Exploring the Psychological and Relational Challenges Experienced by Lesbian Couples During the Adoption Process in South Africa:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

By

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Mini-Dissertation

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Gender Studies

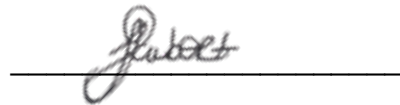At

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Student Declaration

I, Leandra Joubert, student number: 2009051653 herby declare that the mini-dissertation titled: **Exploring the Psychological and Relational Challenges Experienced by Lesbian Couples During the Adoption Process in South Africa: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis** in partial fulfilment for the Gender Studies Master's degree at the University of the Free State, has not in any form previously been submitted for a qualification at any other institution and is a record of my independent work.

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Leandra Joubert
31 Dec 2021

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Abstract

Most of the existing literature on lesbian couples' experiences of the adoption process either elucidate an investigation into cognitive, psychological and sexual development of children who were adopted by same-sex individuals or examine the stability of these individuals with limited attention being paid to the experience of the lesbian couples who partake in the adoption process itself. In this study, the researcher adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological approach to investigate how lesbian couples experience the phenomenon of adopting in South Africa by exploring the psychological and relational challenges that these couples might have experienced. Eight female participants (4 couples) were interviewed through semi-structured interviews by utilising the video conferencing software *Zoom,* and by focusing on investigating their experiences of the adoption process. Two major themes emerged from the data, namely: Psychological introspection, which investigates the psychological challenges that the adoption process has on the individual and couple, and secondly; In Love and War, which evaluates social support, family and friend's opinions of the adoption process as well as institutional attitudes, like the assumptions and beliefs of social workers and adoption agencies. The findings suggest that most participants found the adoption process taxing on their individual psychological well-being and their relationship. The analyses suggest that all participants experienced some form of homophobia whilst in the process. Therefore, findings of this study are specific to these research participants and their unique experiences of the adoption process. In this regard, findings cannot be generalised to a broader population.

Keywords: Lesbian, same-sex, couples, adoption, LGBTQIA+, legality, Civil Union Act, homosexuality, homophobia, parenting, parenthood, mothering, social workers

Chapter 1: Background to The Study

1.1 Chapter Preview

An overview of the research will be provided in this chapter. The chapter opens with a detailed discussion of the research aim, describing the aspects that are most important to the study, and a cumulative discussion on the theoretical frameworks utilised in the study, ending with a comprehensive outline of the chapters that underpin the mini-dissertation. Lastly, a conclusion to the chapter is provided.

1.2 Background information to the study

Transitioning into parenthood is filled with confusion, physical and emotional distress and financially impacts the couple (Foli et al., 2017). In addition to welcoming a child to their family, adoptive parents experience unique challenges like enduring legal battles and face potential discrimination and stigma surrounding adoption. Adoption causes couples to experience higher anxiety levels which involves legal uncertainties or situations where they have waited to become adoptive parents for several years (Goldberg & Smith, 2008). For lesbian couples, the process might be even more stressful due to the historical discourse of homosexuality, persistent stereotypes, and propagated views by religious groups. Breshears and Lubbe-De Beer (2016) indicate that two-thirds (61%) of South Africans still consider homosexuality to be unacceptable and non-cultural.

In South Africa, pervasive homophobia persists, creating a dearth of literature on lesbian adoption. For this reason, the study aims to uncover some of the psychological and relational challenges that lesbian parents undergo during the adoption process. The study involved an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis by exploring the psychological and relational challenges that lesbian couples experienced during the adoption process in South Africa.

1.3 Aim of the Research

This study's primary purpose was to investigate the psychological and relational challenges that lesbian couples experienced in South Africa during the adoption process. The researcher aimed to understand the psychological barriers encountered during the

adoption process and how these challenges affected these lesbian couples on an individual and relational level. For the intention of this study, the term psychological challenges denote any difficulties or obstacles that affect the individual's mental status and health. The following constructs were explored thematically: (a) changes in mood and behaviour; (b) stress; (c) anxiety; (d) fear; (e) depression; (f) relational conflict, and (g) cultural stigma. The researcher qualitatively evaluated these constructs by utilising interviews that are semi-structured as a primary source for collecting data, followed by a thematic analysis incorporating constructs (a) to (g). The researcher asked questions like:

Did the adoption process affect your mental health in any way? What were some of the emotions that you experienced? Did you have any type of support (psychological and relational) during this time?

1.4 The Objectives of the Research

The objectives specific to this study were to:

- Explore the psychological challenges such as emotional distress, anxiety, depression, perceived social support[1], and inter-relational conflict experienced by couples during the adoption process in South Africa.
- Identify the lived experiences or phenomenology of lesbian individuals who adopted children in South Africa and their views on discrimination and stigma experienced during the adoption process.
- To investigate lesbian couples social support or lack thereof during the process.
- To investigate to what extent the traditional notion of the family remains the same or changes in the context of lesbian adoptive parents.

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[1] Social support can be defined as receiving psychological and material resources from a social network e.g.: friends, family, neighbourhood, and community to help an individual's cope with stressful situations (Ozbay et al., 2008). Ko, Wang and Xu (2013) further indicated that social support can be divided into five groups namely: a) Emotional or non-tangible support referring to caring, empathy and concern for another. b) Informational support means providing information/ advice to anther individual. c) Esteem support aids in the promotion of another's skill set and abilities to foster positive value. d) Social network refers to the sense of belonging within one's community or social group. e) Tangible support denotes physical support like money or helping to raise children.

1.5   Theoretical Framework

A theoretical or conceptual framework serves as the foundation or 'blueprint' that describes the research findings based on existing theories in the designated area of interest (Adom, Hussein & Adu-Agyem, 2018). This study followed a feminist paradigm of an investigation into the psychological and relational challenges faced in South Africa by lesbian couples during the process of adoption. These theories provided new explanations on family dynamics not previously conceptualised or considered. Several theories guided the study: Lesbian feminism, Queer theory, Social constructionism, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

1.5.1   Feminism as Paradigm.

According to Ellis and Peel (2011), feminism aims to liberate women from all types of oppression. Butler (1990) further maintained that the feminist movement strives for gender equality in all aspects of life, namely political, economic, and social spheres. Although there is no distinct definition of feminism, it is broadly understood that feminist research at its core seeks to reveal the social structures and lived experiences of women and other so-called inferior groups (Ellis & Peel, 2011). For this reason, feminist theory is situated at the centre of this study because it is concerned with situations and experiences from women's perspectives (Valk, 2018), and it is therefore relevant to the objectives of the study in question.

1.5.1.1 Lesbian Feminism

Lesbian feminism can be described as a subcategory of feminism that centres around the experiences and lives of lesbian women (Ellis & Peel, 2011; Valk, 2018). Sheila Jeffreys (2003: 22) states that "lesbian feminism is distinguished from other varieties of lesbian politics by its emphasis on the need for some degree of separation from the politics, institutions and culture of men." Riley (1988) maintains that lesbian feminism arose from two distinct social movements: the gay and lesbian movement from the 1970s to the 1980s and the feminist movement from that era. Ellis and Peel (2011) emphasise that lesbian feminism challenges the perception of heteronormativity and patriarchy as 'normal' and presents alternative theories on gender and power.

Heteronormativity is a term coined by Michael Warner, a Queer theorist, that refers to the notion that there are two distinct genders. Each gender is associated with its roles and the emphasis on heterosexuality as the standard is evident in most societies (Little, 2016). Lubbe (2007) states that homosexuality has been regarded as behaviour deviating pathologically from the supposed heterosexual norm. Lubbe (2007) agrees that heteronormativity is an emphasis of the so-called 'correctness' of the traditional family encapsulating heterosexual beliefs and thus, renders homosexuality invisible.

Kaufmann (1986) maintains that the position of a woman in society is governed by her "otherness" that is imposed by cultural rather than biological factors. However, women can withdraw from the normative heterosexual system (Tompson, 1992). This means that women can love other women, as demonstrated within lesbianism (Tompson, 1992). The definition of lesbianism is widely contested, thus for this study's purpose, the term "lesbian" makes reference to women who have intimate relationships with other women (Eliason & Morgan, 1998).

Since the 19th-century, lesbianism was regarded as deviant, pathological, criminal, seen as experimental masturbation and viewed women who live without men as asexual spinsters (Cook, 1979). Lesbian feminists have insisted explicitly on the right to be lesbian as a definite identity, advocating for the freedom to have relationships with other women for all women (Strand, 2018).

