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“No More Secrets, it's Over!”: Small Stories about Late Adoption Disclosure in Chilean Adults

Abstract: Today there is broad consensus that adoptive parents should initiate open communication early and continue talking about adoption throughout their children's lives. However, a significant group of adopted adults do not know their adoptive origin and learn about it late in their lives, especially in Latin American countries where closed adoption systems dominate. Within a broader narrative study carried out in Chile, in this article we analyze a subset of 14 narrative interviews of people adopted domestically who underwent processes of late adoption disclosure. We draw from a small stories approach (Georgakopoulou, 2015) and identify a narrative structure for accidental and late disclosure experiences. We focus on three dimensions of the communicative experience narrated by participants: (1) the spatio-temporal situatedness of disclosure, (2) the construction of family emotions, and (3) the issue of the "right age for disclosure". Focusing on these dimensions is particularly relevant because the narratives of adult Chilean adoptees seem to depart significantly from current master narratives on how families should talk about adoption. Finally, we discuss our findings in relation to adoptive identity construction processes, current debates regarding communication in adoptive families and origin search processes, and the implications for specialised professional interventions in this area.

Key words: Adoption; Late Disclosure; Narratives; Small Stories; Secrets.

Introduction

For a long time, adoption was surrounded by secrecy in Western societies (Carp, 1998). However, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) contributed to greater regularization of adoptive policies by focusing on the Best Interest of the Child and a shift to a much more open perspective on communication about adoption (Siegel and Smith, 2012). In addition, the advent of assisted reproduction technologies (ARTs), new digital communication technologies and genetic testing services to find relatives simply make secrecy in adoptions increasingly difficult to maintain, pushing towards greater communicative openness (Grotevant, 2019). In line with the child's best interests, some countries (e.g. United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, etc.) have opted for *open adoption* models, with different degrees of post-adoption contact agreements between parties of the adoptive triad.

In contrast, Latin American adoption policies and practices continue to advocate for closed adoption systems. In particular, Chile is a country in which a full and closed adoption model has a strong and long tradition. It also has an unfortunate history of irregular practices surrounding domestic and intercountry adoptions (ICA) during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990) (Salvo Agolia and Alfaro, 2019). According to Selman (2012), during the 1970s and 1980s Chile was the sixth country in the world in the number of children authorized for ICA. The right of adult adopted persons to access their birth records is enshrined in Adoption Law N° 19,620, approved in 1999 (Art. 27), without affirming it as a right and limiting it to permission for adopted persons to begin searching for their origins once they legally come of age. This law also states that adopted persons must request their adoptive parents' permission to access their adoption records (Salvo Agolia and Marre, 2020). At the moment, there is a bill under debate in the national congress (since 2013) to reform the adoption system that proposes that adopted children can access their adoption records at 14 years of age and proposes the introduction of open adoption arrangements.

However, even if enacted, this legal change would still be insufficient to respond to the needs of adopted persons and achieve due state protection of the right to know their origins.

Consequently, there is a significant group of Chilean adopted people who still do not know their origin, and there are many others who learn about their adoptive origin late, often accidentally (triggered by the participation of third parties), and only partially. Given this secrecy within adoption dynamics, it is very difficult to assess the scale and carry out a detailed study of the phenomenon of late adoption disclosure and existing international research has paid little attention to exploring the adoption disclosure process from the perspective of adopted people (Baden et al., 2019; Clapton, 2021; Wydra, O'Brien and Merson, 2012). In Latin America, systematic research on this topic is scarce, especially in the case of domestic adoptions. In this article, we address this knowledge gap focusing on the Chilean context dominated by a closed adoption model. We adopt a narrative analysis strategy based on a small stories approach (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008) to examine personal accounts of the moment of “accidental and/or late disclosure” given by adults adopted in Chile, and we situate these experiences in the context of current global debates about the communication of adoptive origins. From our perspective, this narrative material allows us to better understand communicative processes about adoption in contemporary Chile. In particular, these small stories about the moment of disclosure have great potential as a gateway to multiple issues related to the construction of adoptive identity, to family relationships, and the search for origins of the adopted adults we have worked with.

Background

Secrets and adoption secrecy

Voice and silence are socially constructed in conversational interactions between speakers and listeners and are influenced by canonical cultural narratives (Fivush, 2010). The study of secrets is a long-standing topic in different disciplines. Secrecy is irreducibly paradoxical (Bellman, 1981), as the "do not talk about it" proscription is contradicted by the fact that secrecy is constituted by the very procedures by which secrets get communicated. According to Smart (2011), within family secrets, reproductive secrets constitute the largest group of secrets, covering topics ranging from conception, premarital birth, illegitimacy, secret adoptions, the uncertainty of fatherhood and assisted reproduction. Secrets disrupt family narratives (Sullivan and Lathrop, 2004), not only by obscuring a key element of the family story but through a ripple effect of silences and omissions in the construction of family narratives. When secrets concern a central family issue, many family conversations are affected by fear of opening the door to other questions that might uncover the secrets. Imber-Black (1998) defines these secrets as "toxic" or "dangerous", as they make certain parts of family histories inaccessible, have a high emotional cost and emerge as obstacles to strong relations among family members. From an anthropological perspective, Konrad (2005) discusses the concept of "active not-knowing" and suggests that people are engaged in practices of active not-knowing around family matters that are potentially disruptive. Part of growing up or simply relating to others may be learning what "not to know". The communication dynamics linked to active not-knowing (Konrad, 2005) clearly show why one should not wait for adopted people to ask questions about their origins to start talking about adoption: in more closed families people learn not to ask.

