motherhood. This journey, marked by

extensive research, paperwork, personal scrutiny, and emotional uncertainty, may serve as a selective filter, favoring individuals with higher resilience and lower susceptibility to depressive symptoms.[6]

These findings highlight the critical need for integrated interventions that address psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. Psychologists, policymakers, and researchers must collaborate to develop comprehensive support systems, reduce societal stigma, and advance research, ensuring adoptive mothers are equipped with the resources and resilience needed for a positive adoption journey.

Conclusion

Single parenthood in adoption contests conventional family structures, prompting inquiries into societal support systems and the individual fortitude necessary to manage parenthood independently. The experience of a divorcee illustrates the intersection of adoption and marital transitions, examining how relationships develop and endure amid dual challenges. The situation of a disabled mother with adopted children highlights the relationship between physical disability and parenthood, emphasizing how differently abled parents navigate their responsibilities within adoptive families. Each case presents distinct challenges and strategies that adoptive parents utilize to promote emotional wellbeing, resilience, and stability within their families.

A few notable limitations of the study were noted:
(i) Since this is part of PhD thesis, the study was completed with three diverse cases which were found during data collection. It limits the generalizability of the findings to a larger population.
(ii) Different narratives, hence codes and themes, could be identified if we interview the diverse population of fathers who have adopted a child.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

The author(s) used ChatGPT during the development of this article in order to improve the clarity and readability of the material. The content was reviewed and edited by the author(s) after using the tool/service, and the author(s) take absolute responsibility for the content of the publication.

Financial support and sponsorship

None.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Jones BP, Saso S, Yazbek J, Smith JR. Uterine transplantation: Past, present and future. BJOG 2016;123:1434-8.
2. CARA- Central Adoption Resource Authority. 2025. Available from: https://cara.wcd.gov.in/.
3. China Intercountry Adoption Information. 2024. Available from: https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/Intercountry-Adoption-Country-Information/China.html?utm_source.
4. Shiraishi E, Takae S, Faizal AM, Sugimoto K, Okamoto A, Suzuki N. The scenario of adoption and foster care in relation to the reproductive medicine practice in Asia. Int J Environ Res Public Health 2021;18:3466.
5. Where do International Adoptees Come From? USA Facts. 2024, February 28. Available from: https://usafacts.org/articles/where-do-international-adoptees-come-from/?utm_source.
6. Payne JL, Fields ES, Meuchel JM, Jaffe CJ, Jha M. Post adoption depression. Arch Womens Ment Health 2010;13:147-51.
7. Fontenot HB. Transition and adaptation to adoptive motherhood. J Obstet Gynecol Neonatal Nurs 2007;36:175-82.
8. Zhuoran W, Wanpeng L, Tao P, Coates R. Qualitative research on infertile Chinese couples' understanding of sexuality. Fam Pract 2018;35:88-92.
9. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Health Psychol Rev 2006;3:77-101.
10. Barbosa-Ducharne MA, Soares J. Process of adoption communication openness in adoptive families: Adopters' perspective. Psicologia Reflexão E Crítica 2016;29:1-9.
11. Yassini, SM, Shavazi MT, Shavazi NT. Factors associated with adoption acceptance rate from the viewpoint of infertile couples. Iran J Reprod Med 2012;10:413-8.
12. Taebi M, Kariman N, Montazeri A, Majd, HA. Infertility stigma: A qualitative study on feelings and experiences of infertile women. Int J Fertil Steril 2021;15:189-96.
13. Costa I, Barbosa-Ducharne M, Palacios J, Soares, J. Predictors of parenting stress in Portuguese adolescents' adoptive parents. Child Fam Soc Work 2020;25(S1):178-87.
14. Born SL, Preston JJ. The fertility problem inventory and infertility-related stress: A case study. Qual Rep 2016;21:497-520.
15. Mott SL, Schiller CE, Richards JG, O'Hara MW, Stuart, S. Depression and anxiety among postpartum and adoptive mothers. Arch Womens Ment Health 2011;14:335-43.

