The Unheard Voices of Adult Adoptees: How it felt to be excluded from the Mother and Baby Home Report

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CARL Research Project

in collaboration with

Aitheantas – Adoptee Identity Rights

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CARL seeks to:

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- provide their services on an affordable basis;

- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;

- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;

- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and

- enhance the transferrable skills and knowledge of students, community representatives and researchers (Living Knowledge Network).

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We define CSOs as groups who are non-governmental, non-profit, not representing commercial interests, and/or pursuing a common purpose in the public interest. These groups include: trade unions, NGOs, professional associations, charities, grass-roots organisations, organisations that involve citizens in local and municipal life, churches and religious committees, and so on.

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The research agreement between the CSO, student and CARL/University states that the results of the study must be made public through the publication of the final research report on the CARL (UCC) website. CARL is committed to open access, and the free and public dissemination of research results.

How do I reference this report?

Author (year) *Dissertation/Project Title*, [online], Community-Academic Research Links/University College Cork, Ireland, Available from: https://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/rr/ [Accessed: date].

How can I find out more about the Community-Academic Research Links and the Living Knowledge Network?

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Declaration of Originality

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled '*The Unheard Voices of Adult Adoptees: How it felt to be excluded from the Mother and Baby Home Report*' as submitted to the School of Applied Social Studies at University College Cork, is my own work.

Where the work of others has been used in the contents of this dissertation, it has been acknowledged and referenced accordingly. This dissertation has been submitted via Turnitin, the similarity report has been reviewed, and the necessary amendments have been made in line with UCC's plagiarism policy.

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<u>Date:</u> 25th April 2022

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the late Maureen Ahern.

Acknowledgements

Abstract

The release of the report of the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (MBH Report) has sparked widespread criticism amongst adult adoptees due to the report's portrayal of issues such as illegal and forced adoption practices in Ireland during the 20th century, and the narrow scope of the remit of the commission. The remit of the commission included 14 Mother and Baby Homes and 4 County Homes. As a result, adult adoptees who were born outside of these specified homes have been excluded from a process that directly impacts them. This CARL project sought to address two questions. First, what impact did the release of the MBH Report have on adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit of the commission? Second, what supports are needed for adult adoptees, and how should these supports be delivered? A total of 6 qualitative interviews were carried out online with adult adoptees. The main findings are that the release of the MBH Report led to feelings of anger, frustration and disappointment for adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit of the commission as it failed to acknowledge the extent of the intergenerational trauma and suffering that has been caused by closed adoption practices. The supports that are needed for adult adoptees include access to specialised counselling services, tracing supports, and the legal right to access original birth certificates and early life information.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This opening chapter will begin by providing the reader with the background to this topic and the rationale for undertaking this research. An introduction to my community partner, Aitheantas will also be provided, along with the research aims, objectives and questions. This chapter will conclude with a brief chapter overview.

1.2 Research Title

'*The Unheard Voices of Adult Adoptees: How it felt to be excluded from the Mother and Baby Home Report*'

1.3 Research Background

The history of adoption in Ireland is complex, as are the issues that adult adoptees face. In 2014, the work of amateur historian Catherine Corless sparked widespread global media attention, when reports emerged that the remains of 800 babies had been found in a 'septic tank grave' beside a former Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway (Garrett, 2017; Barry, 2017). In response, the Irish government announced the creation of a panel consisting of Judge Yvonne Murphy, Dr William Duncan and Professor Mary E. Daly. The panel was appointed to lead the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, with the aim of investigating the treatment of 'unmarried mothers' and their children in the selected homes during the period of 1922 to 1998 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021). The final report was published on January 12th, 2021.

The release of the report of the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (MBH Report) (Murphy *et al*., 2021) has since sparked widespread anger, frustration and

disappointment amongst adult adoptees due to the report's portrayal of issues such as illegal and forced adoptions, the handling of witness testimonies, the insensitive language used and the overall lack of empathy that was conveyed throughout the report (Aitheantas, 2021; The Clann Project, 2021; Condon, 2021). The exclusion of adult adoptees from the remit of this commission, who wanted their stories heard, exacerbates the disappointment felt by those affected. This Community Academic Research Links (CARL) project will contribute to the understanding of how the release of this report has impacted adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes. This research will also aim to identify the supports that are needed for adult adoptees, and how these supports should be delivered, according to adult adoptees themselves.

1.4 CARL Partner

This research is being conducted in collaboration with the community organisation, Aitheantas. Aitheantas are an advocacy group who campaign for the rights of adult adoptees through highlighting the need for open access to "health, heritage and history information and the acknowledgment of identity rights" (Aitheantas, 2022, p.1). The most recent work of Aitheantas includes campaigns such as '*Repeal the Seal, Open the Archive*' and '*SOS*", as well as their recent report entitled '*The Adoptee Voices Report*' (Aitheantas, 2021).

1.5 Rationale

As noted, the release of the MBH Report has led to criticism amongst adult adoptees for many reasons, one of which was the limited scope of the remit of the inquiry. The remit of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was limited to 14 Mother and Baby Homes and 4 County Homes. As a result, a large cohort of people who are direct victims of forced and coerced adoptions have been excluded from the investigation and the findings of the report because they were born outside of these homes. The impact of adoption is not limited to a specific home, institution or agency, hence why Aitheantas and I, have chosen to focus on the views and experiences of those who were excluded from the remit of the commission in this study.

Further, when the opportunity arose to undertake a CARL project in partnership with Aitheantas, I put myself forward without hesitation. This CARL project will provide me with a unique opportunity to research a topic that I believe to be meaningful and worthwhile. To date, I have come to understand the

ability to respectfully listen and empathise with others as core elements of good social work practice. This CARL project will present me with the opportunity to develop these skills within the context of conducting primary research, as well as my collaboration, communication and social research skills.

1.6 Research Aims

The aim of this research is to better understand the subjective and unique views, needs and experiences of adult adoptees, with a focus on the impact of being excluded from the remit of the *Commission of Investigations Report into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al*., 2021). This research will also aim to identify the supports that are needed for adult adoptees, and how these supports should be delivered, according to adult adoptees themselves.

1.7 Research Objectives

1. To provide a brief overview of adoption policy, legislation and practice in Ireland, and the context in which the *Commission of Investigations into the Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al*., 2021) emerged.

2. To better understand the impact of being excluded from the remit of the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al*., 2021) for adult adoptees.

3. To explore the views, needs and experiences of adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit of the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al*., 2021).

4. To identify the supports that are needed for adult adoptees, and how these supports should be delivered.

1.8 Research Questions

1. What was the impact of the report of the *Commission of Investigations into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al*., 2021) for adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit of the Commission?

2. What supports are needed for adult adoptees, and how should these supports be delivered?

1.9 Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter will provide the reader with the background to the topic, the rationale for undertaking this research, and an introduction to my community partner, Aitheantas. The research aims, objectives and questions are also be outlined.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will provide the reader with a brief history of adoption in Ireland. This will be followed by a discussion around the development of adoption policy and legislation in Ireland, and the shift from closed adoption practices towards a more open approach. Ireland's current position on tracing legislation and the remit of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes will also be discussed.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter will provide the reader with an overview of the theoretical and epistemological perspectives that will be used to underpin this study. The research methods that will be used to collect and analyse the data will also be outlined, as well as the ethical considerations, the challenges and limitations of the study, and the reflexivity of the researcher.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter will examine the findings collected from the interview process as well as a discussion of the findings with reference to the literature discussed in chapter two.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The final chapter will present the conclusions and recommendations based on the findings presented in chapter four. Areas for future research will also be outlined followed by a reflection on the research process.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with context as to why the final report of the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (MBH Report) (Murphy *et al.*, 2021) was so significant for adult adoptees in Ireland. Through critically reflecting on the past, this chapter will aim to inform the reader's understanding of current, and perhaps future discussions, surrounding the MBH Report. For this purpose, this review will begin by providing a brief history of adoption within the Irish context. This will be followed by an overview of the development of adoption policy and legislation in Ireland, and the shift that has begun from closed adoption practices towards a more open approach. Finally, Ireland's current position on birth information and tracing legislation, and the scope of the remit of the commission will be discussed.