In particular, Tarroja (2010) defines adoption secrecy as including various elements such as: late telling, non-parental disclosure, and infrequent discussion. In different ways, secrecy and late disclosure allow adoptive families to create family histories that bring them closer to an "ideal"

biogenetically related family (Baden et al., 2019). Evidence shows that adoption secrecy and denial affect adopted people's identity development (Rosenberg and Groze, 1997). Knowledge about origins or genetic links is not mere 'information', rather it is deep knowledge about one's kinship network and also about one's self (Smart, 2011). For Fivush (2010), when silence is imposed, it can lead to a loss of memory and a loss of part of the self.

Late Adoption Disclosure: Tensions between Closedness and Openness

Today there is consensus among experts on the need to initiate the process of disclosing the child's adoption as early and gradually as possible, and to talk openly and empathically about adoption across the lifespan (Grotevant and McRoy, 1998; McRoy et al., 1990; Melina, 2000), understanding adoption disclosure not as a single event but as a dynamic process of communication (Brodzinsky, 2011). This move towards acceptance of adoptive origins benefits the psychological well-being of adopted persons (Brodzinsky, 2006), and the construction of their adoptive identity (Grotevant et al., 2000; Colaner and Soliz, 2017).

Adoptive families especially depend on active discursive work to construct family narratives to replace blood relationships and legitimate their new bonds, connecting each and every family member (Galvin, 2003). To tackle the voids in the personal history of adopted people, their adoptive families create *adoption entrance narratives* in place of a child's birth story (Krusiewicz and Wood, 2001). The complexity and multidimensionality of adoption entrance narratives have an impact on the self-concept construction and well-being of adopted people (Kranstuber and Koenig Kellas, 2011). Yet, this does not guarantee that all adopted people can rely on these family narratives about adoption because the child's background may be incomplete, unknown, or difficult to communicate (Harrigan, 2010).

Communicative openness is both a lifelong issue and an evolving challenge facing adoptive family members (Jones and Hackett, 2007). Although a general consensus has been reached about promoting early communication, there is no full agreement on the most appropriate time to initiate it (Carp, 1998) and professional recommendations are often insufficient. The sparse evidence available suggests that a considerable number of adopted persons learn about their adoptive origin at ages that are considered "late", but there is no explicit agreement on the ages at which a disclosure would be considered as such (Baden et al., 2019; Kenny et al., 2012; Raley, 2008) or what it entails exactly.

Independently of the information available on the child's origins, it is the adoptive parents who control the subjects that are addressed or avoided (Passmore et al., 2007). Contemporary adoptive parents express several worries and concerns about how best to disclose or share with their children meaningful and sensitive information about their origins and the reasons for their adoption, and about when is the "right moment" to do so, considering their ages and other special features of their children's life stories. Also, adoptive parents confront the dual dilemma of not wanting to reveal too much too soon, while at the same time not wanting to be perceived as holding back essential facts, and seeking to give positive yet honest accounts of the adoption process (Jones and Hackett, 2007). The fear of some parents may lead them to reject openness, especially if the risks of loss appear too high (Smart, 2009). The tensions and ambiguity between openness and closedness continue to be present in many adoptive families and adoption practitioners (Harrigan, 2009), producing what Frekko et al. (2015) call communicative vigilance, the careful management of the ways families talk and do not talk about adoption. As Ryburn (1995) argues, closedness and openness coexist in a dynamic relationship as they have always done and the relative weighting attached to either position is determined by a constellation of social and political forces that shape

family communication practices about adoption. These conditions, especially (but not only) in countries with closed adoption models, facilitate a scenario in which many people know of their adoptive status late and/or accidentally.

The limited evidence available on the topic of late adoption disclosure shows that many late discoverers feel that they have not received acknowledgment of the particularity of their experience and the long-term effects of this discovery (Passmore et al., 2007). Narratives following the accidental and late discovery of adoptive status are marked by intense feelings of betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving and a need to acknowledge that secrecy was an unjust and hurtful family dynamic with a negative impact on the well-being of adopted persons (Riley, 2008; Passmore et al., 2007; Baden et al., 2019; Kenny et al., 2012). Others would have liked it to have been handled differently but understand how difficult this task could be for their parents. Kranstuber and Koenig Kellas (2011) define these experiences as "deception narratives" referring to the way adopted people discovered their adoption: by finding out accidentally or in surprise revelations by other people (whether family members or not), learning about this origin by themselves (for example, by discovering documentation), and, in the case of those who always knew they were adopted, in discovering later that their stories were partially untrue. Likewise, some interviewees recount that in the disclosure they discovered that it was an "open secret" that their whole family knew about and only they were unaware of, finding themselves excluded from knowledge that belongs to them more than anybody (Kranstuber and Koenig Kellas, 2011).

Narratives, Identities and Adoption: Between Master Narratives and Small Stories

From a narrative approach, every process of identity construction involves the telling of stories that link aspects of the past, present and future of the self (Bamberg, 2011). Narrative and identity are often regarded as closely connected, complex and fluid notions that contain multiple paradoxes

(de Fina, 2015). In particular, adopted persons are faced with various master narratives, social portraits and stereotypes present in popular culture about adoption and adoptees; most of the time, negative, or in their positive cases, idealized and romanticized. The meanings of their adoption have been influenced by multiple factors: moral values regarding sexuality, conceptions of genetic inheritance and attitudes towards the legal rights of adopted children. Within these discourses, adopted persons navigate through complex questions about their "origins", belongingness and understanding the role of their adoption in their sense of self (Grotevant, 1997). The biographies of each adopted person are entangled in these dynamics, they adhere to, negotiate or resist social master narratives, exercising varying degrees of agency and re-authorship in their life stories.

From our perspective, the forms of narrative analysis clustered around positioning analysis (Bamberg, 2004; Korobov, 2010) and small stories research (Georgakopoulou, 2015; de Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012) provide powerful tools to examine the biographical experiences of the adult adopted persons presented in in this article. On the one hand, these traditions build on the distinction between big stories (Bamberg, 2006) or master narratives (Bamberg, 2006; de Fina, 2013) and small stories. The first refers to relatively stabilized, dominant and socio-culturally constructed discourses on the social world, while small stories refer to more fleeting accounts that emerge in interaction (including the particular conversational interaction of a research interview) and often focus on particular episodes and experiences in the teller's life. On the other hand, small story research builds on a varied set of analytical tools that can shed light on how personal (small) stories contribute to construct identities, are intertwined with master narratives and social relations and can become powerful tools to construct meaning (cf. Adler et al., 2017).