Monique Wittig, a pioneer among lesbian feminists, argues that sexual differences emerged because of heterosexual societal structures (Strand, 2018). Therefore, it is because of Wittig's notions that radical lesbians from the 1980s onwards abandoned their political stance about 'women' and strove towards a sexless society and a demolition of heterosexuality (Hale, 1996). Heterosexuality, according to Wittig's ideology, is thus a system of male dominance over a woman. She further states that both lesbian and heterosexual women experience the world as being dependent on men, which according to Wittig, is a statement that needs abolishment (Hale, 1996).

Regarding this study, lesbian feminism initiated a significant shift in concepts of lesbian parenting in the 1970s, primarily because of the impact of feminist ideas about motherhood and lesbian sexuality (Strand, 2018). Riley (1988) notes that the household pattern within lesbian feminism differs from the normative nuclear/traditional family by being single-gendered and egalitarian[2]. Adrienne Rich (1980), another proponent of lesbian feminism, advocated that motherhood can be viewed as a male-centred bond contributing to the institutionalisation of womanhood instead of mothering, which can be perceived as a female-centred relationship.

In her text *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Rich utilises the word "compulsory" to signify the mandatory core of heterosexuality, one which, according to Rich, must be submitted to (Rich, 1980). In other words, anything outside the norm (heterosexuality) must be explained, as in the case of lesbian identity. For Rich (1980), heterosexuality is a politically laden concept that oppresses women economically, socially and emotionally. Therefore, lesbian feminism served as a solid theoretical perspective to analyse lesbians' view on family and parenting, focusing on what constitutes a traditional nuclear family and, conceptualising a new definition for lesbian-headed families in the 21st century.

1.5.1.2 Queer Theory.

The emergence of queer theory as an influential mode of thought can be traced back to the 1990s (Minton, 1997). In the nineteenth century, the word 'queer' was used to describe members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Thiel, 2017). The term defined non-conforming behaviour with regards to gender and sexuality (Minton, 1997). Moreover, queer theory originated from the study of sexuality in both the public and the private spheres (Thiel, 2017). The works of Butler (1990) on gender and heterosexism influenced the development of queer theory as it is known today.

Queer theory strives to contest the traditional concept of identity and sexuality, challenging normative structures on gender's so-called acceptable and non-acceptable

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[2] Egalitarian households can be defined by the equal sharing of responsibilities, resources and problematic situation or circumstances (Deutsch, 2009).

sexualities (Schutte, 1997). Butler (1990) maintains that the recognition of parenthood of queer individuals relies on social interpretations, leading to her ideology of performativity, meaning that gender is something a person does and not something a person has.

One cannot discuss queer theory without the acknowledgement of Michel Foucault. Foucault (1978) believed that political struggles constitute relations of power in which freedom can emerge and the fluidity of human sexuality. Queer theory as a framework has been overlooked in the field of family sciences but holds vast potential to uncover and examine queer family processes (Foucault, 1978).

There is little research on queer families that utilises a theoretical lens to account for this phenomenon (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Research conducted at a family level from a queer perspective is scarce, and the previous research does not account for queer family structures. Findings from literature revealed that heterosexual individuals do not necessarily engage in healthier family practices compared to queer individuals. However, research suggests that these families function just as well as their heterosexual counterparts (Goldberg & Smith, 2008). Queer theory thus served as an excellent point of departure to investigate the stereotyping of lesbian families and the adoption process by examining queer families that are primarily marginalised in a dominant heteronormative realm. The researcher aimed to understand queer families, specifically lesbian families, in their diverse forms.

1.5.1.3 Social Constructionism.

Social constructionism contends that reality is shaped by our perception of it. It emerged several decades ago in an attempt to construct the nature of our reality and was concerned with how knowledge was culturally and historically embedded within individuals' values and practices (Andrews, 2012). Kitzinger (1995) maintains that research on sexuality through a social constructionist lens began with Mary McIntosh. McIntosh drew on the theory and stated that homosexuality should be seen in the light of its social role rather than being identified as a mental illness or a disease and that the term homosexuality was embedded in political, historical and social constructs (Kitzinger,

1995). A key factor of social constructionism is that concepts or assumptions become a way of speaking about particular ideas or behaviour (Galbin, 2014). In other words, creating an agreed-upon fact or truth leads to the institutionalisation of sexuality, where sexuality becomes socially constructed (Kitzinger, 1995).

Galbin (2014) states that human life from a social constructionist view exists due to social and interpersonal influences. Therefore, society's view of reality can be subjective and objective (Andrews, 2012). Social constructionism facilitated the researcher to explore how social constructs about homosexuality and same-gendered families influence lesbian couples' psychologically and relationally.

1.5.1.4 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) devised a new theoretical perspective for research in human development. The perspective focused on the developing person, their environment, and the association between the two. Therefore, the manner in which a person views and deals with his/her environment either enhances or hinders their development (Visser & Moleko, 2012). This perspective helped demonstrate the interaction between lesbian families and their immediate environment and its positive or negative effects. Issues like intolerance, stigma, and homophobia affected each family member differently and helped the researcher formulate specific questions that addressed the objectives of the study.

The ecological environment is often compared to nested Russian dolls, one inside the other functioning as a nested structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The characteristics of a system lie in the organisation of its parts; to understand a complex system, one must understand each piece as a whole. Moreover, to comprehend the relationships, patterns and behaviour of a social system, one must understand the complexity of the specific system (see Figure 1) and view it as a whole (Visser & Moleko, 2012). There are five interrelated categories in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, namely, the (a) micro-, (b) meso-, (c) exo-, and (d) macrosystems and (e) the chronosystem (Van Dam, 2003, Visser & Moleko, 2012).

All levels are in interdependent relationships with one another (Visser & Moleko, 2012). Firstly, the microsystem includes the individual and his/her natural environment and interpersonal relationship (family, friends, and teachers). Secondly, the mesosystem involves interaction between various microsystems, all influencing individual development. It encompasses several microsystems and involves linkages between the home and school, peer group, and family and/or community (Weiten, McCann & Holder, 2019). Examples would include issues like divorce or homosexuality and how these situations could lead to psychological distress. Thirdly, the exosystem infers the interconnections between the micro and mesosystems and encompasses an organisational level, which incorporates both formal and informal social structures, like the individual's neighbourhood, mass media and the workplace, to name a few. These structures do not involve the individual directly but indirectly influence and affect them (Visser & Moleko, 2012). Lastly, the macrosystem is a broader system of ideology and involves the organisation of social institutions to which a person belongs, including people's attitudes, values, and policies (Weiten, McCann & Holder, 2019). Thus, the notion is, for instance, that people who grow up in war-torn countries will have a different outlook on life and development than those who grew up in a peaceful environment.

Visser and Moleko (2012) state that Bronfenbrenner later added the fifth dimension: the chronosystem, referring to a time dimension, which indicates that all these systems develop together over time. The chronosystem played a significant role in the study as views on same-sex relationships were evaluated on how they changed over the years and what the 21st-century impression is. In addition, the researcher evaluated changes in the legality of the adoption process itself and how it differs since the introduction of the Civil Union Act of 2007[3] and other periods.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model (1979) provides a valuable framework for understanding the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian women. The theory focuses on the family concerning society as a whole (Little, 2016).

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[3] The Civil union Act was established in 2007 and allowed same-gendered individuals the right to marry or enter into a civil partnership (Montero, 2014).

Therefore, the Ecological Systems Theory offers a frame of reference for understanding the intricacies of community processes. In this regard, the theory is used with great conviction in understanding social systems within the study (Visser & Moleko, 2012).