2.2 Ireland's History of Adoption

Throughout the 20th century in Ireland, social policies, norms and attitudes were heavily influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church. One result of this was that women who became pregnant outside of marriage often faced rejection from their family and community due to the moral shame and stigma that was attached to 'illegitimate children' at the time (Smith, 2007; McCaughren & Lovett, 2014; Powell *et al*., 2013; Hogan, 2019; Burns & McCaughren, 2021). In other words, "Irish families were less willing to provide home and support to a daughter" who became pregnant outside of marriage, and after giving birth (Murphy *et al*., 2021, p. 59). This resulted in young women being left with few alternatives but to enter institutions such as Mother and Baby Homes, the purpose of which were to provide refuge for pregnant women at a time when they had nowhere else to go. This diminished autonomy often carried through to post-birth. With shame, betrayal and exile facing unmarried mothers, and with no state financial support being available to single mothers until 1973 (Smith, 2007), women were forced to choose between living with their child in a Mother and Baby Home, accessing abortion services in the United Kingdom, emigration or adoption (Clann Project, 2018; Burns & McCaughren, 2021).

From this shaming and punitive treatment of women formed a closed system of adoption which was seen as an opportunity for women to move on from their past 'mistakes' and 'immorality', whilst their child was placed with a marital family (Burns & McCaughren, 2021). This system also led to informal, and in many cases illegal adoptions taking place, and resulted in the falsification of birth records by those in charge of religious-run homes, institutions and agencies (Hogan, 2019; Redmond, 2018; O'Brien & Mitra, 2018;). Hogan (2019) argues that such practices were also carried out by professionals who were involved in the provision of healthcare at the time, such as midwives and doctors. Such practices not only effected women who stayed in Mother and Baby Homes and the children who were born there. Rather, these practices were part of a wider culture of adoption that was pervasive throughout homes, institutions and agencies across communities in Ireland at that time, thus, effecting far more people than those included within the remit of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

2.3 Policy and Legislation

In 1952, adoption became legal in Ireland for the first time, during a period that was blighted by secrecy and stigma in relation single mothers and the birth of children born outside of marriage. Since the introduction of the Adoption Act (1952), legislation has been amended eight times, with the most recent amendment being introduced in 2017 (O'Brien & Mitra, 2018).

In line with these legislative amendments, and with the influence of the church on state and society decreasing, adoption practices in Ireland have been evolving since the introduction of the first act in 1952. As Ireland has become more culturally diverse and progressive, societal views of traditional family structures have been transformed, with a greater awareness and acceptance now existing in relation to different family structures such as single parent families, same sex parenting, and blended families (McCaughren & Lovett, 2014). The legislative changes introduced in 2015 and 2017 were reflective of this, with the scope widening in relation to those deemed eligible to adopt. The significance of a person's marital status was lessened, with the welfare of children being deemed as paramount in the application process (Children and Families Relationship Act 2015; Adoption Amendment Act, 2017). Despite these legislative and societal changes occurring, current legislation and policy relating to closed adoption, tracing processes, and access to birth information, has remained unchanged since the introduction of the Adoption Act in 1952 (AAI, 2022).

The Adoption Act (2010) forms the legislative basis for adoption policy and practice in Ireland, and was brought into effect on 1st November 2010. The introduction of the act saw the establishment of the Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI), which is an independent body currently responsible for the regulation of adoption in Ireland. Under current legislation, in order to obtain access to birth information, adoptees are required to submit an application to the AAI, requesting access to this information (Section 86, Adoption Act 2010). Following an assessment of the application, adoptees can then be granted access to their birth information. At present, adoptees are only granted access to birth information which is non-identifying in relation to their birth family, unless permission is given by birth parents to disclose further identifying information. In this regard, current legislation and procedures give precedence to maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of birth parents, over the automatic right of adoptees to access personal information (Aitheantas, 2021).

In sum, if an adoptee wishes to obtain birth information or decides they would like to make contact with biological family members, current policy requires them to firstly register on the National Adoption Contact Preference Register (NACPR), which is a platform on which both adoptees and birth parents can formally record their contact preferences. Following this, contact is made with the agency in which the adoption took place (AAI, 2022). Adoption records which were previously held in agencies that have since been closed, have been transferred to Tusla (McGettrick *et al.*, 2019).

2.4 Closed Adoption

Although Irish society is gradually recovering from a past of secrecy, shame and oppression when it comes to adoption and the treatment of women in Ireland (McCaughren & Lovett, 2014), the recent release of the MBH Report has again highlighted the need for more openness in adoption practices. The discriminatory treatment of women during pregnancy and post-birth in state and church run homes during the 20th century, paved the way for a closed system of adoption in Ireland, the effects of which continue to be felt by adult adoptees and their families to this day. McCaughren & Lovett (2014) argue that such closed models of adoption involve the complete severing of contact between adoptive and birth families. Not only do such closed systems serve to disempower and oppress birth parents, research also suggests that such practices can negatively impact adoptees in numerous and lasting ways (McCaughren & Lovett, 2014). According to Groza and Rosenberg (2001), closed adoption can cause a sense of loss and grief, as well as difficulties in identity development for adoptees. Similarly, Leon (2002) explains how secrecy in adoption can create an increased sense of loss and shame for adoptees in relation to their birth families,

thereby impairing self-esteem. Arguably, such research highlights the intergenerational impact of the closed adoption system that dominated practice in 20th century Ireland. For this reason, it could be argued that the final report and recommendations produced by the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was a missed opportunity for the Irish state in terms of uncovering and acknowledging the extent of forced and coerced adoption practices in Ireland during the 1900's, and the intergenerational impact that it continues to have on birth parents and adult adoptees.

Similarly, in relation to tracing processes for adoptees, the search for birth information has been described by Lifton (2007, p. 656) as an "inevitable process of adoption", which begins as soon as one becomes aware that they are adopted. McCaughren & Lovett (2014) argue the importance of acknowledging that the reasons behind initiating the tracing process are wide ranging, and that reasons can vary from the desire to learn more about one's birth family, to contact with birth relatives, or to obtain one's birth certificate or medical information. Leon (2002 p. 656), in an examination of the empirical literature on active adoptee searches for birth parents, suggests that the primary motivation behind initiating the search process relate to "consolidating a sense of identity through filling in the missing pieces of one's genetic background and acquiring a clear history of one's biological background". Such research again highlights the complexity of the issues that can arise throughout the life-course for adoptees in relation to identity and sense of self. Arguably, Ireland's historic culture of forced and coerced adoption, combined with the lack of legislative change in relation to tracing processes, adds further layers of complexity for adult adoptees trying to navigate the tracing process. Corder (2012, p. 450) argues that when an adoptee has to fight for access to their birth information, as is often the case under current policy and legislation in Ireland, they can be left feeling "demeaned and belittled by sealed records that restrict access to such personal information". Although a more open approach to adoption is surfacing slowly in Ireland (McCaughren & Ni Raghallaigh, 2015), current adoption policy and legislation is still largely based on the model of closed adoption, hence the need for legislative reform, and greater support to be given to adult adoptees going through the tracing process.