In short, the experiences of adopted persons who discover late and/or accidentally their adoptive origin unfold within a historical shift regarding the master narratives about adoption

processes and the communication of adoptive origins. Yet, the stories about the moment of disclosure presented here do not fit well in these changing schemas, as they do not adjust to contemporary discourses regarding family communication about adoption and they showcase ways in which an intended family regimen of secrecy about adoption is broken down. Narrative identity is most often assessed via prompts for key autobiographical scenes, which are construed as turning points of teller's life-history narratives (McLean and Pratt, 2006). In this article, we examine the small stories produced by a group of Chilean adopted adults about their accidental and unplanned discovery of their adoptive origins. We specifically examine accidental disclosure small stories to identify common narrative structures and answer three questions regarding this set of narratives: (a) how are accidental disclosure stories situated in time and space?; (b) how are family emotions constructed in these narratives?; and (3) how is the "right age for disclosure" construed by participants drawing on their experiences?. These three issues, which are basic features of disclosure narrative constructions, also interconnect with broader debates regarding disclosure and adoption which are addressed in the final discussion.

Methods

Participants

We draw from a broader narrative study led by the first author with adult people who were adopted domestically in Chile (N = 35) recruited through the Chilean Search for Origins Program of the National Service for Minors (SENAME), adoptive parents (N = 12), birth mothers (N = 8) and professionals (N = 5). The general goal of the broader project focused on how adopted adults construct and negotiate their identity in a cultural and legal context of full and closed adoptions, surrounded by secrecy and adoption stigma. The group of adopted adults (N= 35) had very

heterogeneous life histories and had performed origin search processes with very dissimilar results. At the time of the interview, participants' ages ranged from 21 to 53, having begun their search for origins between the ages of 18 and 45. All of them were adopted over a long period of time (1965-1996) and most were born and grew up before the Chilean state ratified the UNCRC (1989) and the Hague Convention on Adoption (1993). 26 participants were women (74%) and nine were men (26%). All the participants were adopted at an early age, 33 of them when they were newborn babies and two when they were three years old. All the participants stated that they had studied at university and defined themselves as middle or upper middle socio-economic class.

In this article, we focus on a subset of 14 adopted adults who experienced accidental and/or late adoption disclosure processes. Disclosure of the adoption secret was based on the discovery of documents, the revelation of a third party (a member of the extended family, acquaintances, or neighbors), or because the person decided to directly confront their adoptive parents with the suspicions they had held for years. One relevant shared feature of the narratives and experiences of the sub-sample selected for this article is that disclosure was a singular event in which the adoptive status became known, but was quickly restricted to this specific conversation (Harrigan, 2010). In connection to this, it should be mentioned that this bounded nature of the disclosure process is also present in the 21 other cases of the wider study in which communication of their adoptive status began before they were seven years old and/or was planned by parents. Of this later set, in 11 cases, the participants pointed out that it was only one specific event and not an ongoing process - because their parents had no information about their birth family or, if they had it, decided not to share it until they were older. In the rest of the families in which there was greater openness to communication, this attitude changed significantly when the interviewees decided to start their search for origins. Adoptive parents supported and accompanied these search for origin processes

in only five cases of the study sample. In most cases, participants did not tell their parents that they were doing an origin search, often due to strong loyalty conflicts, performing what we could call a "secret search for origins" (Salvo Agoglia and Marre, 2020).

Table 1

Subset of Participants who Experienced Accidental and Late Disclosures

[insert Table 1 here]

Data Production

Upon receiving approval from the Universidad Alberto Hurtado (Santiago de Chile) Research Ethics Board, participants were recruited through the National Service of Minor's Search for Origins Program that provides specialized support to adopted people who want to search for their birth family. Participants were informed of the research objectives and procedures and signed an informed consent form to participate in the study. The larger narrative study (Riessman, 2008) consisted of two phases that included different data production methods and tools. Narrative research understands personal stories as units that contribute to construct meaning and identity (Bruner, 2003), intertwined with social narratives and power relations, which do not remain fixed over time (Riessman, 2008). As Adler et al. (2017) point out in their discussion of research methods to study identity, a narrative approach is particularly well suited to examine meaning-making processes that concern the self, allowing researchers to ethically and meaningfully understand lived experiences in context. In addition, they also underscore how it is well suited to explore agency, as one of the most important dimensions of life-story narratives.

In this article, we present part of the results of the first phase of the project based on narrative interviews (Riessman, 2008) that invite participants to respond by retelling experiences and events in their biographies as they happened. During the interviews, the researcher explicitly

states that he/she has time to listen and is interested in the smallest details, asking clarifying questions as narrators go along (Fraser, 2004). According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998), in the process of constructing a life story, narrators grapple with two tasks: telling a story of their being and development, and providing explanations as to how and why they have reached their present situation or identity. Giving meaning and attributing meanings to stories is how narrators construct identity and sense of self, select, mould, and edit cultural meanings into their stories (Lieblich et al. 1998).

The narrative interviews gravitated around a flexible script of open-ended questions on four topics related to the study objectives: (a) the adoption story, (b) the construction of personal identity, (c) the communication of origins in the adoptive family and (d) the process of searching for origins. This script allowed the interviewees to produce an autobiographical narrative (Pazos, 2004a, 2004b) composed of stories, examples, episodes and memories of various aspects related to their adoption, their identity construction and search for origins. In other words, from a small story perspective, such interviews contain multiple instances of these typically small tellings (de Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012) on different aspects of the biographies of participants, which can be connected to various adoption processes and dynamics.