Supplementary file

Supplementary Case Studies: Participants brief case history

Case 1: The story of XY (Name Changed), a 37-year-old Indian Air Force officer, provides a compelling account of single parenthood through adoption. As the eldest of three siblings and raised in a close-knit family, XY faced the loss of her father during her college years. Despite societal norms and expectations, she envisioned herself as a mother, independent of marital status, and was steadfast in her decision to adopt. Her journey reflects the psychological, emotional, and social complexities of single parenthood through adoption in contemporary India.

XY's decision to adopt was not sudden but rather an aspiration she had nurtured since her college days. Fully aware of the process, she registered with CARA (Central Adoption Resource Authority) when she realized traditional paths to parenthood were not aligning with her life's trajectory. Initially, she opted to adopt a single child, but as the three-year waiting period progressed, she chose to adopt siblings. This decision stemmed from her strong desire to provide a nurturing home for more than one child and her belief in keeping biological siblings together. XY's journey was filled with anticipation and emotional highs and lows as she navigated the uncertainties of the adoption process.

The emotional challenges XY encountered were significant. The prolonged waiting period tested her patience and resolve, especially as she observed peers around her raising children. She coped by immersing herself in adoptive parent communities, planning extensively for her future children, and engaging in activities like traveling to maintain a positive mindset. Upon receiving the referral for twins—a boy and a girl—XY faced both joy and anxiety. Her immediate concern for her daughter's medical issues led her to consult doctors and ensure the children received proper care and nutrition. This period marked a profound emotional transformation as XY embraced her role as a mother and overcame initial fears with resilience and determination.

Throughout her journey, XY's support system played a crucial role. Her mother and sisters were instrumental in caregiving and emotional reinforcement. XY, also sought guidance from adoptive parent networks, which provided practical advice and reassurance during difficult times. These interactions allowed her to navigate societal biases and prepare herself and her children for challenges associated with their unique family structure. XY's proactive approach extended to creating an inclusive environment for her children, fostering their understanding of adoption as a normal part of their identity.

Despite encountering societal biases and probing questions about her decision, XY, remained steadfast in her belief that family extends beyond traditional definitions. She encountered skepticism from individuals who struggled to accept single parenthood as a legitimate choice. Nonetheless, she educated others, often responding to children's innocent queries with patience and clarity. XY's unwavering focus was on equipping her children with the emotional resilience to face such questions as they grew older.

XY's journey underscores the psychological growth and emotional resilience required of single adoptive parents in India. Her story highlights the importance of supportive networks—both familial and social—in navigating the challenges of adoption. It also reflects the changing societal attitudes towards non-traditional families, though biases persist. 's proactive steps in fostering an inclusive environment for her children serve as a testament to her commitment to their well-being.

Case 2:

MN (Name Changed), a 39-year-old genetic engineer, faced significant life transitions after her marriage in 2012, including a relocation that led her to explore new career avenues. Living in a joint family, she found a supportive environment where her aspirations were encouraged. Both MN and her husband are differently-abled, a fact that shaped their life experiences and decisions. While B has polio and uses a leg brace, her husband underwent surgery to correct a leg deformity before their marriage. Their union, initially arranged, evolved into a deep partnership rooted in mutual understanding and shared values.

From an early age, MN expressed a desire to adopt, a sentiment she carried into her marriage. Adoption, to her, was not just an alternative but a fundamental aspect of her vision of family. Her mother-in-law's awareness of the adoption process, gained from observing neighbors who had adopted, further reinforced the family's openness to the idea. MN's in-laws viewed adoption as a natural way of building a family, much like biological birth or assisted reproductive technologies.

In 2015, the couple first explored adoption through CARA (Central Adoption Resource Authority). At the time, unclear guidelines for differently-abled couples left them assuming they were ineligible. The revelation in 2019 that they could, in fact, adopt marked a turning point. Motivated by this clarity, they registered for adoption in 2020, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

MN's personal growth and advocacy work, including her achievements in motivational speaking and a beauty pageant, inspired her to spread awareness about adoption, particularly for differently-abled individuals.

The waiting period was a source of significant anxiety and uncertainty. MN, described the process as emotionally taxing, akin to the emotional turmoil of pregnancy, albeit without visible markers. Daily rituals of checking updates, managing expectations, and coping with societal attitudes were mentally exhausting. The lack of awareness among her extended social circle often compounded her sense of isolation.