2.5 The Changing Landscape of Adoption

As a result of continuous campaigning by numerous advocacy groups in Ireland, including my research partner 'Aitheantas', the landscape of adoption policy is changing for the better, with an increased awareness now developing around the need for adoptees to have access to their birth information. '*Repeal the Seal, Open the Archive*' (2020) was a campaign led by 'Aitheantas', which highlighted the need for

legislative change in relation to tracing processes and the rights of adoptees, which subsequently contributed to the drafting of the 'Birth Information and Tracing Bill' (2022). The current draft of the bill as set out by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman, would grant full access to adoptees and those who were boarded out, to their birth certificates, birth information, and medical information (Birth Information and Tracing Bill, 2022). This bill recognises the rights of adoptees to information about their origin and identity for the first time under Irish law, the importance of which was previously highlighted by the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection, Dr Conor O'Mahony, in a report submitted to the government in 2020 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth, 2020). The proposed legislation would also see the introduction of a newly formed statutory contact preference register, as well as legal safeguarding for relevant records, that would create offences for destroying or falsifying them (Birth Information and Tracing Bill, 2022). The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes recommended that adoptees "should have a right to access their birth certificate and associated birth information", and that this right "should only be denied in very exceptional circumstances" (Murphy *et al.,* 2021, Section 2.7). The commission provides no clarification regarding what exactly is meant by 'very exceptional circumstances'.

As well as the '*Repeal the Seal, Open the Archive*' campaign, Aitheantas also advocated on behalf of adult adoptees for access to mental health supports before the release of the MBH Report. The work of Aitheantas subsequently led to the provision of counselling supports by the HSE for former residents of Mother and Baby Homes. Although the provision of mental health support for former residents of Mother and Baby Homes was undoubtedly needed and welcomed, the release of the report affected many others who were not residents of these homes and who were not included in the remit of this commission. The remit of the commission included 14 Mother and Baby Homes and 4 County Homes; however, the number of institutions and agencies that were involved in informal, forced and coerced adoption practices throughout the 1900's is thought to be as high as 182 (Clann Project, 2021). In response to concerns expressed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Child Protection regarding the limited scope of the commission, the government argued that the remit was adequately "focused and comprehensive" (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2020). At present, the HSE provides no free dedicated counselling services to adult adoptees who were not residents of Mother and Baby Homes specifically.

Similarly, in November 2021, the government approved a redress scheme entitled 'Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme'. The proposed scheme as outlined in the recommendations of the MBH Report, would entitle all mothers who spent time in Mother and Baby Homes to a payment which increases in line with their length of stay, and "all children who spent six months or more in these institutions" (Government of Ireland, 2021). The criteria outlined under the proposed redress scheme has also been criticised for the exclusion of those who spent under six months in these homes, and the lack of recognition given to the impact and trauma suffered by those who do not meet this criteria. On the 20th January 2022, a protest was held outside Leinster House in Dublin, with survivors strongly advocating for the redress scheme to be extended to include all people who spent time in any of the institutions, as well as those who were 'boarded out' as children.

2.6 Conclusion

In sum, the creation of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and its final report and recommendations, provided an opportunity to acknowledge the extent of the intergenerational harm caused by Ireland's history of forced and coerced adoption practices, and to recognise the impact of the lack of legislative reform regarding tracing processes. Instead, the limited scope of the remit, the style and content of the final report, the proposed redress scheme, and the state apology that followed has "minimised the experiences and suffering of adult adoptees, birth parents and survivors" (Aitheantas, 2021, p. 55). This small-scale dissertation will contribute to raising awareness around the need for the Irish government to take a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to investigating forced and coerced adoption practices in Ireland during the 20th century, by providing a space and opportunity for adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit, to share their personal views and experiences. The next chapter will provide the reader with details on the methodology used to inform this dissertation.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the theoretical and epistemological perspectives underpinning this study. The reader will also be provided with an outline of the Community Based Participatory Research framework that was implemented throughout the research process which in this case was UCC's Community Academic Research Links (CARL) initiative. Following this, the research methods that were used to collect and analyse the data for this research will also be outlined. This chapter will conclude with an overview of the ethical considerations, the challenges and limitations of this research, and the reflexivity of the researcher.

Theoretical Perspective: *Interpretivism*

Methodology: *Qualitative*

Methods: *Interviews*

Epistemology: *Constructivism &Community Based Participatory Research*
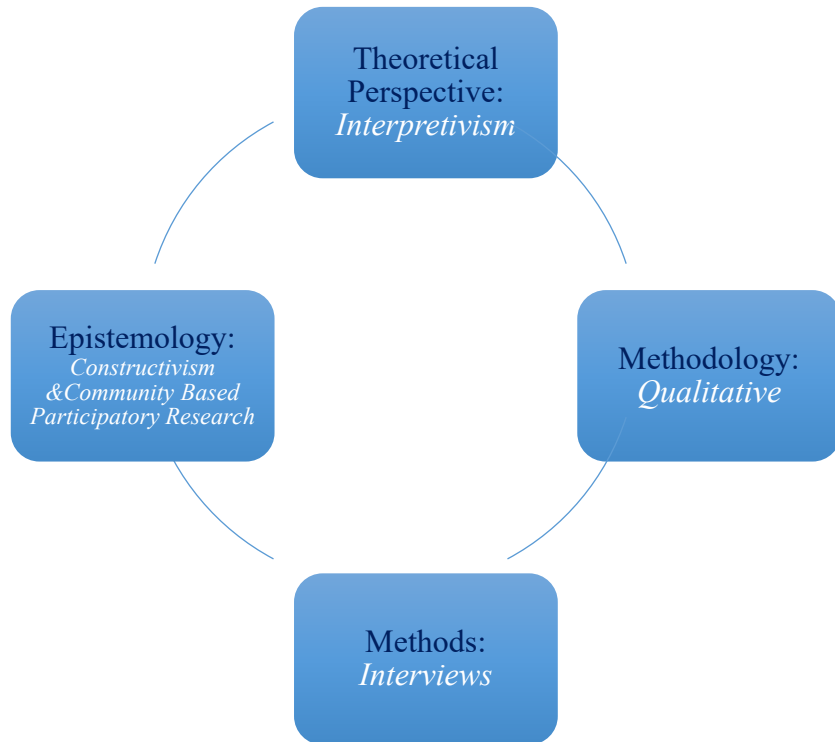
3.2 Theoretical Perspective

An interpretive approach was implemented throughout this research process, with the aim of uncovering and understanding the subjective, lived experiences of people who make up the social world (Rosenthal, 2018). This approach highlights the need to consider the ways in which the views of adult adoptees and the issues that they face, will vary depending on context, their lived experiences, and their perceptions of these experiences, all of which will inform and influence the findings of this research. Further, this approach underpins the purpose of this research which is to explore and understand the views, experiences and needs of adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, and how their interactions with their social world, have influenced the impact of this exclusion. As the aim of this research is to highlight and validate the subjective and unique views and experiences of each research participant, the interpretivist approach was deemed to be the most appropriate. As put by Becker *et al*. (2012, p. 112), for many in social work, where "respect for persons is a core value", and the everyday experiences and struggles of people is "core business", the interpretivist approach to research makes intuitive sense.