One or two interviews, each lasting approximately three hours, were conducted with each participant by the first author of this article between 2017 and 2020. We recorded and transcribed the interviews for an initial codification of the stories and meanings constructed by the interviewees in relation to their surroundings, the context of production and the way in which the stories reflect, emphasize or even contradict the master narratives about adoption in the Chilean cultural context. As said, in this article we specifically focus on the narrative account of the accidental or late disclosure moment produced by 14 adopted adults. These are relatively clearly

bounded small stories which can be identified and extracted from the broader interview, be examined in themselves and within the broader context of participant's adoptive experiences and life-histories. Finally, as a note regarding the sample it should be clear that we do not use a sample saturation criterion, as the broader project draws from a hard-to-reach population and all those who volunteered to participate in the project were recruited using the aforementioned strategy.

Data Analysis

We develop an analysis based on *small stories* research (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; de Fina, 2013; Georgakopoulou, 2015; de Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). As said, the discovery/disclosure of adoptive status in this sample of participants is limited to a specific communicative moment or narrative event in participant's biographies (Bauman, 1986; Wortham and Reyes, 2015). In turn, within the broader biographical interview the account of this experience becomes a narrated event that is identifiable as such, with some features that cut across our group of participants. First, these stories are relatively entextualizable (Silverstein and Urban, 1996; Bauman and Briggs, 1990), that is they can be extracted from the broader conversational environment as meaningful units, and can be examined in themselves as a small stories (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008) of “accidental and/or late disclosure.” Second, in addition, this reconstruction of the moment of disclosure occurs during an interview conducted at a specific point in the interviewee’s biography that is (more or less) distant from the moment of disclosure and varies widely in how it was experienced by the group of participants. Therefore, like every narrative, it involves reconstruction and positioning work that not only tells of the specific circumstances in which the disclosure took place (a narrative’s most denotative aspect), but also

serves as a space from which to disentangle identity processes and discursive stances in relation to the narrative topic (Koborov, 2001, 2010).

Given this double dimension of accidental disclosure stories, our analysis of narrative positions within small stories about accidental disclosure unfolded in two phases. The first phase focused on the narrative structure of these stories. The proposal of this narrative structure emerged through an adaptation of the qualitative data analysis phases proposed by LeCompte (2000) and applied here to the interview materials. First, the corpus of interview transcripts of participants who experienced late accidental disclosures was coded to identify small stories about disclosure. Second, these stories were re-examined to identify: (a) the narrative *items* present in late/accidental disclosure and (b) how these items are assembled into *patterns*, constituting the structural elements of the disclosure narratives¹. As this initial structure is the building block of subsequent analyses we open the results section presenting the general organization of a late/accidental disclosure story through the analysis of an extended exemplar. The second phase of the analysis delves into the discursive positions and identities of adoptees using the analytical tools of small stories research, particularly building from a practice-based approach (Georgakopoulou, 2013; de Fina, 2021) which proposes "a shift from an emphasis on *this* story to an emphasis on *this type* of story and its conventional associations with the local context in which it occurs" (Georgakopoulou, 2013, p. 92, emphasis in the original). Building from this perspective, we discuss the standpoints displayed by participants in relation to the key structural features of the late late/accidental disclosure process identified in the first step. Advancing the analysis below, schematically these discursive positions refer to different biographical moments in relation to disclosure: *before* disclosure (the 'suspicion'),

¹ It should be noted that, in comparison with LeCompte's (2000) three-step process, the corpus of small stories (14) and the succinct nature of the small story extracts (a few lines of transcript) makes the mid-step process of creating *taxonomies of items* redundant and inefficient for our analysis.

the *moment* of disclosure and *post-disclosure* reflection (the issue of the 'right age' of disclosure). From this perspective, late/accidental disclosure becomes a key biographical moment in the adoption chronotope (e.g. de Fina, 2022) and the analysis of late/accidental disclosure stories emerges as an entry point to understand broader identity and relational constructions processes.

Results

The Structure of the Story of Late Adoption Disclosure

Analysis of the narratives that reconstruct how each participant discovered their adoptive status suggests that these stories gravitate around a common structure that may be followed more or less explicitly and with different degrees of detail. Also, these small stories stand out for containing typical elements of narratives about personal experiences (Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1982), such as a high emotional and evaluative load and discursive work aimed at connecting this experience with the broader biography of each narrator. Late disclosure (both accidental and not accidental) emerges as a specific and discrete episode in the biography of each participant and its reconstruction materializes in a narrative structured around three elements (patterns): the "suspicion", the moment of disclosure, and the evaluation of the moment of disclosure. The case below of 30-year-old Hernán represents a very explicit example of this dynamic. For years, Hernán had various "suspicions" regarding "different elements that caught his attention" in his history (e.g. having had a "wet nurse" or the discrepancy between his date of birth and date of birth registration). One day, when he was 14 years old, Hernán asked his mother, almost in passing: "Mom, am I adopted?" Although he refers to not knowing why he asked this question, he points out that it was as if "his body had vomited," and that the extraordinary intensity of his mother's emotional reaction (a piercing cry) was what confirmed his suspicion. At that moment, he "dissociated" himself and

left with his friends. On his return, his parents were waiting to talk with him, this being the single and limited moment in which his parents spoke of his adoptive origin, captured in the following story:

Excerpt 1

The Disclosure Story as a Biographical Episode (Hernán, male, 30)²

$$(\dots)$$

(A)

1 they were waiting for me at when I got back
2 and, well, my father was sitting I remember like in a corner of the kitchen
3 we have in the kitchen like let's say a small daytime table
4 and he was sitting in a corner
5 looking at his cup like very serious
6 and my mom was like preparing tea
7 but my mom very like nothing has happened

(B)

8 In my family everything's like that
9 "nothing has happened here"
10 we work very much with the logic of magical repairs
11 things are never really talked about
12 there's never been a dialogue about bad feelings
13 instead everything is covered over
14 everything is made invisible in one way or another

(C)

15 and so, I arrive, I sit down
16 and so, very nervous like I have a knot in my stomach
in my throat
17 and my dad says to me, looks up
18 because he was like concentrating on his cup
19 looks up and says to me
20 “well, ehm, now you can ask us all the questions you want

² The narratives have been transcribed for this article in lines and stanzas/blocks, following a simplified version of stanza analysis (Gee, 1991) and ethnopoetic (Hymes, 2003) transcription and patterning conventions. All narratives were originally produced in Chilean Spanish and have been translated for this article by the authors.

because this is the first time
and the last time that we are going to talk about this”
21 that’s how he started
22 and I remember thinking
23 “what do I ask?”