Figure 1.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979)
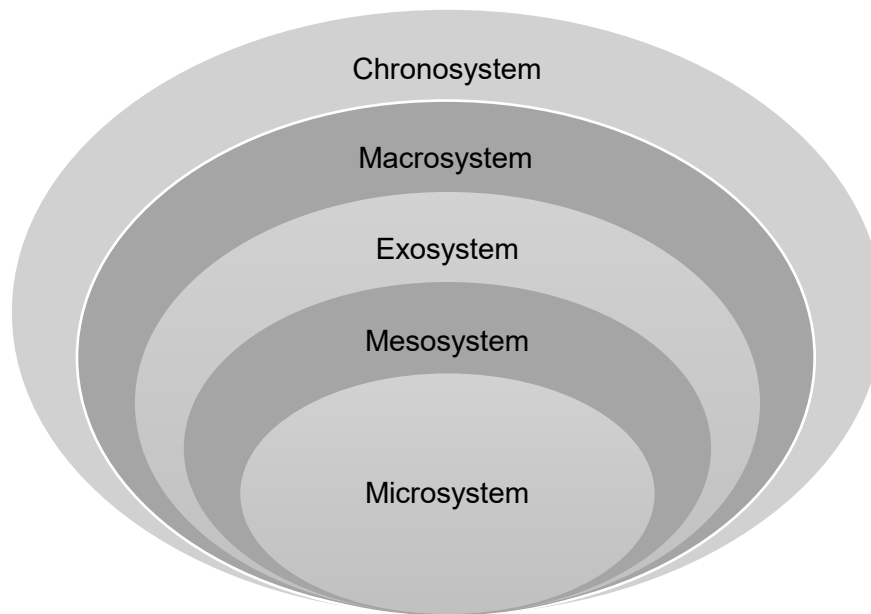
1.6 Outline of the Chapters

Chapter 1 introduces a general overview of this study, as well as the research aim, objectives and theoretical frameworks utilised. In Chapter 2, the literature review of the phenomena under study is presented: namely same-sex adoption, including previous research conducted from a global and South African context. Chapter 3 discusses the research design and methodology implemented in this study. An explanation of the research method used, data collection utilised, extraction, and procedures of analysis are given, presenting a summary of Interpretative Phenomenological analyses to the reader. Chapter 4 comprises an analysis of the data, thus a discussion and interpretation on the lives of four lesbian couples whom the researcher interviewed by identifying key themes that transpired from the transcribed data followed by the research findings. In Chapter 5,

a conclusion is provided that introduces a summary of the most prominent themes identified. Finally, a discussion on the strengths and limitations encountered during the study will be given, closing with suggestions for future research.

1.7   Chapter Conclusion

This chapter represents an outline of the phenomena in question, namely lesbian couples psychological and relational experiences of the adoption process in South Africa, followed by an introduction on the researcher's aim and objectives in addition to descriptions of the theoretical frameworks utilised within the study, namely: Lesbian feminism, Queer theory, Social constructionism, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, concluding with an outline of chapters that will make up the mini dissertation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Preview

The following chapter entails a discussion of the literature and the current body of knowledge related to the psychological and relational challenges encountered by lesbian couples in South Africa in the course of the adoption process. The chapter explores and discusses the history of adoption dating back to ancient Roman times. After that, South African adoption is discussed to provide background for the research study. The chapter investigates South African law and how it relates to same-sex couples and the legality of adoption in the 21st century. Lastly, related research will be discussed to form the basis of the study. This will include comparative case studies between heterosexual and same-gendered adoptive parents, the development of children within a same-sex family, attitudes towards same-sex adoption, and studies investigating the mental health of same-sex individuals and same-sex adoptive parents.

2.2 South African Adoption Law

Adoption has been part of human existence for over two millennia dating back to ancient civilisations like the Romans and Mesopotamians 2 000 years BC (Bisha, 2015). Adoption refers to a legal process that defines a legal relation joining the child and parent who are not related by childbirth (Zamostny et al., 2003). However, South African law has it's origins from three countries: Rome, the Netherlands, and South Africa (Van der Walt, 2014). The earliest law reform was known as Roman-Dutch law, i.e., a mixture of Roman principles stemming from laws of the Netherlands (Van der Walt, 2014). However, Roman-Dutch law which originated in the mid-seventeenth century does not include adoption, and the practice of formal adoption was unknown during this time.

Consequently, according to the law, the child continued being the heir of the biological/ original family (Van der Walt, 2014). Although informal adoption might have occurred, such children did not have the right to inherit and were not legally viewed as children of the adoptive parents (Van der Walt, 2014). As a result of the Roman-Dutch influence, adoption as a law was not known to the Cape of Good Hope and did not manifest as a

legal act until 1923 in South Africa. Adoption only became recognised in South Africa in the late twentieth century when the establishment of the Adoption of Children Act of 1932 was recorded.

This new Act made adoption legal in South Africa and was based on legislation found in New Zealand's Infant Act 86 of 1908 (Ferreira, 2007). This new law required the establishment of a relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive parents. Therefore, adoption could only occur if it was in the best interest of the child and would promote welfare (Ferreira, 2007). However, although the first inclination of the Act does not stipulate a ban on interracial adoption, it can be noted that no such record of interracial adoption at the time exists, and this could be due to the embedded and deep-rooted racism and colonial culture of the time. It was believed that no one would wish to adopt a child that was different to their own culture (Van der Walt, 2014, p. 432). In section 35(2) of the Children's Act of 1960, transracial adoptions were legally prohibited[4] (Mosikatsana, 1995).

In 1965, The Children's Amendment Act 50 of 1965 was amended, and it became evident that the race of a child and those of his/her adoptive parents became important in the evaluation of the adoption processes[5]. It was thus impossible to do a placement of a child with a family who did not share the same race classification as the child (Ferreira, 2007). Van der Walt (2014) stated that at a later stage, this Act, along with it's previous amendments, got replaced by the Child Care Act 74 of 1983 and section 17 of the Act stipulated who would be allowed to adopt a child:

a) Spouses jointly
b) A widower or widow, or an unmarried or divorced person
c) A person who is married to the child's parent; or
d) The natural father of a child born out of wedlock

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[4] Under the apartheid regime South Africa endured racial segregation therefore inter-rational adoption was only allowed in 1991 (Nielsen,2019).
[5] Religious law and marriages refer to the moral codes that can be found with religious groups, like Christianity and is not legalised in South African Law.

Van der Walt (2014) further maintains that the racial classification dictated that custody of a child cannot be given to a person who had a different racial classification than the child unless the person was the biological parent or guardian. Section 40(b) of the Child Care Act 74 of 1983 reads as follows:

> A child shall not be placed in or transferred to custody of any person whose classification in terms of the population registration act is not the same as that of the child except where such person is the parent or guardian of the child.

With reference to section 28 of the same Act, the law did not grant the right of adoption to persons who were just married by means of religious law, meaning that only legalised marriages were considered valid in the adoption process, and it did not apply to gay and lesbian relationships, which indicated that only one partner could adopt children (Gishen, 1996). Apart from racial considerations, cultural and religious background constituted another factor that influenced the adoption process in South Africa, as can be noted in the amended *Child Care Act* (1991) (Gishen, 1996). Section 40 of the amended Act states the following:

> Determination of custody of children - regard shall be had to the religious and cultural background of the child concerned and his parents against that of the person in or to whose custody he is to be placed or transferred (Gishen, 1996:41).

Zaal (1994) believes that the apartheid regime merely included the term "cultural background" to mask their political and racial agenda and furthered segregation. Joubert (1993) notes that transracial adoption is necessary for the South African climate as a large quantity of coloured and black children are available to adopt and not many black or coloured individuals adopt children due to economic difficulties. On the one hand, Mosikatsana (1995) maintains that adopted children whose race differ from his/her adoptive parents will suffer from racial prejudice and a loss of cultural and racial identity. On the other, Joubert (1993) indicated that these concerns are addressed, as white parents do foster a sense of "black identity" within their children and that these children have stable self-esteem as they are raised with care and love.

2.3 The Constitutional Era

On 4 February 1997 the South African constitution came into effect and embraced the principles of democracy. Thus, the constitution guaranteed equality for all (Bilchitz & Du Toit, 2016). Section 9 of the Constitution (Bill of rights, 1996) provides an equality clause which states the following:

(1) Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.

(2) Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken.

(3) The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.

(4) No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3). National legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination.

(5) Discrimination on one or more of the grounds listed in subsection (3) is unfair unless it is established that the discrimination is fair[6].

According to Bilchitz and Du Toit (2016), the constitution has two goals: a) the elimination of unfair discrimination by private persons and the state, and b) to redress past injustices to ensure an equal future by changing prejudiced attitudes. Regarding children and adoption, the constitution states that any child has the right of access to family, parental or alternative care. In other words, when a child is in need, he/she can be put in foster care and be adopted when it is in the best interest of the child (Van der Walt, 2014). This led to the formation of the Child Care Amendment Act 96 of 1996. The amended Act

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[6] Discrimination is tested in the court by means of the "Herksen test" which focus on weather discrimination did occur and are in violation to ones' dignity or whether it can be attributed to differentiation instead (McCannachie, 2014).

made it possible to adopt inter-racially as it was previously prohibited (Zaal, 1994). However, in 2005 the Act was further amended and encompassed more effective legislation pertaining to the process of adoption. A clause is provided by this act that any child 18 years of age and younger can be adopted. The Act makes provisions on who may adopt as follows in section 230 (2) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005,[7]

"A child may be adopted –

    (a) Jointly by –

    (i) A husband and wife;

    (ii) Partners in a domestic-life-partnership; or,

    (iii) Other persons sharing a common household forming a permanent family unit;

    (b) By a widower, widow, divorced or unmarried person;

    (c) By a married person whose spouse is the parent of the child or by a person whose permanent domestic life-partner is the parent of the child;

    (d) By the biological father of a child born out of wedlock; or,

    (e) By the foster parent of the child."