Despite these challenges, MN's resilience shone through. Her mother-in-law became a pillar of emotional support, encouraging her to articulate her anxieties and process her emotions. MN also sought solace in building a community of adoptive parents, sharing experiences, and learning from others in similar situations.

MN's immediate family played a crucial role in her journey. Her husband, in-laws, and parents fostered an environment of acceptance and encouragement. Her father-in-law's progressive views ensured that societal pressures about having children never intruded on their lives. However, MN noted a stark contrast between the awareness levels of her in-laws and her own parents. While her in-laws were familiar with the adoption process, her parents struggled to understand its nuances, largely due to a lack of exposure.

In contrast to her supportive family, MN faced unexpected resistance from a close friend, who doubted her ability to care for a child due to her physical disability. Although hurtful, this incident strengthened MN's resolve to prove herself capable and focus on the adoption process.

MN and her husband welcomed their first child in 2021 and their second child in late 2023. She described the arrival of her children as a culmination of years of effort, likening it to winning a hard-earned gold medal. The initial adjustment period was marked by self-doubt, but she quickly embraced her role as a mother. Her children became a source of immense joy and fulfillment, affirming her decision to adopt and her belief in non-traditional family structures.

Case 3:

PQ (name changed), a 55-year-old HR professional, reflects on her journey to becoming a mother through adoption. Having previously experienced motherhood with her biological son, PQ wanted to expand her family but was uncertain about entering another relationship after her divorce. Adoption became the natural choice for her. Influenced by her elder sister, who had adopted as a single woman, PQ felt confident about the process. Her decision was driven by a deep desire to relive the joys of motherhood and provide a nurturing home to another child. This sentiment, coupled with her sister's prior experience, made the process seem less daunting.

PQ's decision to adopt did not stem from a singular moment but from a growing internal desire. She described feeling a universal alignment, as though the intention to adopt set her journey into motion. Once her mind was made up, she began the paperwork with the same organization her sister had used, which made the process more straightforward. By March, the formalities were complete, and the waiting period began. Some 20 years ago, in August, she was informed that a child had been identified, and by October, the baby was home. This period, filled with anticipation and excitement, felt akin to waiting for the results of a life-altering exam.

The initial days with her adopted daughter were a mix of joy and adjustment. Unlike her biological child, her daughter, accustomed to institutional care, displayed traits of self-sufficiency at an unusually young age. This self-reliance, while admirable, initially made it challenging for PQ to bond deeply. Unlike the immediate connection she had experienced with her son, the emotional bond with her daughter took time to develop. PQ played her role as a caregiver diligently, understanding that the bond would deepen with time and shared experiences. She recalls moments of doubt and reflection, questioning her instincts and abilities as a parent. These feelings were amplified by the unique challenges of raising an adopted child, particularly one who had experienced early life adversities.

Societal attitudes toward single parenthood and adoption added another layer of complexity. While PQ did not encounter overt stigma, systemic challenges—such as the insistence on including a father's name in school forms—were recurring frustrations. These institutional rigidities often required her to advocate for her family structure, which was emotionally taxing. Despite this, PQ maintained an open and honest approach to discussing adoption with her daughter, ensuring that it was never treated as a secret. She believed in normalizing the conversation about adoption, tailoring the dialogue to her daughter's level of understanding as she grew.

As her daughter matured, deeper emotional challenges surfaced. Feelings of abandonment and insecurity began to manifest during her adolescence. These issues, rooted in her early experiences, required PQ to adopt a more proactive and supportive role. Therapy became an integral part of their journey, helping her daughter navigate complex emotions and fostering a sense of security. PQ admits that this phase was particularly challenging, filled with moments of self-doubt and emotional exhaustion. Nevertheless, she remained steadfast, driven by her commitment to her daughter's well-being.