(D)

24 and, sure, looking back
25 I realise I chose the dumbest question
26 I could have asked in a context like this
27 which was how I remember
28 because at that moment I had this fantasy
29 in my very televisual head
30 of how children are adopted

31 I had no idea
32 when I was 14 I had no idea
33 of how adoption processes happen

34 So I had this ridiculous fantasy
35 that my parents would be hugging
36 looking through a window at a whole lot of babies

(E)

37 so I asked him something like
38 “how did you choose me?”
39 they looked at each other and like they didn’t answer
40 really they gave me no reply
41 to anything I asked them
42 nothing, they avoided answering
43 “well, no, it’s nothing like that at all”
44 absolutely nothing
45 they didn’t want to talk about it

(F)

46 and, well, I was left with a bitter feeling about this situation
47 I think that’s when my sadness started to manifest
48 in fact I began by not celebrating my birthday
(...)

In this disclosure story, the elements that are part of the small story and its discursive development can be seen. The moment of the disclosure is situated in a specific time and place of participants' biography and contains several items that bring about the material, social and spatial details of the moment of disclosure (A: lines 1-7) and unfolds -as in others- in the form of a dialogue (C: lines 17-23 and E: lines 37- 44). Furthermore, over and above this presentation of the narrative action there is discursive work focusing on reconstructing the characters inner plane (narrator and other interlocutors), in this case their family (B: lines 8-14), and of the interviewee at the time of the disclosure (D: lines 27-36). Finally, the disclosure story explores the impact of the event on the narrator's biography, in this case in a succinct coda (F: lines 46-48). Table 2 summarizes the structure of "late/accidental disclosure small stories" and their connection to the analytical levels adapted from LeCompte (2000). Having presented this general structure, in the sub-sections that follow we examine each of these components in more detail, focusing on the narrative standpoints participant's build in and through each narrative component.

Table 2

The structure of Late/Accidental Disclosure Stories

[insert Table 2 here]

The Preface: "Suspicion"

On several occasions the disclosure story is prefaced with the existence of a suspicion about the link with parents or, at least, the singularization of some non-ordinary aspect in the individual's identity. From Smart's (2011) perspective, reproductive secrets are not buried and forgotten, but rather they can be kept alive by innuendo, palpable silences, evasions and rumor. These elements are located in the distant past of the interviewees' childhood and when this aspect is pointed out, what varies among participants is how and when this suspicion is approached with their family. In the space-time of the narrated moment of disclosure (Bauman, 1986; Wortham and Reyes, 2015)

an adoptive origin may actually emerge as a possible explanation of these discordant elements in the biography of the narrator. Excerpt 2 shows this part of Fabiola's story. She discovers around the age of 26 that she was adopted, two years before the time of the interview:

Excerpt 2

The Construction of Suspicions about Adoption Secrets (Fabiola, female, 28)

(...)

(A)

- 1 I never had doubts before
2 the only thing that caught my attention were my cousins
3 because all all all all all
4 of them were stout large fat all the same
5 and I am or was the only skinny one of them (...)
6 that always caught my attention
7 but once again I never believed that it was for that

(B)

- 8 The same as my ID
9 I never associated that my ID was different
10 because they had assigned me another
11 I should have been like 18 million and I am 15 million
12 those people are like about 35 now
(...)

Fabiola identifies two aspects that she could not easily reconcile with her personal experience. On the one hand, the obvious physical differences with relatives with whom she supposedly had biological ties (lines 1-5), and, on the other hand (lines 8-12), the administrative mismatch of her identity document (ID) with that of other people of the same chronological age. This second aspect points to a singular element in the narratives about the adoptive origins of our Chilean interviewees. As in other states, the ID is a unique and individual identifier assigned by the Chilean administration correlatively and for all Chileans at the time of birth and, thus, allows

citizens to informally identify age cohorts based on the ID number. Current Chilean legislation allows the original ID to be modified at the time of the adoption ruling. This practice typically causes a disparity with the usual numerical range for the adopted person's age cohort. This disparity is easily identified since their childhood by most of the people interviewed, and frequently appears in stories of late disclosures and interviewees' suspicions about their origins. Yet, these elements that could point towards the existence of an "open secret" cannot be confirmed due to the impossibility of verbal communication, allowing doubts about personal identity and kinship ties to persist for years. In Excerpt 2, Fabiola minimizes the importance of these disparities but for other interviewees the construction of this suspicion is an extremely significant element that frames the disclosure story itself. This turns disclosure into an episode that finally "explains" all the paradoxes of the interviewees' biography.