2.4   Same-sex adoption and rights

Section 39 (1) of the Constitution states that:

> When interpreting the Bill of Rights, a court, tribunal or forum- (a) must promote the values that underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, quality and freedom; (b) must consider international law; 56 (c) may consider foreign law.

The section, as mentioned above, implies that whenever rights are interpreted, they should be viewed with regard to both national and international legal reform (Feldhaus & Van den Heever, 2013). Bilchitz and Du Toit (2016) state that attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in pre-democratic South Africa were met with repression and negativity. Same-sex unions were not legally recognised, nor did these couples have the legal ability to adopt children. According to Montero (2014), studies on same-sex adoption are limited. To date, as of 2013, only 15 countries have approved same-sex adoption without

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[7] This act came onto affect in 2010 (Boezaart & De Bruin, 2011).

restrictions[8]. Historically, Canada was the first country to allow and legalise same-sex adoption in 1999 without restrictions; this was later followed by the Netherlands in 2001, and then South Africa in 2002.

In 2002, *Du Toit v. The Minister of Welfare and Population Development and others* accepted that preventing adoption by same-sex couples jointly was unconstitutional (De Wet, 2007). South Africa provides a clause around sexual orientation in the Bill of Rights (1996) and the legalisation of same-sex marriage as stipulated in the Civil Union Act (2006). This makes it one of the first countries worldwide to have such a clause.

The Civil Union Act (2006):

> Legalises same-sex civil unions (registered as either marriages or civil partnerships) by defining "civil union" in gender-neutral terms (a civil union has the same legal consequences as a marriage under the Marriage Act, 1961) (University of Toronto & International Human rights program, 2012: 5).

The Civil Union Act resulted in same-sex partners receiving equivalent rights to their heterosexual counterparts. The new rule allowed spouses to decide on each other's behalf for example, to make decisions regarding one another's life, for instance, in emergencies where medical issues are concerned (Ntlama, 2010). Additionally, the rule awards the right to same-sex couples to adopt children and receive spousal maintenance. Same-sex partners may adopt as a single parent, cohabitating relationship, or as a civil union partnership or marriage (Ntlama, 2010).

The constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that:

> Section 9(3) of the Constitution provides that the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth (South African Law Reform Commission, 2021: 25).

However, many same-sex couples face difficulty when applying for adoption (Montero, 2014). This is evident globally as it was only in 2011 that the United Nations Human rights Council recognised the protection of LGBTQI+ members rights and urged other countries

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[8] "Without restrictions": To adopt children jointly as a couple.

to do the same (Montero, 2014). The history in South Africa of same-sex relationships is also met with difficulties as many South Africans believe that homosexuality is unAfrican and unacceptable in the eyes of the Christian church (Lewis, 2011).

A barrier for same-sex couples is society's prejudiced assumptions and myths, claiming that same-sex parents cannot provide the same quality of parenting when compared to heterosexual individuals (Montero, 2014). Furthermore, others hold the idea that same-sex couples will abuse or molest children, although no empirical findings can be found to suggest that children are at a higher risk of abuse in a same-sex family. On the contrary, evidence suggests that heterosexual males are more prone to paedophilia and abuse of children (Schumm, 2016). These flawed assumptions make the process of adoption more difficult and psychologically demanding for same-sex couples. Another difficulty involves lesbian couples and social workers. Although social workers are required to uphold the law of the country, this is not always the case. Many adoption agencies and social workers have a negative bias against same-gender couples and play a significant role in denying them the right to become parents (Schumm, 2016).

Since World War II, the view of what constitutes a family has been altered (Riley, 1988). The traditional nuclear family, which consists of a stay-at-home mother and a working father, is not seen as the norm anymore (Little, 2016). This is true in both Western and African societies. Because of the high incidence of divorce worldwide, children often grow up with one parent or form part of a blended family where one of the parents either remarried or took on a new partner (Bos et al., 2005). Therefore, queer families find themselves in a contradictory situation, thus that on the one hand, there is inclusion into the law to receive equal rights and on the other, victimisation still occurs due to societal barriers (Lynch & Morrison, 2016).

In South Africa, this is also true (Breshears & Lubbe-De Beer, 2016). As lesbian families are a relatively recent phenomenon, this has sparked varied research debates and critiques (Kolk & Anderson, 2020). Janet Wright (2001) utilises the label 'heterosexual supremacy' when describing the predominantly heterosexual and chauvinist milieu within

which the 'male/female' bond so often gets romanticised. Little (2016) agrees with Wright (2001) and maintains that heteronormativity fuels homophobia[9] and discrimination of sexual minorities because heterosexuality is regarded as superior to all other sexualities.

2.5   The Adoption Process in South Africa

In South Africa, adoption is only viable through an adoption order that is regulated by the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005) that was amended by the Children's Amendment Act of 2007, which is the current childcare and protection legislation in the country. In addition to this, approval from the Children's Court[10] in the judicatory area within which the child resides is needed (Gerrand, 2017; Monye, 2017). The following steps adapted from Gerrand (2017), Monye (2007) and the National Adoption Coalition South Africa (2013) serve as a guide for the South African adoption process

a) An individual or couple decides to adopt.

b) Individuals or couples seek the help of a registered social worker or agency who is legally allowed to render the provision of adoption services as prescribed in section 251 of the Children's Act. However, some agencies, predominantly Christian adoption services, oppose same-gendered parenting and will not allow homosexual individuals or couples to apply, even though our Constitutional law has no restrictions other than being a South African citizen of legal age, thus 18 years and older to adopt a child.

c) Prospective adoptive parent/s must undergo a screening process that the Department of Social Development, along with the guidance of the National adoption coalition of South Africa (NACSA) and the South African Association of Social Workers in Private Practice (SAASWIPP) (Gerrand, 2017). This process involves an interview with a social worker and that police clearance is received that

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[9] Homophobia: The irrational fear of gay and lesbians' individuals mostly associated with prejudice and anger leading to discrimination (American Psychological Association, 2014).
[10] The Children's Court is a specifically curated to protect and care for children's needs and issues relating to neglect, abandonment, abuse and makes decisions on behalf of these children, any Magistrate's Court is a Children's court (Department: Justice and Constitutional Development, 2011).

indicates that the individual/s applying do not have any criminal record. In addition, prospective adoptive parent/s are obligated to undergo medical and psychological testing and are required to provide financial statements[11]. Indivulalds further need to be cleared from the National Child Protective Register and National Register for Sex Offenders (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2011). In addition to the information mentioned above, couples will be assessed on their relational and marital stability. The screening process further denotes that individuals who wish to adopt should provide at least three references in support of their application (Adoption, 2021). After completing all documentation, a social worker will conduct a home visit whereby all biographical data gathered will be used to formulate a profile that will be used to match a child to adoptive parents. When all information is gathered and corrected, the social worker will place the adoptive parent/s on the National Adoption Database named The Register on Adoptable Children and Prospective Adoptive Parents (RACAP).

d) The next stage involves the waiting period, which could be time-consuming and discouraging for the prospective parent/s

e) The meeting stage: during this phase, the prospective parent/s are notified that a child has become available and matches their profile. Here the social worker will give the couple or individual the opportunity to either accept or decline. If prospective adoptive parents accept, a meeting with the child will be scheduled (National Adoption Coalition South Africa, 2013). Institutions that currently look after the child, like a place of safety, will issue documentation stating that the child can reside with the prospective adoptive parents until the finalisation of the adoption process (National Adoption Coalition South Africa, 2013).

f) Completing the process involves the final stage, where the adoption process is finalised in a Children's court. All necessary documentation prepared by the

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[11] Adoption criteria is not dependable or discriminative against any person on the bases of their financial and economic status (Gerrand, 2017).

specific social worker is presented to the court. Here the adoptive parents can decide to either keep or change the first and last names of adoptive children, and the request will then be sent and placed on the National Adoption Register. Finally, the court grants the adoptive parents legal rights as parents of the adoptive child and they may ask the Department of Home Affairs to issue new birth certificates (Department of Home Affairs, 2021).

2.6 Discourse on Family

In South Africa, data on queer families are not readily available (Lynch & Morison, 2016). There is still strong opposition to queer families as they have mostly been viewed as a threat to heteropatriarchy and society itself (Lynch & Morison, 2016). The traditional nuclear family consisting of two parents of different sexes has been the standard against which all non-normative families have been measured and judged (Pearce et al., 2018).