Reflecting on her journey, acknowledges the immense learning curve she has experienced as a parent. While the road was filled with uncertainties, she cherishes the moments of connection and growth she shared with her daughter. She candidly admits that there were times when she questioned her decision to adopt, wondering if her daughter might have thrived better in a more traditional family setup. However, these doubts were often overshadowed by moments of profound gratitude and fulfillment. believes that her daughter's presence in her life is not a coincidence but a meaningful alignment of destinies, affirming her belief in the transformative power of love and resilience.

Supplementary Table 1: Codes derived from participant transcripts and corresponding main themes

Main Themes	Codes
Adoption Processes and Challenges	-Age-related concerns
	-Anticipatory Grief
	-Biological Limitations
	-Bureaucratic Hurdles and Inconsistent Practices
	-Communication & Disclosure
	-Creative Use of Online Resources
	-Cultural Norms
	-Early Inclination Towards Adoption
	-Early Self-Sufficiency in Adopted kids
	-Evolving desires and expectations
	-Exploring Alternatives
	-Exposure to Adoption Through Family
	-Impact of External Factors
	-Impact of Social Stigma and Lack of Understanding
	-Lack of Understanding & Empathy
	-Longing for Parenthood
	-Maternal Bond and Connection
	-Minimizing Potential Risks in Adoption Process
	-Navigating Societal Expectations
	-Personal Life Circumstances
	-Potential Concerns Regarding Partner Acceptance
	-Practical Considerations
	-Preparing for Parenthood
	-Prioritizing Child's Well-being
	-Proactive Preparation
	-Providing Rich and Meaningful Experiences
	-Seeking Confirmation and Validation
	-Seeking Understanding in Future Relationships
	-Slower Development of Emotional Connection
	-Social Pressure & Expectations
	-Societal Pressure
	-Uncertainty & waiting
	-Understanding the Adoption Process
	-Unexpected Challenges and Complexities
	-Weighing Costs and Benefits
Emotional Processing and Wellbeing	-Accepting Uncertainty
	-Adaptability and Flexibility
	-Anxiety and Stress During the Legal Process
	-Betrayal & Disappointment
	-Building Self-Confidence and Resilience
	-Caregiver Burnout
	-Challenges in Communicating Emotions
	-Comparing Adoption Journey to Other Life Milestones
	-Cultivating Values and Beliefs
	-Decision-Making and Goal Setting
	-Demonstrating Family Unity and Support
	-Dominance of Excitement and Anticipation
	-Examining Personal Emotional Patterns
	-Exploring the Emotional Impact of Adoption
	-Finding Meaning and Fulfillment
	-Focus on the Positive
	-Impact of Adoption on Child's Emotional Well-being
	-Impact on Parenting
	-Internal Conflict & Resolution
	-Internalized Stigma and Self-Doubt
	-Invisible Stress & Anxiety
	-Loss and Resilience
	-Minimal Experience of Grief or Loss
	-Post-Placement Emotions
	-Resilience and Adaptability

Supplementary Table 1: Contd...

Main Themes	Codes
	-Rollercoaster of Emotions
	-Self-Acceptance and Authenticity
	-Self-Awareness and Self-Care
	-Slower Development of Emotional Connectiom
Family Dynamics & Support	-Addressing Children's Questions
	-Advocacy and Empowerment
	-Building a Support Network
	-Building Trust and Open Communication
	-Celebrating Family and Community
	-Defining Motherhood
	-Defining Supportive Relationships
	-Demonstrating Family Unity and Support
	-Extended Family Involvement
	-Family Opinions and Preferences
	-Family Support & Influence
	-Impact of Adoption on Sibling Relationships
	-Influence from family
	-Intergenerational Support
	-Personal Desire for a Larger Family
	-Positive Family Dynamics and Support
	-Prioritizing Relationship and Well-being
	-Seeking Emotional Support from Family
	-Shared Decision-Making
	-Shared Responsibilities
	-Social Support & Connection
Personal Values & Beliefs	-Career Adjustments
	-Cultivating Values and Beliefs
	-Finding Clarity and Confirmation
	-Finding Meaning and Fulfillment in Motherhood
	-Intuitive Decision Making
	-Prioritizing Eco-friendly Choices
	-Progressive Attitude
	-Self-care and Distraction
	-Self-sufficiency and Agency
Societal & Cultural Influence	-Challenging Societal Norms
	-Challenging Societal Norms and Expectations
	-Impact of Social Stigma and Lack of Understanding
	- Impact on Professional Life
	- Lack of Awareness and Sensitivity
	-Navigating Societal Expectations
	-Social Isolation & Withdrawal
	-Social Pressure & Expectations
	-Societal Pressure
	-Stigma & Judgement
	-Stigma and Social Pressure