The Event: "Disclosure"

In the sub-set of cases analysed, we identify two main ways in which disclosure is triggered: because neighbours, or other relatives who knew the whole story "let it out" at some point, or because the interviewee who held suspicions asked the question about his/her status as an adopted child in a casual conversation with his/her adoptive mother (Excerpt 1). In her story, Fabiola points out how, despite identifying and signalling these disparities, she never links these experiences in her past with a possible adoptive origin (although other interviewees do). However, what is shared among narrators is the emotional language that frames these suspicions. As Excerpt 2 shows, the evaluative items assigned to recall these unusual elements of childhood are relatively restrained. Thus, Fabiola uses the expression "caught my attention" (lines 2 and 6) on both occasions to qualify her past emotional response to the disparities that she points out. This emotional frame

significantly contrasts with the one deployed when the moment of disclosure is narrated. The disclosure episode replays much more intense and extreme emotional reactions and, consequently, incorporates emotionally charged language (Besnier, 1990). In the following excerpt, we continue with Fabiola's narrative about the moment of disclosure that occurs immediately after the previous preamble (the numbering of the excerpt runs on from the previous one):

Excerpt 3

Story of the Disclosure (Fabiola, female, 28)

(...)

(A)

14 we were lying on the bed
15 and just then it began to move (the belly)
16 so I told my mom to put her hand on it
17 so that it would give her little kicks and things like that

(B)

18 so I don't remember what it was that I asked her
19 and my mom got very nervous
20 and I said to her like this, joking, I said to her like this
21 "mom, I think that I am adopted"
22 I said to her

(C)

22 and my mom was like
23 "and why are you saying that?"
24 "no because like-
25 then I remembered-
26 "like you are always changing the versions, like it's weird"
27 I said to her

(D)

28 and then she started to cry, to cry, to cry, to cry
29 and I inside was like this
30 "iiisshhh, shit!"
31 I only saw her cry like that when her mom died
32 there I saw her cry like she cried that day
33 so I hugged her and said

34 "so, it's true?"
35 and she said
36 "yes"

Throughout the broader interview Fabiola singles out two aspects of her disclosure experience that she considers highly relevant. First, that it is extremely late, since it occurs when she is around 26 years old, when she is pregnant. Second, that this process of disclosure of her adoptive origin has only occurred with her mother; her father is unaware that she knows that she is adopted. This is the conversational context in which the story of Excerpt 3 takes place. Thus, while the preamble to the disclosure narrative (Excerpt 2) shows certain inconsistencies during her childhood to which she did not attach much significance, Fabiola begins to have stronger suspicions during her own pregnancy when she notices that her mother is incapable of answering consistently different questions that Fabiola asks about her mother's presumed gestation. As shown in Excerpt 3, these suspicions trigger an accidental disclosure in an unforeseen way during a moment of family intimacy. As in other studies that discuss the role of reported speech and direct voice in the construction of an emotional landscape in narrative (Relaño-Pastor, 2014; Capps and Ochs, 1995), this story unfolds as a re-enactment of the conversation between Fabiola and her mother into which the adoption hypothesis is introduced. First, the interviewee softens the emotional intensity of the suggestion by presenting it as part of a humorous exchange (line 20, cf. Norrick, 2010). However, this tone of restraint collapses when it is revealed that she is indeed adopted, and her inner world and family relationships interweave. The last part of the story (lines 28-36) begins with her mother's sobs in reaction to this supposedly funny question. Two strategies are used to highlight the intensity of her mother's emotional reaction: repetition (line 28), and the establishment of a parallel—linguistically constructed with two parallel clauses (lines 31 and 32:

"I saw her cry")— between this reaction and her mother's reaction to another tragic moment in her biography: the loss of her own mother (Fabiola's grandmother).

This segment of Fabiola's story emphasizes her mother's emotional reaction, within a broader conversation in which the interviewee concentrates on reconstructing the impact that the disclosure had on her family relationships, but also provides insight into the narrator's own emotional reaction (lines 29-30). In this case, it is presented as a dialogue with herself in which she completely re-evaluates the context of her question and, as we pointed out above, the meaning of the suspicions that have been building about her origin during her own pregnancy - yet, this evaluation is still in relation to the impact of her actions on her mother. By comparison, other stories centre much more on the emotions and reactions of the person who has just discovered their adoptive condition (the narrator). An element of this focalization in the story is the discursive maximization of emotional reactions, which on several occasions is described as "paralyzing." When the affective response to disclosure is constructed in these terms, the dialogue between different participants is replaced by a focus on the somatization of affect (Capps and Ochs, 1995):

Excerpt 4

Reconstruction of Emotional Reactions (Tania, female, 27)

(...)

(A)

- 1 and right there was like the text
- 2 that starts by saying that he and my mother could not adopt
- 3 I mean that they could not conceive children
- 4 so they were thinking about adoption

(B)

- 5 in that moment
- 6 ah! and I was with Juan! – my partner
- 7 and sure, I was left in shock
- 8 he just happened to be accompanying me – I don't know why
- 9 he was there just at the precise moment

(C)
10 and I just like I read the first line
11 and I couldn't go on reading
12 like I started to shiver
13 so we sat down
14 and he read it to me
(...)

Tania recounts the accidental discovery of her adoptive origin at the age of 22 while tidying up the house in which she lived with her father. Her father, 72 at the time of the interview, was writing his biography and kept a folder with some papers about her adoption. Excerpt 4 relives the discovery of these documents and the emotional reaction it triggered. The interviewee reconstructs the affective intensity of the accidental disclosure through two moves. First, by underscoring the physical-corporal manifestations of her reaction to the discovery (lines 7 and 12). Second, by specifying the impact of the disclosure on her actions at that moment: it prevents her from continuing to read a document in which different aspects of her adoptive process and origins are revealed (lines 10-11). However, this story also shares with the previous one (Excerpt 3) the fact that disclosure did not occur when she was on her own. Tania discovers and reads this document at a moment when she was accompanied by her partner - when this discovery could equally have occurred while she was alone. This points as well to a recurring and relevant difference in the corpus of accounts examined: while suspicions are formulated and take shape individually, disclosure occurs through or with other significant people.