Although members of the LGBTQIA+[12] community have commonly been linked with a childless way of life in the past, more members are opting for parenthood (Lubbe, 2007). Lesbian and gay individuals who have adopted children has attracted controversy in many countries worldwide. There are many arguments against queer parenting, which in many instances is upheld by heterosexual nuclear family ideology (Lynch & Morison, 2016). Bos et al. (2005) indicate that arguments against same-sex parenting, especially those of lesbian headed families, are based on the absence of a father figure in children's development. However, preliminary findings by Biblarz and Stacey (2010) indicate that both straight and lesbian mothers allocate more of their time to children and family than heterosexual fathers. In a study led by Bos, Balen and Boom (2005) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, empirical findings did not yield heterosexual (woman and man) parenting as superior over same-sex parenting. In other words, the research indicated that same-gender parents and their children's outcomes are as favourable as those in families of heterosexual parents (Bos et al., 2005).

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[12] LGBTQIA+ is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer and others (Lubbe, 2007).

However, same-gender families are still stigmatised by society, which affects not only the mental well-being of the adoptee but also the adoptive parents. Therefore, it is essential to investigate same-sex families that challenge the dominant social discourse of 'straightness' (Lubbe, 2007). Breshears and Lubbe-De Beer (2016) indicate that two-thirds (61%) of South Africans continue to consider homosexuality unacceptable and non-cultural, and believe that it is unacceptable in society.

Transitioning into parenthood is filled with confusion, physical and emotional distress and impacts the couple financially (Foli et al., 2017). In addition to welcoming a child to their family, adoptive parents experience unique challenges. McKay et al. (2010) state that many adoptive parents endure legal battles and face potential discrimination and stigma surrounding adoption.

2.7 Previous research on Lesbian adoption: Global to South African research

This section pays attention to previous research about lesbian, same-sex adoption. The research studies and contributions are introduced from both a South African context and a global context.

2.7.1 Global research

While several studies on lesbian couples and adoption exist, the topic has generally been limited, and most research on adoption and parenting is viewed through a heterosexual lens (Averett et al., 2009). Many studies on adoption are concerned with comparing heterosexual and same-sex parenting (Averett et al., 2009). This can be attributed to the belief that homosexuality is a deviation, pathological in nature, from the assumed heterosexual norm (Lubbe, 2007). Lubbe (2007) agrees that heteronormativity highlights the so-called 'correctness' of the traditional family and heterosexual beliefs and thus, in return, renders homosexuality invisible.

Other scholars are interested in analysing the stability of lesbian couples and their relationships compared to heterosexual mothers (Ball, 2003; Schumm, 2014). An earlier study conducted by Dilapi (1989) indicates the stability and maturity of lesbian relationships as equal to heterosexual relationships, which challenges the belief that gay and lesbian individuals cannot sustain relationships (Herek, 1991). Therefore, Herek

(1991) notes that lesbian couples are as well-adjusted as heterosexual individuals. Moreover, Lubbe (2007) concurs that the so-called lack of stability is unfounded and that lesbian families are equally stable for children when compared to heterosexual ones (Redding, 2008).

Cooper and Cates (2006) conclude that there was no account of any instability in research that indicated that heterosexual parents were more stable than lesbian and gay parents. Rohrbaugh (1992) believes that lesbian couples show more stability than heterosexual ones because women operate on the principle of an ethics of care and would not dissolve the relationship. A study by Herek (1999) discovered that the idea that a homosexual parent might negatively influence children is discounted, which is further evidenced in the findings of Patterson and Redding (1996), who uncovered that no disadvantages on the grounds of child development were found where parents were same-gendered, and this includes both gay and lesbian families. Additionally, a study by Anderson (1999) indicates that raising children in a lesbian-headed family can be advantageous for child development.

An American study by Brooks and Goldberg (2001) focused on sexual minorities and the societal barriers they faced during the adoption process. Brooks and Goldberg examined a small group (*n*=11) through the use of focus groups. Findings indicated that most of these participants experienced a lack of confidence and negative attitudes from the professionals working on their adoption cases (e.g. social workers), who questioned their application and parental capabilities (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001).

Most recently, Scherman, Misca, and Tan (2020) conducted a study of social workers and lawyers that investigated their perceptions on the subject of lesbian and gay individuals who adopted children. A total of 314 individuals were recruited and findings suggested that even though same-sex relationships are gaining favour, many professionals still prefer heterosexual couples to adopt children over same-sex individuals. The researchers noted that negative inclinations towards gay and lesbian adoptive parents were based on conservative political and religious beliefs (Scherman, Misca & Tan, 2020).

Goldberg and Smith (2008) studied 30 gay males, 45 lesbians, and 51 heterosexual couples who recently successfully went through the adoption process. The study aimed to differentiate between the perception of societal stigma around adoption and the internalisation of adoption stigma. The results highlighted that lesbian women experienced higher social stigma levels, whereas heterosexual individuals had a higher internalised stigma. A limitation in the study was that couples participated in the study three months after the adoption process, and it yielded little evidence into the psychological and relational experiences of lesbian participants.

Cochran and colleagues (2003) maintain that lack of social support may cause lesbians to be at greater risk of having lower levels of well-being since they are exposed to heterosexism. Studies conducted on the well-being of lesbians during the pre-adoptive phase indicate higher levels of chronic stress leading to depression (Goldberg & Smith, 2008). Adoption itself causes couples to experience higher anxiety levels, which involves legal uncertainties or situations where they have waited to become adoptive parents for several years (Goldberg & Smith, 2008). For lesbian couples, the process might be even more stressful due to the historical discourse of homosexuality, including the notion that homosexual individuals are paedophiles, deviant, and/or pathological (Kinney, 2015). In addition, same-sex couples face stigma, homophobia, and discrimination from society and in their culture, and through religious affiliations (Hudson-Sharp & Metcalf, 2016).

In 2012, Lavner, Waterman and Peplau conducted a study on adoption in Los Angeles. This study involved an analysis into the promotion of healthy development of children by same-sex parents with high-risk children[13]. A comparison was made between adoptees' cognitive development and behavioural problems post-placement. For this study, 82 families consisting of 7 lesbian, 15 gay and 60 heterosexual couples were given questionnaires and children were interviewed and tested. Assessment of the children occurred at 2, 12 and 24 months after the adoption process. Results of the study indicated that in both heterosexual and same-sex households, behaviour problems were similar. In addition, cognitive development in both households normally increased for both

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[13] High at-risk, is a child who is under the age of 18 who is at risk for emotional, physical neglect and abuse due to personal, environmental, and relational factors (Lavner, Waterman and Peplau, 2012).

heterosexual and same-sex parents. In another study conducted by Power et al. (2010), it became evident that due to the effect of homophobia on their children, many same-sex families experienced negative attitudes from health, education, legal, and welfare systems and many experienced psychological distress as well (Power et al., 2010).

A Canadian study led by Shapiro et al. (2009) investigated the impact that legal and societal support of one's country of residence has on the mental health of heterosexual and lesbian mothers. The sample included individuals from both Canada and The United States. The study was made up of 35 lesbian mothers and 42 heterosexual mothers in Canada, and 153 heterosexual mothers and 52 lesbian mothers in the United States. Results indicated that lesbian mothers from the United States divulged elevated levels of worry regarding legal status[14], and experienced increased levels of depression to their Canadian counterparts. Additionally, lesbian mothers in the USA encountered more legal obstacles than their Canadian counterparts, and heterosexual mothers in both countries did not face the same legal challenges (Shapiro et al., 2009).

Messina and D'Amore (2018) conducted a similar study to Brooks and Goldberg (2001)[15]. The 2018 study focused on gay and lesbian couples and the adoption process in Europe, and it evaluated the challenges and barriers these couples' encounter. Findings on the barriers indicated that all participants reported that they had been discouraged by social workers who presented them with statistics demonstrating a limited number of successful same-sex adoptions. There is a limited amount of research about the lived experiences of lesbian couples and the adoption process from a non-western perspective.

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[14] Legal status with reference to adoption process encompassed the status that the law assigns to a person, thus, to assign a person the privilege of "mother" or to have marital status by law (Shapiro, Peterson, & Stewart, 2009; US Legal, Inc, 2021). However, one's legal status is dependable by law and in some countries homosexual behaviour is still criminalised (Moore, 2017) meaning that LGBTQIA+ members have little to no legal status.

[15] Brooks and Goldberg (2001) investigated the societal barriers faced by sexual minorities during the adoption process. Their findings yielded that most of the participants experienced negative beliefs and attitudes from the professionals in charge (e.g., social workers), who questioned their application and parental capabilities.