3.3 Epistemology

The epistemological framework that informs and underpins this research is social constructivism. According to Crotty (1998, p. 43), constructivism is the view that meaning and reality is "constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting", and developed within a social context. With that, meaning is viewed as being "uncertain and ambivalent in the social world", and change is viewed as ongoing (Carey, 2012, p. 34). As the purpose of this research is to explore and understand the individual experiences, views and needs of adult adoptees, this epistemological stance ensures that focus is maintained on the perspectives and voices of the research participants, and that each voice is accurately captured.

3.4 Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

A Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework was also implemented throughout this research process. CBPR is a collaborative approach to research in which the student researcher works with the community partner to utilise their strengths and insights in order to identify important issues and develop solutions (Coughlan *et al*., 2017). This approach to research puts emphasis on shared power and

decision making, co-learning, and the prioritisation of the needs of the community organisation (Bates & Burns, 2012), whilst recognising the complexity of social realities (Munck *et al.*, 2014). These principles align with those of the Community Academic Research Links (CARL) initiative at UCC. The utilisation of this approach ensured that the participation and input of adult adoptees was paramount in addressing the research questions, through capturing their individual views, needs and experiences. Through regular and open communication between myself and the community partner Aitheantas, the research questions, aims and objectives as set out in chapter one were devised, and the research process as a whole was enhanced.

3.5 Research Methodology

For the purpose of this research, the methodological approach chosen was primary qualitative research. The decision was made by myself and Aitheantas, to carry out primary research due to the extremely limited data that currently exists in relation to the impact that has been felt by adult adoptees following the release of the MBH Report. Further, as explained by Becker *et al.* (2012), qualitative research aims to understand the experiences, values and beliefs of people from the perspective of people themselves, and the context in which the research is being carried out. This empathic and contextual approach of "seeking to see through the eyes of one's research participants" (Bryman, 2012, p. 386) is in contrast to a quantitative approach to research which tends to focus on the collection of objective 'facts', generalisation, explanation and prediction (Carey, 2012). As the aim of this research is to develop a deeper understanding of the views, needs and experiences of adult adoptees, a qualitative approach was chosen by myself and Aitheantas.

3.6 Research Methods

The research method used to gather the data for this research was semi-structured interviews. As explained by Carey (2012, p. 110), conducting interviews can be an appropriate way to examine complex and sensitive issues, and can assist with detailing and unpacking "personal experiences, emotions and feelings". A total of 6 semi-structured one-to-one interviews were carried out online via Microsoft Teams, each lasting approximately 50 minutes. According to Ritchie *et al.* (2014), a core feature of semi-structured interviews is combining structure with flexibility. Through discussions with Aitheantas, an interview guide (see Appendix D) comprising of 10 open-ended questions was devised in order to

facilitate this flexibility. This approach encouraged reflective and in depth responses, whilst enabling the participants to respond to the questions in their own words, and in as much or as little detail as they felt comfortable with.

3.6.1 Sampling

Carey (2012) refers to purposive sampling as the deliberate choosing of people who have relevant knowledge or experience that is directly linked to the research aims and objectives. The participants required for this research needed to be adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit of the *Commission of Investigation into the Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al.*, 2021). Thus, through my community partner Aitheantas, I was provided with indirect access to a sample group of people who met this criteria. The information sheet (see Appendix B) outlining details of the research and interview process was shared by Aitheantas amongst a closed Facebook group which I had no direct access to. This information sheet outlined instructions on how to express an interest, along with my UCC contact details. Following an expression of interest, I received notification via my UCC email and the contact details of people who were interested. Following this, I directly contacted everyone who expressed an interest in participating. A total of 11 people expressed an interest in taking part in an interview. From the 11 people, 5 did not meet the criteria for this particular study. Thus, a total of 6 interviews took place.

3.6.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Once a suitable time and date was scheduled for the interviews, a link for the meeting was sent to the participants via my UCC email. The participants were also advised to complete a consent form (see Appendix C) prior to the interview taking place. To ensure that the data was collected securely, I used UCC's version of Microsoft Teams to conduct the interviews. The record and transcribe function was used to enhance the data collection process. Following the interviews, I reviewed the transcriptions and removed any identifying information.

The data collected from these interviews was thematically analysed which Carey (2009) refers to as the process of collecting data and allowing patterns of experience and views to emerge. Put simply, I carefully examined the transcriptions to extract core themes that arose throughout the interviews (Bryman, 2012). I thematically analysed the transcriptions manually, and formed a list of themes.

Following discussions with my community partner, five main themes were chosen for in-depth analysis in line with the research questions and objectives.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

For the purpose of this research, two applications were submitted to UCC's MSW Research Ethics Committee. Upon submitting the first application, I was advised by the committee to clarify and amend two aspects of my research proposal. Firstly, I was asked to clarify the inclusion/exclusion criteria for this research. I was also asked to amend the data retention period as outlined on my information sheet to 13 months as per UCC's policy. The second draft of the application was granted ethical approval on the 16th December 2021 (see Appendix A).

Due the sensitive and emotive nature of this topic, considering the emotional impact that this study might have on the research participants was extremely important for me. Iphofen & Tolich (2018) argue that the actions of a researcher can have unintended consequences that can be harmful or beneficial for research participants. After careful consideration, it was the view of myself and Aitheantas that the importance and potential value of this research outweighed the risks. Through discussions with Aitheantas and my tutor, I was able to ensure that contact details of supports were made available to adoptees should they require it throughout the research process. With that, for the purpose of minimising the risk of causing upset or offence to adoptees, the language used when forming the interview questions, and throughout this dissertation, was given care and consideration in liaison with Aitheantas. Finally, it was important to ensure that the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees was maintained throughout the research process, including in the findings of this study. With the assistance of the MSW Research Ethics Committee and my community partner, I was able to ensure that the research process was carried out ethically, sensitively and respectfully.

3.8 Challenges and Limitations of the Study

The most significant challenges and limitations of this research related to time constraints and the word count. With more time, my community partner and I could have broadened the inclusion/exclusion criteria and extended the recruitment process, thus giving more adoptees the opportunity to have their views heard. Further, the word count of this dissertation was also a major limitation in terms of the amount of data that could be shared within the findings. As mentioned previously, a number of themes

were identified during the initial data analysis process; however, only five of these themes could be discussed in detail within this dissertation due to the word count. The decision making process that was carried out with my community partner in terms of selecting the main themes was a particularly challenging aspect of the research process due to the extensive, detailed and insightful data that was obtained from the participants during the interviews.

Finally, another major challenge that arose throughout the research process was in relation to the recruitment process and the lack of clarity people had as to whether or not they fell within the remit of the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and other related matters* (Murphy *et al.*, 2021). As noted, 14 Mother and Baby Homes and 4 County Homes were included within the remit of the commission; however not all former residents of these particular homes were given the opportunity to participate in the commission's investigation. Thus, a large cohort of people exist who were technically included under the remit of the commission but were excluded from the process and did not have the opportunity to give testimony. The process of clarifying the criteria with potential participants and explaining that we were unable to include people in this study because of the set criteria as outlined in my Research Ethics Application form, was another challenging aspect of this research process. Further, the fact that people who were within the remit of the commission were not given the opportunity to contribute to the investigation is indicative that the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was not comprehensive or inclusive enough.