The Issue of the "Right Moment" for Disclosure

As we discussed in the introduction, one aspect on which the literature on adoption disclosure is least specific is determining the most appropriate age to initiate it. Expert advice and the

perspectives of adoptive parents dominate this discussion and we know much less about how adopted people themselves evaluate what might be the best moment to learn about their adoptive status. Small stories about the late/accidental disclosure of our participants potentially show how adoptees retrospectively assess the age at which their disclosure occurred. Although this aspect does not appear in every case, when it does emerge it provides closure to the disclosure story. This makes it possible to examine the discourses that adopted participants themselves build regarding the ages they consider most appropriate for the disclosure to begin - building from a consensus that disclosure is always necessary. Our interviewees expressed no clear trend on their preferred age of disclosure, nor did they concur with dominant expert discourses.

Our starting point are stories of accidental disclosures and, therefore, a break from an alternative trajectory in which communication of adoptive origins could have been a more natural, continuous (and early) part of their biography - and, at the same time, a process that unfolds with more planning on the part of adoptive parents. Nevertheless, some participants did build an assessment of the appropriate age for disclosure. In these reconstructions, two conceptions of time (Bakhtin, 1981; Erickson, 2004) emerge. On the one hand, a more chronological view of time, in which a range of different answers about the best age for disclosure are presented: for some, childhood (around 7-8 years) is considered to be too young an age to face one's adoptive origin; for others, adolescence is identified as too late a stage, while for others disclosure in adulthood is reconstructed as positive. On the other hand, a biographical-subjective view of time and age emerges, one in which there is more consensus since several accounts gravitate towards a notion of a "right moment" for disclosure.

Excerpt 5

On the "Right Moment" for Disclosure (Gabriel, male, 37)

(...)

- (A)
- 1 Once a doctor asked me
2 “what would you have preferred?
To have known when you were little or now?”
3 and I said to him
4 "I knew when I had to know"
- 5 but I would have preferred to know at the same age that I was
6 when I was grown up
7 with a family
8 with everything
- (B)
- 9 because one sees things differently
10 perhaps if it had caught me when I was 10 or smaller
11 I wouldn't have known how to understand it
12 or at 17 maybe in that stupid reality all young people have
13 I wouldn't have been able to understand it
- (C)
- 14 it caught me just when it had to catch me
15 I found out just when things had to happen
(...)

This construction of the right moment among the people interviewed is related to the nature of disclosure as a *boundary experience* (Meijers, 2002; Geijssel and Meijers, 2005): a life episode identified as a highly emotional and a significant experience for the reconstruction of personal identity and participation in the social world as constituted until the moment of this liminal episode. It is from this perspective that the idea of the right moment makes sense. The fuller narrative interview about late disclosure reveals broader personal work connected to participants' biographical reconstruction and the reorganization of family relationships. Age of disclosure is only one aspect that gives meaning to this process; thus, the question is not so much the chronological age (understood as a normative stage of development) at which the disclosure

occurs, but the identity reconstruction process triggered by this boundary experience. In this context, a quasi-circular definition of what constitutes the "right moment" comes into play: if, in retrospect, this identity reconstruction work achieves a certain new balance, it is because the disclosure came at the right moment.

From this perspective, Gabriel's narrative reconstructs this sense of the "right moment". The explanation is triggered from an enacted dialogue with a family doctor in which he presents his adult life as the appropriate moment for discovery/disclosure (A - C) - Gabriel learns about his adoptive origin when he is 35 years of age, two years before the interview takes place. Yet, this appropriateness is expanded by discarding other moments in the life-cycle (childhood and adolescence) in which tackling an accidental disclosure of his adoptive status could have been more problematic (B).

Discussion and Conclusions

Considering that this is a topic that has been scarcely explored at the international level (Clapton, 2021), especially in the context of countries with closed adoption systems, this article provides a novel perspective on the multifaceted and complex communicative experiences of Chilean adoptees. Most notably, participants' narratives apparently clash with current expert discourses and international policy trends in relation to disclosure processes in adoption. The data show the coexistence of a variety of experiences and disclosure practices, in different generations of adopted adults but in which some shared trends can be identified. The narratives help unpack this tension within family dynamics and the situated rationalities surrounding social and family secrecy around adoption (Smart, 2011).

First, accidental and late disclosure consists of a communicative act located in and constrained to particular time and space. This disclosure is very significant emotionally and has an important impact on the reconstruction of social relationships and the identity of adopted persons. Yet, when evaluated retrospectively it is reconstrued in a variety of ways, embodied for example in the construction of a "right moment" for disclosure. Participants actively reflect on what is the "right age" to communicate adoptive origin from their own point of view and experience. In some cases, their perspectives diverge from advice that suggests that adoptive parents should develop intentional open practices early on and, especially, continuous communication of their children's adoptive origin, understanding this as a process that unfolds throughout family time and space (Brodzinsky, 2006). Each of these aspects uncover tensions with current master narratives on communication in adoptive families.

Second, we identified a wide range of variability in the age of disclosure within the total sample (from seven years for the earliest case to more than 30 years for those who speak of their "adult life."). In more recent adoptions (participants of up to 25 years of age), we identified a trend toward earlier and more continuous communication of adoptive origins. In this way, our analysis leads us to share the problematization of the narrative of progress towards openness, from harmful or turbid practices towards a scientifically informed approach to relationships (Jones, 2016; Ryburn, 1995; Smart, 2009). As Jociles, Lores and Konvalinka (2021) point out for the case of disclosure processes with children conceived through reproductive donation in Spain, it is necessary to unpack the very concept of disclosure, because disclosing is not a single and monolithic concept, but rather has multiple nuances. Our article contributes to this discussion focusing on adoption and adult experiences. In addition, the analytical strategies provided by small stories research allows examination in greater detail and specificity of the tensions and discursive

struggles involved in the secrecy-disclosure dialectic, as competing meaning systems that are constituted in and through communication. From this perspective, the disclosure process is not simply a way of confirming information or knowledge regarding their origin or adoptive status; it is a communicative act in which meaning is actively created about themselves, and the reorganization of family relationships which may occur after disclosure can be either positive or negative, and many shades in between (Smart, 2011).