The study by Messina and D'Amore (2018) identified a gap demonstrating the shortcomings and inadequacies of existing literature in that most research only concentrated on particular challenges and barriers (e.g., the justice system, parenthood, the adoptive child's well-being, and childhood development) (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Cochran et al., 2003; Goldberg & Smith, 2008; Lubbe, 2007; Messina & D'Amore, 2018). Cochran and colleagues (2003) maintain that lack of social support may cause lesbians to be at greater risk of having lower levels of well-being since they are exposed to heterosexism. Studies conducted on the well-being of lesbians during the pre-adoptive phase indicate higher levels of chronic stress leading to depression (Goldberg & Smith, 2008).

2.7.2 South African Research

In South Africa, hardly any research is conducted on same-sex adoption and parenting. However, several studies are conducted on the LGBTQI+ community. One such study by Kevin Mwaba (2009) investigated South African university students' attitudes regarding same-sex marriage and homosexuality. Participants included 150 undergraduate students who were interviewed, and the findings concluded that 71% of students perceived same-sex marriages to be "bizarre", and 40% reinforced discriminatory behaviour against same-sex individuals. In addition, 46% of students felt that homosexual individuals should not be allowed to adopt children.

In her Master's thesis, Leigh de Wet (2007) investigates same-sex couples' experience of parenting and the adoption process in South Africa. De Wet (2007) found that same-sex parents suffer from self-doubt and stigmatisation of becoming parents by society as many religious adoption agencies prevent these couples from adopting. Furthermore, these couples experienced discrimination from governmental agencies and the adoption process was largely negative, as implied by terms like "tiresome" and "disillusioning." Another study by Samantha Moore compared South Africa's adoption policies for LGBTQIA+ members to those of the US. Moore's findings indicated that South Africa's adoption policy is better and more efficient than those found in the US (Moore, 2017).

Little research on the topic is available from a non-western perspective and a new definition of what constitutes a family requires formulation. The researcher aimed to investigate lesbian couples' experiences during the adoption process in South Africa and investigated the psychological barriers and existence or absence of social support that exists for lesbian adoptive parents. Given the absence of literature on lesbian adoption in South Africa and the pervasive homophobia in this country, this study sought to uncover some of the psychological and relational challenges that lesbian parents undergo during the adoption process.

2.8   Chapter Conclusion

This chapter discussed the history of adoption both globally and in South Africa. The chapter evaluated previous research on the topic of adoption by lesbian couples, and it became evident that little research on the subject is available. Most research on the subject is related to misconceptions that the sexual orientation of mothers influences a child's sexual development and gender identity. Others believe that children with same-sex parents will not have the same school outcomes as children raised by heterosexual individuals. Although much of the existing research has debunked myths about same-sex individuals, stigmatised views on same-sex parenting persist internationally and locally.

Therefore, stigmatised views of homosexuality in the country and how this can impact the adoptive couple and their experience of the process were discussed to elucidate that psychological and relational challenges can occur due to homophobic social constructs. Hence, the need to evaluate the lived experiences of lesbian couples during the adoption process becomes vital in acquiring knowledge on the subject as it will provide insight into some of the challenges that lesbian couples face during the adoption process in South Africa.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Chapter Preview

This chapter describes the methodology and research design used in the study. Thereafter, the researcher provides a detailed discussion on the reason for choosing the specific research design, followed by an explanation of the procedures employed in the collection of data, transcribing, and analyses. In addition to this, the researcher describes the recruitment and selection process for participants and comments on how trustworthiness and rigour were employed and applied. The researcher further elucidates the importance of reflexivity and discusses how the research will be disseminated. Lastly, the chapter concludes with ethical considerations employed during the research process.

3.2 Qualitative research

The research aimed to explore the psychological and relational challenges experienced in the course of the adoption process by lesbian couples. The objective was to gain knowledge about both the psychological and relational difficulties encountered throughout the adoption process by lesbian couples. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was utilised to uncover the psychological and relational aspects of the phenomena in question, thus the experiences of lesbian women during the adoption process. Qualitative research investigates how humans construct or decode their world (Tuffour, 2017). In other words, how they experience events and phenomena rather than searching for cause-effect relationships (Tuffour, 2017). The importance of qualitative research is to bring lesser-known phenomena to the foreground (Tuffour, 2017). Qualitative research relies on linguistics (words), images and meanings individuals derive from a phenomenon (Nieuwenhuis, 2020a).

For this reason, qualitative research is different from quantitative data, which include numerical data and the establishment of hypotheses (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Willig & Rogers, 2017). Furthermore, qualitative research often involves a single case, observations or narrative descriptions about a specific phenomenon and aims to answer "how" and "why" questions about human practices, actions and perceptions (Silverman, 2016). The study focused on the lived experiences of lesbian couples by investigating the psychological and relational challenges encountered during the

adoption process. Qualitative research was the most appropriate method for addressing individuals' experiences and how they compose, organise, and interpret the world they live in (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Moreover, qualitative research is meaning orientated; thus, making sense of a phenomenon becomes essential. Silverman (2016) maintains that the most important aspect of qualitative research comprises an interpretive approach. At this level, the researcher interprets a phenomenon within its natural setting (Berg & Lune, 2017). In other words, the researcher collects data through the means of text, images or sound (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised in this study as a methodological approach.

3.3 The Research design

3.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

The study employed a qualitative research methodology via Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to conceptualise and make sense of the data obtained. Walsham (1993: 5) states that:

> Interpretive methods of research start from the position that our knowledge of reality, including the domain of human action, is a social construction by human actors and that this applies equally to researchers. Thus there is no objective reality which can be discovered by researchers and replicated by others, in contrast to the assumptions of positivist science[16].

Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) suggest that one of the strong points of qualitative research, especially IPA, is studying a phenomenon not available elsewhere. Consequently, the proposed study aims to explore the multiple realities specific to lesbian couples' experiences during the adoption process. Additionally, qualitative research employs natural interpretative data to secure how questions are answered by deriving meaning from participants (Cassidy et al., 2010). Consequently, the proposed study will make use of an interpretive naturalistic approach. Nieuwenhuis (2020a) states that qualitative research is especially interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings by means of rituals, social roles, symbols, social structures, and so forth. Additionally, qualitative research utilises exploratory research

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[16]Positivism assumes that reality is objective and that no other forms of reality are present (Cassidy et al., 2010).

questions underpinned by the importance of understanding a specific phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The study employed an exploratory design as research approach. Exploratory research aims to identify problems within a particular phenomenon and tries to understand it (Zukauskas et al., 2018). Nieuwenhuis (2020b) maintains that a researcher should remember that exploratory research is primarily inductive, thus working with a theoretical framework rather than a set of hypotheses. The researcher identified IPA as an appropriate method to study and examine lesbian couples' experiences of psychological and relational challenges posed by the adoption process.

The researcher aimed to investigate the lived experiences of lesbian couples during the adoption process by examining how lesbian's derive meaning from their experiences. Therefore, IPA assumes that individuals are 'self-interpretive beings' and draws on the fundamentals of phenomenology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Furthermore, IPA employs both hermeneutics and phenomenology, resulting in a method that is descriptive, one being concerned with the way phenomena appear and allowing "things to speak for themselves" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p.8).

3.3.1.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is concerned with individuals' perception of events and situations, thus looking into their experiences as essential and unique components (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). According to Nieuwenhuis (2020b), phenomenological studies focus on individuals' meaning from their experiences. Therefore, the voice of the participants becomes central to the study when using IPA. Data gathered were obtained from lesbian couples from their unique experiences and perspective of the adoption process. Based on the literature, lesbian experiences are often unexamined and therefore, these lived accounts help build the body of knowledge on lesbian family's experiences. Furthermore, Zukauskas et al. (2018). state that the utilisation of the phenomenology approach is that independence between reality and human existence is assumed. Phenomenological research is always descriptive, linguistic, and interpretative and directs the location of meaning and understanding of a specific phenomenon or situation (Zukauskas et al., 2018).

IPA focuses on the notion that multiple realities are possible (Alase, 2017). For this reason, the researcher used IPA as an appropriate method of inquiry. Alase (2017) further notes that phenomenology aims to explain a singular essence that underpins the phenomena or specific situation, as it is a method of inquiry that discovers and draws conclusions about existing potentialities of the phenomena in question (Adoption, 2021)

3.3.1.2 Hermeneutics

The study will follow a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, documenting lived experiences by text and interpreting underscored meaning. The foundation of hermeneutics requires that the researcher should adopt a phenomenological attitude by employing 'bracketing', putting past knowledge and assumptions aside when conducting research (Tuffour, 2017). Furthermore, hermeneutics encompasses the art of interpretation that utilises language and the researcher's experience in the meaning-making process (Tuffour, 2017). Therefore, the researcher uses double hermeneutics to make sense of participants' experiences (meaning-making). In addition, data that emerges is dependent on both the researcher and the participant during the process of interviewing (Tuffour, 2017).