3.9 Researcher Reflexivity

According to Gringeri *et al.* (2013, p. 56), the practice of reflexivity requires the researcher to develop "an ongoing and critical awareness of the social inputs that shape the production of knowledge in their work". In this regard, engaging in critical reflection throughout the research process was essential for me in terms of recognising and monitoring the impact of the values, biases and personal experiences that I brought to the research process, as well as the cultural, political and social context in which I was situated (Bryman, 2012; Berger, 2013). The practice of reflexivity aligns well with the epistemological framework underpinning this research, social constructivism, and maximised objectivity throughout the research process. More specifically, engaging in this process was particularly important for me throughout the interview process in terms of managing my own emotional responses, adapting my interview style, and recognising the questions that I tended to emphasise or shy away from.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the research process with reference to the epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and research methods that were implemented. The ethical considerations of this research and reflexivity of the researcher were also discussed. This chapter concluded with an outline of the challenges and limitations that arose throughout the research process. The next chapter will present an overview and discussion on the findings of this research.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present and discuss the main themes that emerged from the research process that has been outlined in chapter three. The data collected from the interviews was thematically analysed, and five main themes were identified in line with the research questions and objectives. The first two themes presented will address the first research question as set out in chapter one, whilst themes three, four and five will address the second research question. The themes as chosen by myself and Aitheantas are:

Theme One	Reaction to the report
Theme Two	How it felt to be excluded
Theme Three	Mental health supports
Theme Four	Tracing supports
Theme Five	Access to original birth certificates and early life information

Direct quotations will be used throughout this chapter to convey the views and experiences of the adult adoptees who took part in an interview. For the purpose of ensuring that the anonymity of the participants is maintained throughout this research process, all identifying information has been removed and pseudonyms have been given to each individual.

4.2 Theme One: Reaction to the Report

As noted, the release of the report of the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (MBH Report) (Murphy *et al*., 2021) led to anger, upset and disappointment amongst adult adoptees and survivor groups (Condon, 2021; Aitheantas, 2021). When the participants of this research were asked for their opinion on the report, their responses echoed these feelings of disappointment and anger. Although Mary was initially optimistic when she described the report as being

a "*good start*", she also expressed disappointment at the unfair allocation of blame that the report placed on families and society:

"I was disappointed. I felt that the religious institutions got a bit of an out with the commission… I feel the report put blame on society and family instead."

The lack of accountability held by the church and state was a recurring theme in relation to the shortcomings of the final report. Anne expressed her frustration at the lack of accountability and honesty that was conveyed throughout the report, and the need for the institutions and agencies that were involved in forced, coerced and illegal adoption practices to acknowledge the extent of trauma and suffering that has been caused:

"It's another cover up. It's not a watershed moment. Nobody is learning anything new. There's no ownership, there's no accountability… I expected them to be more honest. I expected them to just own it. They need to acknowledge the hurt and the trauma that they have caused everybody."

Similarly, Julia describes the report as being a "*white wash*" as it minimised the harm caused by the homes, institutions and agencies that were involved in closed adoption practices.

4.2.1 Narrow Remit

The issues regarding the limited scope of the remit of the commission as discussed in chapter two, was again highlighted by the participants within this research. The participants shared the view that the scope of the remit was too narrow and consequently meant that the commission had failed to uncover the full extent of illegal adoption practices in Ireland:

"The issues raised were relevant to a much wider group. I think it should have had a broader remit in relation to adoption and how it was managed." (Mary)

"It's not really fair that they are only focusing on mother and baby homes. Adoption should be looked at as a whole. In Ireland, all forms of it were so wrong… There needs to be recognition of just how wrong it all was and the trauma of it all." (Ellen)

"I just think everyone should have been included and all voices should have been listened to… It was just so unjust not to hear the voices of everyone involved." (Kate)

"Everyone should have been included. Everybody who is part of that appalling culture and decades of covering up and shame and guilt… I feel my rage not just on my own behalf. I also feel outrage and indignation on behalf of my birth mother, whose life was absolutely turned upside down by a culture that was pervasive in Ireland at that time and by people who should have looked after her." (Catherine)

The above quote from Catherine highlights the intergenerational impact of closed adoption practices, and the hurt felt by adult adoptees as a result of being excluded from a process which directly affects adoptees and birth parents.

4.2.2 Redress

Under Section 2.33 of the final report, the commission recommends that survivors who spent "in excess of six months in mother and baby homes" should be considered for redress (Murphy *et al*., 2021, p. 9). Those eligible for redress would be entitled to a payment, the amount of which would vary depending on the time spent in the homes. The commission argue six months as being a justifiable cut off as it is "the average length of time that women spent in mother and baby homes in other countries" (Murphy *et al.*, 2021, p. 9). In relation to this redress scheme, the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection (2021, p. 134) commented on the state's responsibility not to discriminate between people in similar situations, and argued the need for such a scheme to be implemented with a "degree of flexibility that allows for recognition of the similarities in peoples experiences, instead of highlighting their differences to justify

refusing applications". The findings of this research echo this view and highlight the dissatisfaction, anger and hurt felt by adoptees regarding this redress scheme and the six months cut off:

"What really annoyed me was the fact that you had to be in the homes for more than 6 months. It just didn't stack up. It didn't make any sense. I thought it was very insulting actually. You know even if you were in there a day, there's still trauma attached to adoption… It's just ludicrous." (Kate)

"For 6 months then to be the cut-off point. It's entirely arbitrary and what it does to me is under score very, very clearly the lack of understanding on the part of those people making decisions… People are making decisions about what happened to me and people like me on the basis of no understanding and it's really, really enraging. It's the most appalling feeling and it's not about money… It's the decision to leave us out of this whole process... It's crass." (Catherine)

Kate also emphasises the importance of highlighting the fact that the dissatisfaction felt in response to the redress scheme as outlined in the final report is not about money or financial gain for survivors. Rather, it is the lack of understanding and respect shown by the commission in relation to the hurt and trauma experienced by survivors who have now been excluded and deemed ineligible for redress:

"You know it's not about the money. It's the lack of understanding, the lack of caring, the lack of respect, and this idea of just pushing people away. It just feels like they just want to tie it all up, get rid of it and move on." (Kate)

Mary again emphasises that the issue is not regarding the payment. She argues that for people who have been excluded from the redress scheme, "*it compounds their feelings of worthlessness.*"

4.3 Theme Two: How it felt to be excluded

When addressing the question of how it felt to be excluded from the remit of the commission, many of the participants spoke of feeling removed from the contents of the report and separated from adoptees who were born in Mother and Baby Homes, despite sharing the impact of issues relating to adoption such as early life trauma experiences and tracing legislation:

"I didn't come through a Mother and Baby Home so you feel like you're kind of on the outside of it all... It's kind of like there are adoptees that came through the Mother and Baby Homes, and there are just regular adoptees. It separates you and makes you feel like your trauma isn't as bad." (Ellen)

"I felt like they're not talking about anything to do with me, but at the same time, I was very interested in the outcomes of the report which would be relevant to adoptees in general, like the tracing legislation." (Mary)

In response to the question of how it felt to be excluded, other participants answered within the context of their personal experiences of being adopted. The participants felt that being excluded from the commission and the redress scheme, exacerbated their feelings of being 'less than':

"Being excluded just felt like another kick in the teeth. It was like saying, you're so unimportant... It was like saying we're lesser and that we weren't important. It felt awful really, and it still feels awful. You know you grow up feeling lesser anyway, and then not be included is just more of it as they say. It's upsetting." (Kate)

"To learn that we were excluded from the schemes that are in place was absolutely enraging. [As an adopted person] you have very little agency over your own life. And you're on the outside and people make decisions about you and they make decisions for you... That's what it's like being brought up as an adopted person. And then when this happens... It's the same thing all over again. It's appalling."
(Catherine)