Third, in many cases analysed, disclosure did not foster processes of communicative openness. The disclosure was limited to knowledge of the adoptive child status, and on many occasions, after a third party disclosure or questions asked by the adopted persons. Often, the only interlocutor was the adoptive mother, the adoptive father being excluded from the disclosure event (except when the adoptive mother had died), preventing the opening of a dialogue with other members of the family about the adopted person's origins.

Finally, these findings confirm that there is still a significant number of adopted adults who face accidental and late disclosure of their adoption processes and confront this experience relatively alone. In fact, most of the participants reported that these narrative interviews were their first opportunity to tell their adoption story. At the end of the interviews, many participants expressed how moving, draining, and yet positive it was to share their adoption story through the dialogue fostered by the interview. In this sense, the interview device itself produced an organizing effect on the experience of late adoption disclosure (Pazos, 2004a, 2004b). This shows the need for a highly specialized support during late and accidental disclosure experiences, especially in cultural contexts such as the ones examined in this paper. Currently, in Chile and other countries there are mediation services to search for origins, but not all adopted persons make use of these services (Salvo Agoglia and Marre, 2020). For adoption practitioners, small stories can serve as a

conversational starting point to identify what aspects can be addressed with each person in a singularized way, taking into account that adopted adults are in a process of reconstructing key aspects of their biography. Therefore, what is required are highly sensitive interventions tailored to the uniqueness of each story and the way people give meaning to their adoptive experience, late disclosure, identity, and family relationships. In addition, it would be important to include the perspectives of other members of the adoptive kinship network to build a fuller picture of the disclosure processes. Interventions could explore the different positionings, forms of biographical reconstruction and reorganization of family relationships that are triggered by accidental or late disclosure. Also, work moving beyond individual intervention might also be very productive. To respond to the dynamics of communicative surveillance (Frekko et al., 2015), professionals could build from a narrative approach that addresses both the adopted person coping with disclosure and/or in a potential search for origins and, when possible, provides support to other adoptive family members to deal with the emotional dynamics of adoption talk (Jones and Hackett, 2007). As our findings show, adoptive parents are often afraid or do not know how to talk about adoption and accidental disclosure may generate new communicative asymmetries and barriers that should be reworked. In addition, many interventions would become more effective if adoption practitioners implement group work methodologies. Drawing on the support of other adopted persons who have gone through similar experiences can help break the silences that have surrounded their biography and adoption process.

Limitations and Future Research

The analytical lens of small stories allows accounts of later and accidental disclosures episodes to be extracted and entextualized (Silverstein and Urban, 1996) within the narrative produced by participants during an extended interview conversation, helping to unravel the recurring structure

of these kinds of stories. Our study of accidental and late disclosure narratives opens up future lines of analysis. In this article we have focused on the internal organization and meaning of disclosure small stories. The following step would be to resituate these stories in participants' broader biographies and examine the type of identity reconstruction work that accidental disclosure precipitates. Our discussion of the "right moment for disclosure" begins to point in that direction and the example we have presented (Gabriel, Extract 5) suggests one possible trajectory oriented towards integration and balance. But this might not be the case for all adopted persons and participants in our study, so future analysis should focus on the diverse biographical trajectories that are opened with disclosure and the narrative, discursive and identity work that is captured in the broader biographical interviews.

Finally, it would be extremely interesting -although complex too- to adopt a longitudinal perspective and document the new communicative events that may occur around disclosure, in our case in addition to the process of searching for origins in which the interviewees are involved. It would also be interesting to include the different perspectives of other adoptive family members to build a fuller picture of the disclosure processes; although this, as we know, is limited by the very dynamics of secrecy that predominate in closed adoption contexts like the Chilean one. This longitudinal and networked approach involving other members of the adopted person's family system would also shed light on the impact of possible interventions and professional support to participants.

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Table 1*Subset of Participants who Experienced Accidental or Late Disclosures*

Pseudonym /Sex³	Age at interview	Age at disclosure/Age at search for origins	Person with whom disclosure took place
Tania (F)	27 años	22 years / 22 years	Document of adopted father (adopted mother deceased)
Fabiola (F)	28 years	25 years / 27 years	Adoptive mother
Renata (F)	29 years	8 years / 25 years	Domestic employee and adoptive parents
Hernán (M)	30 years	18 years / 27 years	Adoptive mother and father
Claudia (F)	31 years	8 years / 28 years	Adoptive mother and father
Noelia (F)	32 years	27 years / 27 years	Extended family and adoptive mother
Consuelo (F)	33 years	7 years / 30 years	Both adoptive parents
Fernando (M)	33 years	15 years / 30 years	Adoptive mother and father
Graciela (F)	34 years	21 years / 30 years	Neighbor and adoptive mother
Pedro (M)	35 years	31 years / 33 years	Extended family and adoptive father (adoptive mother deceased)
Cristina (F)	35 years	15 years / 33 years	Adoptive mother
Gabriel (M)	37 years	34 years /35 years	Extended family and adoptive mother
Ana María (F)	50 years	34 years /45 years	Adoptive extended family (adoptive mother and father deceased)
Priscilla (F)	52 years	35 years / 48 years	Extended family and adoptive father

³ To protect participants' identity, we used pseudonyms and omitted details of their stories that were linked to places and dates that could facilitate identification of those involved.

Table 2*The structure of Late/Accidental Disclosure Stories*

Narrative Structure / Component (Pattern)	(Types of Items)
<i>Suspicion</i>	Biographical inconsistencies (not constrained to a time/place): ID number, infancy stories Physical differences with family (...)
<i>Disclosure Moment</i>	Material details of the time-place of the disclosure Participants in the disclosure episode Enacted dialogue (...)
<i>Evaluation</i>	Intense emotional vocabulary Of <i>self</i> / adopted person Of <i>other</i> / family members - adoptive family (...)