The proposed study will follow hermeneutics to uncover the psychological and relational challenges experienced during the adoption process by lesbian couples without holding any preconceived attitudes or beliefs about the phenomena. Moreover, bracketing will be vigorously implemented as the researcher will set aside any psychological knowledge during the interview process. Thus, the study will incorporate language and terms that participants can understand and avoid psychological jargon as this can lead to confusion for participants and can have a detrimental effect on the integrity of the researchers' results.

3.3.1.3 Idiography

Another noteworthy orientation embedded in IPA is idiography, which refers to the in-depth analysis of individual perspectives and experiences within a unique context (Cassidy et al., 2010). Consequently, idiography analyses each case individually and is not concerned with general or universal statements (Alase, 2017). Interpretative phenomenology aims to deliver a detailed analysis of convergent and divergent

themes as participants attempt to make sense of the phenomenon (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). As a qualitative research technique, IPA enables multiple individuals who share similar experiences to narrate their own stories, deriving ordinary meaning (Alase, 2017). IPA offers the privilege to the individual by employing a smaller sample size. Although smaller sample sizes might hold some limitations when conducting IPA research, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) maintain that utilising a smaller participant group allows for richer in-depth analyses into the phenomena that would not be possible in larger sample sizes. Therefore, IPA aims to demonstrate, enlighten, and master themes by assertively anchoring research findings (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). It is for this reason that the researcher chose IPA as the research design. IPA aims to go beyond a 'standard thematic analysis' (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Furthermore, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggested that researchers find a 'fairly homogenous sample.'

3.4   Reason for choosing IPA

IPA is case orientated, involving analyses of individual transcripts. As mentioned before, IPA is not concerned with the generalisation of findings but is committed to examining participants and their individual experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Moreover, IPA emphasises the importance of the researcher to view the participants as experts on the subject in question and that the researcher is merely an observer denoting the facts (Peat, Rodriquez & Smith, 2019). Consequently, the utilisation of IPA contributed to the study by analysing lesbian couples' experiences of the adoption process, thus asking lesbian couples to narrate their own experiences and document their accounts. Therefore, some of the following questions were asked throughout the interview schedule (See Appendix C).

1) Did you experience any form of anxiety, stress, or depression?

2) Did you notice changes in your partner/spouse's mood or behaviour?

3) What was your initial experience regarding the legality of the adoption process, i.e., documentation, court hearing. and home visits?

4) Did you experience any negativity (homophobia) from authority figures like the adoption agency, lawyers, social workers, or judges?

A phenomenological approach aided in the exploration of human experiences through the lens of lesbian couples. The data gathered involved first-hand accounts of lesbian couples and their psychological and relational challenges experienced during the adoption process. Because the phenomena to be studied is relatively unexamined in literature, the study provided the opportunity to view and gather more information about the topic and broaden the works of knowledge. Moreover, the researcher identified key themes that emerge from the transcripts of lesbian women to search for patterns and similarities in various narratives (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and how these couples relate to or differ from one another.

3.5   Data Collection

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) state that IPA research is appropriate for small sample sizes (< 10). The data collection in IPA begins with the uncovering of the phenomena. Therefore, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews as primary sources for data collection. Thus, four couples were interviewed in other words, eight individuals in total. An interview is an interactive form of data collection and is conducted directly by the researcher. Interviews make it possible for the researcher to extricate personal information through the use of questions and probing (Cassidy et al., 2010). Additionally, interviews allow the researcher to make notes and inquire for clarification (Cassidy et al., 2010). Finally, interviews offer the opportunity for an in-depth discussion between the interviewer and the interviewee (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013)

The advantage of semi-structured interviews involves minimal interview structuring and questions (Wengraf, 2001). In addition, the use of interviews that is semi-structured allows for two-way communication, thus a relationship forms between the interviewee and interviewer and allows the interviewee to open up about sensitive matters (Wengraf, 2001). Moreover, the open-ended nature of the semi-structured interview will permit the interviewer to elaborate on personal experiences and enable the interviewer to ask follow-up questions related to the answers given in the previous question, thus allowing new concepts to emerge (Wengraf, 2001).

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic[17] and geographically distributed participants, the researcher has decided to conduct virtual interviews using videoconferencing software like *Zoom*, Microsoft Teams, or WhatsApp video calling. The researcher interviewed lesbian couples as a cohort and not individually; thus, interviews were held with couples exclusively (two at a time). According to Jain (2021), video conferencing software allows two or multiple people to communicate in real-time through video imaging and audio. Subsequently, the researcher and participants connected to their chosen video conferencing software/platform through the employment of (data) the internet (Jain, 2021).

In addition to virtual interviews, the researcher recorded the interview sessions, which were later transcribed verbatim into document form for observational data (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). The interview facilitated participants to share their experiences. Although the interviewer used a guide (interview schedule), participants usually directed the interview as ascribed in IPA standards (Peat, Rodriquez & Smith, 2019). Therefore, the researcher's role is to guide the discussion towards the lived experiences of lesbian women during the adoption process.

3.6   Recruitment, Population and Sampling.

IPA Focuses on a small and homogeneous sample; therefore, the research question must be meaningful for the participants (Peat, Rodriquez & Smith, 2019). Participants are chosen because of their experience of the phenomenon. In this regard, lesbian couples and their experiences of the psychological and relational challenges experienced during the process of adoption was investigated. Typically, in IPA, individuals are obtained for their perspective on the phenomena in question (Peat, Rodriquez & Smith, 2019). Once ethical clearance was granted, the researcher began the recruitment procedure and participants were recruited via: (a) A social media advertisement was sent to adoption and LGBTQIA+ support pages on Facebook, namely: "National Adoption Coalition of South Africa", " The Adoption Society", "Pflag: Parents families and friends of lesbian and gays", "Gay and Lesbians from the

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[17]The Covid 19 pandemic is a global health crisis that started in December 2019 when it was first discovered in Asia, thereafter the world was placed on lockdown for several months as the death toll of the disease climbed (World Health Organization, 2020). Moreover, in South Africa and world-wide social distancing has become important in preventing further transmissions (South African Government, 2020).

University of South Africa", followed by an advert placement on the researcher's Facebook and Linkedin profile; (b) Participants who contacted the researcher also recommended other participants through a snowball sampling technique.

The participants for this study were selected and are thus four lesbian couples (two individuals each). The inclusion criteria were that participants should be a lesbian couple who are currently in a relationship and are between the ages of 35 to 65 who completed the adoption process and resided in South Africa. In other words, eight individuals were interviewed. These specifics assisted in recruiting a homogenous sample subjected to IPA research methodology. Participants were given the following pseudonymous and were interviewed in the following order:

1. Jessica and Avril
2. Morgan and Sue
3. Leona and Clara
4. Zanib and Amy

The study involved a non-probability purposive sampling method often employed in qualitative studies. According to Berg and Lune (2017), purposive sampling is dependent on the researcher's judgement in selecting a specific phenomenon in question. Furthermore, Tongco (2007) maintains that non-probability purposive sampling involves interpreting complex behaviour and accumulating substantial sources of information as opposed to merely generalising the findings. In this regard, purposive sampling provides an opportunity to test the relevancy and applicability of the given theoretical conceptualisations (Berg & Lune, 2017).

3.7   Data analysis and Interpretation

According to Alase (2017), data analysis in qualitative research is cumbersome and tedious. Therefore, to analyse qualitative data within an IPA framework, the researcher is advised to immerse themselves in the data, thus entering the milieu of the participant (Peat, Rodriquez & Smith, 2019). Data analysis in IPA involves multiple readings and making notes. First, the researcher reads the transcripts or audio accounts several times, providing insight for the researcher through notation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Furthermore, the researcher addressed their own experience with the

phenomena even if not directly experienced. This helped the researcher to reflect on any biases that might influence the research (Peat, Rodriquez & Smith, 2019).

The next phase involves the development of emerging themes through linked observations and notations in the previous stages. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) maintain that the researcher needs to search for themes that cluster together and summarise them according to relativity. This included a list of themes along with their subordinates. Therefore, the researcher used the participants' accounts (interview data) of the phenomena to identify themes during the analysis process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

3.7.1 Managing the Data

After each interview was completed, the interview data was downloaded from the video conferencing software *Zoom* onto the researcher's personal computer, where a protected file was used to store the interview data. The data from the interview was converted from audio-visual recording to a transcribed digital text, by making use of transcription. The researcher did not use any computer-generated software to analyse or transcribe the data as the sample size was small enough to be analysed manually. The researcher found that this process was much easier to manage and transcribed each of the four interviews verbatim and allocated identified themes and notes that emerged whilst reading the transcriptional data. All transcripts were completed, edited, and saved on the researcher's computer as Word (doc.) files.