Julia also spoke of the recurring exclusion and ignorance experienced by adult adoptees in relation to feeling ignored and unheard when it comes to drawing attention to the issues that adult adoptees face:

"I put it in the context of my normal. I'm used to being excluded." (Julia)

4.4 Theme Three: Mental Health Supports

Whilst it was outside the scope of this minor dissertation to examine the impact of closed adoption practices, the insights shared by the participants highlighted the trauma and shame they have experienced as a result of being adopted and not having access to their birth information (McCaughren & Lovett, 2014; Leon, 2002; Groza & Rosenberg 2001). As noted in chapter two, prior to the release of the MBH Report, a dedicated counselling service was established by the HSE for former residents of Mother and Baby Homes (HSE, 2022). The following quotes again highlight the fact that the effects of adoption are complex and lasting, and are not unique to those who resided or were born in Mother and Baby Homes:

"The impact of being adopted is absolutely immense. There is so much to do with rejection, lack of validity, secrecy, not being important… There is a pervasive sense of not belonging and being less than other people, being less important, being less valid, and having less of a right to exist… It's the only trauma that that people are meant to be grateful for." (Catherine)

Similarly, when asked about the types of supports that are needed for adult adoptees, Kate replied:

"Adoption is laden with so many layers of trauma and secrecy and fear… I do think mental health support is the big one. Like any trauma I suppose, it can hit you at any time and the supports need to be there."

The experiences shared by participants within this research highlight the need for the provision of mental health supports for adult adoptees to be revised and extended. Arguably, the impact of being excluded

from the remit of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes further compounds this need. With that, participants also highlighted the importance of not assuming that all adoptees are 'in need' of mental health supports, nor that they have lived unhappy lives as a result of being adopted:

"I don't think that just because someone is adopted, they automatically need psychological or counselling supports." (Mary)

"There are lots of adoptees who have wonderful stories to tell." (Anne)

Although Anne and Mary were uniquely positive in terms of their outlook on adoption in general, all participants agreed that mental health services should be made available free of charge, to all adult adoptees regardless of the home, institution or agency they were born in. Further, all participants made their views clear that these services need to be specialised and tailored to suit the needs of adoptees:

"Free face to face or online counselling with someone who is trained in adoption... Not just somebody who is like yeah, you've depression or anxiety. Somebody who actually understands early childhood trauma, separation trauma and what adoptees go through. It's very hard to find an adoptee competent therapist but it's critical to process this kind of stuff... It should be there free, regardless of the home you were born in." (Ellen)

"It would be great if the support could be from someone who is familiar with trauma and adoption issues... There has to be something in place for people because it is a trauma. People like me are searching at the moment and family secrets are coming out and people are being affected in so many ways." (Kate)

"I think people need access to really skilled counselling and psychotherapy... They [professionals] need to understand what the long term impacts are on the development of people who've been

adopted… It should be available to adoptees regardless of which home or how long you were there for. It's not the home that matters. They've got it so wrong." (Catherine)

In relation to their personal experiences, Julia and Catherine both described their adoption experiences as a form of "*human trafficking*". Julia describes how she has felt like "*a commodity since the moment [she] was born*" as a result of how her adoption was handled. In response to being asked about how mental health supports should be delivered, Julia replied:

"*A trauma informed approach would be a crucial element in a similar way that draws parallels for those effected by human trafficking… Online counselling, in person counselling and especially communal spaces such as online groups or group peer sessions… As adoption is a lifelong issue, access to counselling should not be restricted with delays to access or limitations on the number of sessions.*"

These findings convey clearly that the impact of adoption is complex, and that closed adoption practices have effected people differently depending on context and their lived experiences. As noted, although it should not be assumed that adoptees are automatically 'in need' of psychological supported simply because they are adopted, the findings of this research indicate that mental health supports must be made available and accessible to adult adoptees, and that those providing services must be familiar with issues relating to adoption. The added complexity of the ongoing denial of access to birth information compounds this need for access to adequate mental health supports.

4.5 Theme Four: Tracing Supports

From discussions with participants around access to mental health services emerged the final two findings of this research, the first of which relates to tracing processes. As a result of current tracing legislation as discussed in chapter two, it is becoming more common for adoptees to utilise DNA platforms and genealogists to assist with accessing family histories (Aitheantas, 2021). Although such

methods offer a valuable alternative to adoptees when tracing legislation prevents adoptees from pursuing statutory routes, many of the participants described it as being an isolating, stressful and emotional process that is difficult to navigate alone:

"*There should be information available explaining terminology and feelings and how to go about finding your family. There should be information on how ancestry.com and all that stuff works if you're going down that road… I did it all alone and it was horrendous*." (Ellen)

Julia argues for a "*structured process*" to be put in place "*to assist those who wish to undertake the process of contact tracing for medical history or to create familial connections and the different possible outcomes associated with such a process.*"

As noted in chapter two, the reasons behind initiating the tracing process are different for everyone. Similarly, the decision to use direct-to-consumer genetic testing (DTC-GT) varies from wanting to search for birth relatives, to confirming ethnicity, to gaining access to health information (Lee *et al*., 2020). The findings of this research suggest that there is a critical need for adoptees to have access to practical and emotional supports when undertaking this process, particularly when few alternatives are available to adoptees under current tracing legislation in Ireland.

4.6 Theme Five: Access to Original Birth Certificates and Early Life Information

In addition to mental health and tracing supports, this research also found that current legislation regarding access to original birth certificates and early life information is one of the most significant issues facing adult adoptees at present. Under Section 2.5 of the MBH Report, the commission argue that "adopted people think there is considerably more information about them in institutional and other records than is actually the case" (Murphy *et al.*, 2021, p. 1). Regardless of the quantity of information that exists, the procedures and legalities that are currently in place, and the denial of the automatic right to access to this information, continue to cause great distress for adult adoptees trying to navigate the tracing process. The practical and emotional impact of being denied access to original birth certificates and early life information as previously explored by Corder (2012), is evidenced in the quotes below:

"It [adoption] is shrouded in secrecy, you can't access your birth certificate when you turn 18. You can't have your file, you have to go to these agencies and have these really awkward conversations with social workers who are, like, I have your file here but I can't tell you anything. It's horrendous… I don't think that children should be just taken from their family of origin and have their complete identity, history, DNA erased." (Ellen)

"I went a couple of years ago to get the public service card… The woman turned around and there were people behind me, and she said oh, you're adopted, we can't do that here. She said you have to get the proper birth certificate... So I left that social welfare office feeling like a piece of dirt. I remember walking down the street and I started crying... I was just so disgusted that in this day and age, the government are still treating us like second class citizens." (Anne)

"My rights aren't safeguarded because I was born outside of the sanctity of marriage... And all that history that involves a person, their medical history, their DNA, socio economic grouping, what people did for living, it's all gone." (Julia)

The Clann Project (2018, p. 8) argue that "the abuses committed in the past are perpetuated in the present due to the Irish state's denial of information rights to adoptee and birth parents". The findings of this research as evidenced above echo this view.