Supplementary Table 2: Categorization of Adoption-Related Codes Using the 4Ps of Pathology and the Biopsychosocial Model

4 Ps of Pathology	Biological Factors	Psychological Factors	Social Factors
Predisposing Factors	Biological Limitations Age-related concerns	Early Inclination Towards Adoption Longing for Parenthood Intuitive Decision-Making Resilience and Adaptability Self-Acceptance and Authenticity Early Self-Sufficiency in Adopted Kids Adaptability and Flexibility Evolving Desires and Expectations Progressive Attitude Personal Desire for a Larger Family Personal Life Circumstances	Exposure to Adoption Through Family Influence from Family Intergenerational Support Family Opinions and Preferences Early Self-Sufficiency in Adopted Kids Defining Motherhood Extended Family Involvement Understanding the Adoption Process Societal Pressure Challenging Societal Norms Challenging Societal Norms and Expectations Impact of Social Stigma and Lack of Understanding Navigating Societal Expectations Career Adjustments
Precipitating Factors	-	Rollercoaster of Emotions Uncertainty & Waiting Internal Conflict & Resolution Self-Awareness and Self-Care Anticipatory Grief Internalized Stigma and Self-Doubt Examining Personal Emotional Patterns Accepting Uncertainty Betrayal & Disappointment Exploring Alternatives Finding Clarity and Confirmation Potential Concerns Regarding Partner Acceptance Unexpected Challenges and Complexities Caregiver Burnout Anxiety and Stress During the Legal Process	Bureaucratic Hurdles and Inconsistent Practices Lack of Awareness and Sensitivity Cultural Norms Stigma and Social Pressure Lack of Understanding & Empathy Stigma & Judgment Social Isolation & Withdrawal Loss and Resilience Impact of Adoption on Child's Emotional Well-being Impact on Professional Life
Perpetuating Factors	-	Challenges in Communicating Emotions Impact of Adoption on Child's Emotional Well-being Slower Development of Emotional Connection Internal Conflict & Resolution Internalized Stigma and Self-Doubt Minimizing Potential Risks in Adoption Process Exploring the Emotional Impact of Adoption Post-Placement Emotions Practical Considerations Weighing Costs and Benefits Invisible Stress & Anxiety Minimal Experience of Grief or Loss	Challenges in Communicating Emotions Impact of Adoption on Child's Emotional Well-being Slower Development of Emotional Connection Internal Conflict & Resolution Internalized Stigma and Self-Doubt Minimizing Potential Risks in Adoption Process Exploring the Emotional Impact of Adoption Post-Placement Emotions Practical Considerations Weighing Costs and Benefits Invisible Stress & Anxiety Minimal Experience of Grief or Loss
Protective Factors		Building Self-Confidence and Resilience Focus on the Positive Self-Sufficiency and Agency Demonstrating Family Unity and Support Self-Care and Distraction Seeking Confirmation and Validation Self-Awareness and Self-Care Building Trust and Open Communication Dominance of Excitement and Anticipation Cultivating Values and Beliefs Seeking Understanding in Future Relationships Proactive Preparation	Building a Support Network Social Support & Connection Advocacy and Empowerment Communication & Disclosure Positive Family Dynamics and Support Finding Meaning and Fulfillment Seeking Emotional Support from Family Preparing for Parenthood Providing Rich and Meaningful Experiences Decision-Making and Goal Setting Prioritizing Eco-Friendly Choices Addressing Children's Questions Comparing Adoption Journey to Other Life Milestones Defining Supportive Relationships Prioritizing Child's Well-being Shared Decision-Making Creative use of online resources Prioritizing Relationship and Well-being Social Support and Connection Celebrating Family and Community Maternal Bond and Connection