4.6.1 Delays

Although the participants were aware of the government's plans to introduce the Birth Information and Tracing Bill (2022), the continued delays surrounding the enactment of the legislation was a concern expressed by the participants, as well as the consequences of such delays, particularly for older generations:

"There needs to be a timely response to people who do want their information… What's very disappointing is the length of time it takes for things the happen. I do feel very sorry for more elderly people who have died waiting for the commission's report or who have died without getting their opportunity for redress or supports that could have benefited them." (Mary)

"If access to my information had been better, I would have found [my birth father] sooner and would have had more time… Everything could have been different for me." (Ellen)

"I just want to see things happen quicker… Things take too long to happen. Will we all be dead before any of our information is made available to us? That's a very big fear for me… People are going to their graves not knowing anything about themselves." (Anne)

Julia was of the view that such delays were being used as a tactic by the government:

"My request for my early life information has been ignored, denied, deflected… It is a hidden class system… I can see the strategy is to let people die off." (Julia)

4.7 Discussion

The aim of this research is to add to the understanding of how it felt for adult adoptees to be excluded from the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, and to identify the services and supports that are needed for adult adoptees. The findings of this research indicate that the release of the MBH Report has led to anger, disappointment, upset and frustration for adult adoptees who were excluded from the remit of the commission. As a result of being excluded from a process that directly impacts them, adult adoptees have been made to feel as though their trauma, experiences and views are less significant than those who were born in Mother and Baby Homes. The findings suggest that the process of being excluded from the commission has added to feelings of rejection, exclusion and shame as described by the participants, which have formed as a result of the impact of closed adoption practices and the denial of access to birth information. The findings also suggest that for adult adoptees who were

excluded from the commission, it has compounded feelings of being 'less than' people who are not adopted, and now 'less than' those who were born in Mother and Baby Homes. For adult adoptees who have been excluded from the commission, the intergenerational trauma, shame and suffering experienced by them and their birth families as a result of closed adoption practices has yet to be acknowledged and compensated for.

Further, the participants of this research were clear in terms of the supports and services that are needed for adult adoptees. The findings suggest that free online and face-to-face counselling with practitioners who are familiar with adoption issues and who are trained in the area of early life trauma should be made available to all adult adoptees regardless of the home, agency or institution that they were born in. Similar findings were presented in the work of Corder (2012) and Baden *et al*. (2018) as they put forward the need for practitioners to be able to validate adoptees' need to search, to encourage the exploration of identity, to explore the possible implications of reunion, and to empathize with the difficulties that arise during the tracing process. As noted above, the combination of the impact of closed adoption practices and the denial of access to birth information, as well as being excluded from the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, has led to the need for adequate mental health supports to be made available to adult adoptees without delay. The findings of this research also suggest the need for tracing supports to be put in place for adult adoptees trying to navigate non-statutory tracing processes. Under current legislation, adult adoptees are increasingly turning to DTC-GT to access their family histories, thus the participants of this research were of the view that the provision of practical and emotional support with these processes is necessary.

The findings of this research have also highlighted the interconnectedness of the impact of closed adoption practices, the denial of access to birth and early life information, and the need for access to mental health supports. For some of the participants, the denial of access to birth and early life information has had the biggest impact on their mental health whilst for others, they felt it was the combination of the impact of closed adoption practices and the denial of access to their information by the state. Overall, the findings of this research highlight the urgent need for the enactment of the 'Birth Information and Tracing Bill (2022)' as noted in chapter two. The findings also show the level of mistrust adoptees currently feel towards the government in terms of the state's reluctance to revise tracing legislation to date. As a result of the ongoing delays surrounding the enactment the Birth Information and Tracing Bill (2022), the participants spoke of their fear that they may never have full access to their original birth certificates and early life information.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings of the research, as gathered from the interview process. The findings have been categorised into five themes which include the reaction to the report, how it felt to be excluded, mental health supports, tracing supports and access to original birth certificates and early life information. The findings show that the report of the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al*., 2021) has resulted in disappointment, anger and frustration for adult adoptees due to the narrow remit of the commission, the lack of accountability held by the Catholic Church and Irish state, and the lack of understanding that underpins the proposed redress scheme. The participants gave an insight into their feelings of hurt and anger at being excluded from a process that continues to directly affect them. In relation to the supports that are needed for adult adoptees, this research found that mental health support, tracing support and changes in birth information and tracing legislation are urgently required. Based on these findings, the final chapter will present the conclusions, recommendations and areas for future research, as well as a reflection on the research process as a whole.

Chapter Five: Conclusion & Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

As outlined in chapter one, the aim of this research was to better understand how it felt for adult adoptees to be excluded from the *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al.*, 2021), and to provide a space in which adoptees could share their views in relation to the supports that are needed. This chapter will provide the reader with some concluding comments based on the findings as presented in chapter four. A number of recommendations will also be made by myself and Aitheantas, based on the findings of this research. The areas for future research will also be outlined, followed by a reflection based on my experience of carrying out this CARL project in collaboration with Aitheantas.

5.2 Concluding Comments

The creation of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and its final report and recommendations, provided an opportunity to acknowledge the extent of the intergenerational harm caused by Ireland's history of forced and coerced adoption practices, and to recognise the impact of the lack of legislative reform regarding tracing processes. Instead, the limited scope of the remit, the content of the final report, and the proposed redress scheme has caused further hurt for adult adoptees by failing to acknowledge the extent of the suffering experienced by adult adoptees and birth parents. This CARL project has highlighted the need for the Irish government to take a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to any future investigations into forced and coerced adoption practices in Ireland during the 20th century. As a result of being excluded from a process that directly impacts them, adult adoptees have been made to feel as though their trauma, experiences and views are less important than those who were born in Mother and Baby Homes. For adult adoptees who have been excluded from the commission, the intergenerational trauma, shame and suffering experienced by them and their birth families as a result of closed adoption practices, has yet to be acknowledged and compensated for. To date, the government

have given no indication that *Commission of Investigation into the Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters* (Murphy *et al*., 2021) will be revised or extended despite the criticism it has received. Whilst uncertainty lingers as to whether or not any further investigations will be carried out in relation to forced and coerced adoption practices in 20th century Ireland, the provision of adequate mental health and tracing supports, and the introduction of the Birth Information and Tracing Bill (2022) must be prioritised.

5.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this research and a review of the relevant literature:

- The Birth Information and Tracing Bill (2022) is currently at the second stage of the pre-legislative scrutiny stage before the Oireachtas. This scrutiny phase is paramount in terms of giving adoptees and survivor groups the opportunity to have an input into how this legislation should be amended and improved upon before its enactment. Most recently, the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) released a statement calling on the government to remove the provision for the mandatory Information Session as set out under the current form of the proposed bill. The Chairman of the IASW stated that "adopted people have made clear that the Information Session is offensive to them and the IASW strongly supports their call for its removal" (IASW, 2022, p. 1). Such feedback would not be possible without the pre-legislative scrutiny phase. As noted, the ongoing delays in relation to the introduction of new tracing legislation continue to be a major concern for adult adoptees, with many fearing that they may never have full access to their birth, early life, and health information. Thus, it is recommended that the Birth Information and Tracing Bill (2022) is enacted as quickly as possible, but with full participation from adult adoptees at all stages of its development.

- The findings of this research highlight the need for free specialised counselling services to be made available to adult adoptees, regardless of the home or institution they were born in. As recommended by the participants of this research, this support should be available online and face-to-face, and should be provided by practitioners who are trained in the area of adoption and early life trauma. The opportunity to engage with therapeutic supports in group settings was another recurring recommendation made by the participants of this research which should also be

considered. This form of peer support could provide adult adoptees with a safe space in which they could share experiences and offer solutions to adoption related issues as they arise.

- The introduction of formal tracing supports for adult adoptees is also recommended, based on the findings of this research. This service should be able to assist adoptees with accessing information regarding various tracing methods. For example, how to navigate DTC-GT platforms and how to access accredited genealogists. In addition to the mental health supports recommended above, adoptees should have access to specialised counselling support within this service to specifically support them with exploring different tracing options and the potential outcomes in a non-judgemental environment. Similar to the findings outlined in a recent study conducted by Aitheantas (2021), the participants of this research were of the view that this support should not be provided by social workers or the Child and Family Agency.

5.4 Future Research

As noted in chapter three, the remit of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes included 14 Mother and Baby and 4 County Homes. However, there are people who resided and were born in these specified homes but did not have the opportunity to engage with the commission. As highlighted throughout this dissertation, it is important that everyone who has been affected by closed adoption practices in Ireland have the opportunity to share their experiences and have their views heard. Thus, undertaking research with similar aims and objectives, but with a different inclusion/exclusion criteria such as 'adult adoptees who were included under the remit of the commission but excluded from the process of investigation', would be an interesting and important perspective to take in relation to future research.

In relation to this particular piece of research, Aitheantas and I are engaging in ongoing discussions regarding a dissemination plan for the findings of this research. Until such arrangements are confirmed, it has been agreed that a copy of this dissertation will be sent directly to the research participants.

5.5 Reflection

In line with COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews that were carried out for this research were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Initially, I feared that I might struggle to build the same level of rapport with the participants online, and that it would be difficult to convey empathy through the screen while engaging in extremely sensitive and emotive conversations. On reflection, I feel that it was more of an advantage for the interviewees to be able to participate remotely. This method eliminated the logistical complexities that are often involved in arranging suitable times and venues. This made the interview process more accessible for people which is evidenced by the fact that I had the opportunity to interview people outside of Ireland.

When I began this research process, I struggled with feelings of uncertainty as I feared that my lack of knowledge and understanding in relation to adoption issues might prevent me from carrying out this research successfully. I also struggled with the constant media attention that surrounded tracing legislation and the release of the MBH Report, and the fact that this topic was so relevant and important. On reflection of this research process, I think that by overcoming this fear and uncertainty, I was able to approach this research with an open-mind and navigate this research process sensitively and respectfully. I have also learned that as a researcher, I am open to learning and being influenced by research partners and research participants. This enabled me to maintain the epistemological framework as outlined in chapter three, throughout the research process.

Finally, throughout this process I believe I have further developed my understanding of the importance of utilising research to inform my practice. This research process has enabled me to better understand the lived experiences of adult adoptees in Ireland, and the issues that they face by drawing on the literature and by engaging with adoptees openly and honestly. As such, the ability to recognise people as experts on their own lives and appreciating the uniqueness of people's lived experiences are skills that I hope to utilise and further develop throughout my future career as a social worker.

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Appendix A: Confirmation of Ethical Approval

MSW REC Resubmission ☆

MSW Research Ethics Committee

School of Applied Social Studies

Applicant:

Larah Brady, MSW2, 2021/2022

Committee Date:

16th December 2021

Tutor(s):

Kenneth Burns

Reference:

2021-3

Dear Larah

Thank you for your resubmission to the MSW research ethics committee.

The committee has granted approval for your study. Thank you for making the identified changes.

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Thank you for your interest and for considering to participate in the research project "*The unheard voices of adult adoptees – A mental health perspective*". The purpose of this information sheet is to explain what this research is about and what your participation would involve, so that you are able to provide informed consent before you decide to participate.

As part of my Masters in Social Work which I am currently undertaking at UCC, I have decided to undertake a research project in partnership with Aitheantas – Adoptee Identity Rights as part of a Community Academics Research Links Project (CARL). The aim of this project is to explore the views, needs and experiences of adult adoptees in Ireland, with a focus on the effects of the release of the *Commission of Investigations Report into the Mother and Baby Homes (2021)* from a mental health perspective, and how it felt to be excluded from the remit of this commission. This study will also seek to highlight the supports that are needed for adult adoptees, and how these supports should be delivered.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. The interview will be carried out and recorded online via Microsoft Teams, and will last approximately 45 minutes. Please be advised that the researcher will ensure that all information shared during the interview will remain anonymous and confidential, and will only be available to the researcher and the academic supervisor of this research project. Once the interview is complete, the recording will be transcribed and all identifying information will be removed. Following this transcription, the recording will be deleted immediately, and the anonymised transcript will then be securely stored on a UCC OneDrive. Aitheantas will not have access to these transcripts.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and should you choose to participate you can always choose not to answer a specific question, and you can withdraw from the interview process at any time. Once the interview is complete, you can choose to withdraw from the study up to a week after the interview takes place. In this case, the researcher will ensure that all information obtained is destroyed, and will not be included in the findings of the research.

Please note that UCC requires the data collected to be kept for a period of 13 months, which will be securely stored on a UCC database. The information you choose to share will contribute to the researchers Masters in Social Work dissertation, the results of which will be published on CARL's website.

Please be advised that due to the time constraints, the number of interviews that the researcher will be able to carry out is limited, thus it cannot be guaranteed that everyone who expresses an interest will be interviewed. However, your interest will be acknowledged and greatly appreciated.

Finally, please be advised that should your participation in the interview process lead to any distress, the following supports are available to you:

HSE National Counselling Service for former residents of Mother and Baby Homes:
Phone: 1800 817517 (Available Monday to Friday from 8am to 8pm and Saturday 9am to 5pm)

HSE National Counselling Service details:
CHO Area 1

Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim

Phone: 1800 234 119

CHO Area 2

Galway, Mayo, Roscommon

Phone: 1800 234 114

CHO Area 3

Limerick, Clare, North Tipperary

Phone: 1800 234 115

CHO Cork Kerry

Phone:1800 234 116

CHO Area 5

Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, Carlow, South Tipperary

Phone: 1800 234 118

CH East

South Dublin, South East Dublin, East Wicklow

Phone: 1800 234 111

Dublin South, Kildare and West

Wicklow Community Healthcare,

Phone: 1800 234 112

CHO Area 8 (Midlands)

Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath

Phone: 1800 234 113

CHO Area 1/8

Louth, Meath, Cavan, Monaghan

Phone: 1800 234 117

CHO Area 9

Dublin North, Dublin North City

Phone: 1800 234 110

If you would like to participate in this study, or if you have any further queries regarding this research, please contact the researcher at 114341986@umail.ucc.ie. Thank you.

Appendix C: Consent Form

I ………………………………….. agree to take part in the research study "*The unheard voices of adult adoptees – A mental health perspective*".

I can confirm that the nature of this study has been outlined clearly to me, and I am choosing to participate voluntarily.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, and that I can withdraw my consent for my data to be used for up to a week after the interview takes place. In this case, I understand that this information will be destroyed.

I understand that I will remain anonymous in the findings of this research, and that the information I share will remain confidential.

I give permission for anonymised versions of my responses to be quoted in this research.

Signed: ………………………………

Printed: ...…………………………

Date: …………………………...

Appendix D: Interview Guide

1. The Commission of Inquiry into Mother and Baby homes investigated a limited number of homes and agencies - how did you feel about this?
2. How did you find out about the work of the commission?
3. If your home/agency/institution had been within the remit of the commission, would you have chosen to engage with the commission in order to give testimony?
4. What would you have wanted to say?
5. How did it feel to be excluded from the remit?
6. What was your reaction to the release of the report?
7. What type of supports do you think are needed for adult adoptees?
8. Do you feel that adult adoptees should have access to mental health supports? How should these supports be delivered?