The researcher engaged in multiple readings and re-readings of the digital text. After that, the researcher identified further thems, organised into sub-themes. The researcher used Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step framework (See Table 1) for conducting thematic analyses to describe and explain the psychological and relational challenges that lesbian couples experienced throughout the adoption process. Thematic analyses encompassed the identification process of patterns and similarities within textual data and organised these findings in a thematic order (Braun & Clark, 2006). Maguire and Delahunt (2017) suggest that a good thematic analysis includes interpretation where the researcher becomes the research instrument who derives meaning from textual data (interviews).

Table 1

The six-step framework by Braun and Clark (2006)

Steps Taken	Process Description Followed by the Researcher
Step 1: Acquaint Self with the Data	The researcher transcribed the audio-visual data, read and re-read the text (interview data), and identified preliminary findings.
Step 2: Code Generating Process	Data were systematically organised by utilising a theoretical thematic analysis as the research question guided the analyses process. The researcher used both identified parameters, namely: (a) changes in mood and behaviour; (b) stress; (c) anxiety; (d) fear; (e) depression; (f) relational conflict and (g) cultural stigma as illustrated in s*ection 1.3,* and new additional codes that address the researcher's aim and objectives.
Step 3: Searching for Themes	All data has been coded with the research question/aim in mind (*See section 1.3*). Thereafter the researcher grouped all codes and identified emerging themes. The researcher used a thematic map to organise and cluster codes, themes, and sub-themes together.
Step 4: Review Themes	The researcher re-evaluated, identified and discarded themes that were not relevant to the researcher's aim and objectives and convened some themes together.
Step 5: Define and Name Themes	The researcher had a definite thematic map that illustrates the super-ordinate themes, their sub-themes (See Figure 2) and defined what each theme encapsulates and represents.
Step 6: Reporting	The researcher had all the relevant and workable themes and conducted the analyses process by making use of IPA and provided evidence of the emerging themes and their prevalence; thus, quotes from transcripts were employed.

Figure 2.

Final thematic map, indicting two superordinate themes, each with their accompanied sub-theme(s) and initial coding process.
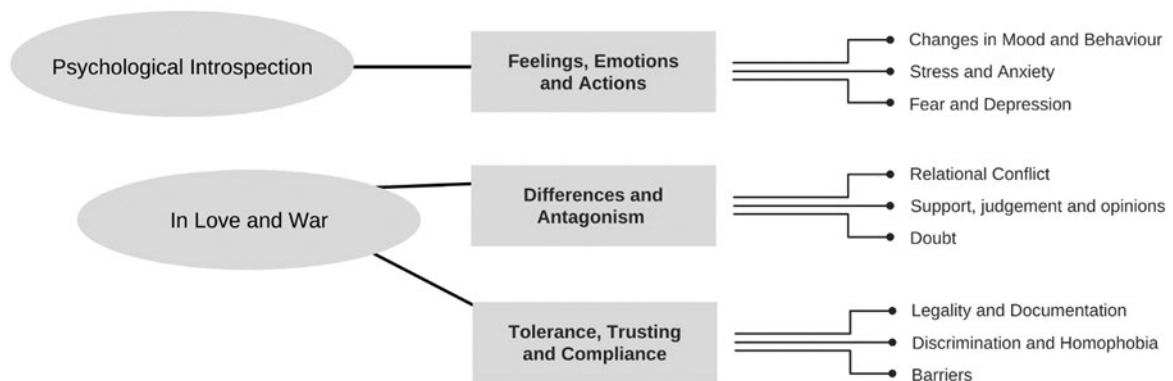
3.8 Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigour

Golafshani (2003) states that the quality of the research design depends on the validity and reliability of the chosen measure. In qualitative research, validity and reliability are measured spontaneously and are not considered separately as in quantitative methodological practices (Golafshani, 2003). Phenomenological research quality is dependent on four unified research measures: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009).

According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), credibility is synonymous with internal validity and elucidates whether findings are accurate, truthful, and plausible from participants' accounts. Runyan (1984) stated that the credibility of a given research project depends on the researchers capacity to convey the phenomena under investigation (adoption) with accuracy and honesty. Within the study, credibility was established by the correspondence, thus similarities between participants views on specific social constructs. Therefore, trustworthiness of the research project can be ensured by utilising multiple sources (Yin, 2018).

In this study, the researcher gained a variety of narratives related to the specific research topic and was informed by the participants lived experiences, which resulted in multiple realities that contributed to the credibility of the research findings.

Ponterotto (2014) recommends that researchers should engage in constant reflective practice to accomplish trustworthiness. For that specific reason, I (The researcher) made use of a detailed diary of all feelings and findings.

Secondly, transferability touches on the ability of the findings of the study to be transferable to other contexts and populations apart from those in the given study (Runyan, 1988; Yin, 2018). However, this research study does not aim to overlook or generalise the findings to a possible larger population but to merely investigate psychological and relational challenges that are experienced during the adoption process by lesbian couples from an Interpretive Phenomenological angle. Therefore, the researcher allows the reader to make his/her own judgments on the interpretative material (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The findings of this study were specific to these research participants and their unique experiences of the adoption process. For this reason, findings cannot be transferable (generalised) to a possible broader population as it only depicts one cohort of lesbian couples experiences.

The third measure is conformability and entails all research procedures. This includes the acknowledgement of researcher biases and how assumptions and beliefs could impact the results. Confirmability refers to how another researcher can confirm research finings (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). During the research process, the researcher kept all notes and steps were taken during the research process to establish an adequate audit trail. The researcher documented all emerging codes and themes extracted from participants' transcripts and adhered to reflective practices to address any predispositions. The researcher clearly stated that the research procedure followed and indicated specific information about the sample group. This information will enable another researcher or auditor to review the findings and evaluate why certain conclusions were reached. Therefore, the trustworthiness of the study was achieved through the accurate representation of the data. Furthermore, the researcher engaged in Braun and Clark's (2007) six-phase model for thematic analysis to analyse the data, which ensured the confirmability of the study which impacted its dependability.

Leung (2015) states that dependability involves consistency of data obtained, thus the degree to which a study can be reliable in constructing corresponding outcomes (Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009). In this regard, the researcher adhered to

the accurate transcribing of audio-visual accounts into text form and refrained from leading the participants when asking questions to secure truthful responses and experiences. Throughout the study findings, quotations of the participants' narratives are provided which only reflect the participants lived experiences

3.9 Reflexivity

Lazard and McAvoy (2017) infer that reflexivity involves the critical acknowledgement of personal beliefs, assumptions and attitudes that might impact the research process and findings. Therefore, reflexivity comprises self-awareness and requires the researcher to address any challenges that could affect the results (Rennie, 2004). IPA requires the researcher to reflect on both a methodological and personal level to address trustworthiness and quality (Lazard & McAvoy, 2017). For this reason, the researcher kept a reflective journal to address any assumptions, preconceived ideas, thoughts and feelings that could impact the findings in any way.

3.10 Dissemination

Dissemination refers to how research findings will be conveyed to the stakeholders, broader public, and participants. The researcher will thus incorporate the use of a *research report* to disseminate research findings (Gyapong et al., 2014). The purpose of disseminating can: a) ensure that the target audience understands the issues within the phenomena in question better; and b) influence policies and practices relating to the phenomena (DeCarlo, 2018). Furthermore, Gyapong et al. (2014) state that any research conducted on humans must be disseminated, and failure to do so will be unethical and result in an unnecessary risk for the participants. Therefore, the research study cannot be completed without disseminating the findings (Gyapong et al., 2014). For the purpose of this study, the results will be disseminated to participants through the writing of a mini-dissertation that forms part of the Masters (MA) in Gender Studies program.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

Allmark et al. (2009) note that in-depth interviews are commonly subject to scrutiny by ethical committees. Furthermore, the interview is dependent on the interviewee and it should be noted that potential emotional trauma may be evoked, especially concerning

the topic of the proposed study (Allmark et al., 2009). Consequently, the adoption process and emotional issues like depression and anxiety may arise. Ethical considerations thus become vital. All aspects of the research process follow three critical ethical principles: beneficence, autonomy, and justice (Allmark et al., 2009). This means that the research was non-harmful, that the researcher was responsible for the participant's well-being, and informed them of the risks involved in partaking in the research study (Suri, 2008). In addition, the researcher never threatened participants or influenced their responses (Allmark et al., 2009).

The researcher respected their participant's autonomy, meaning all individuals had the right to make their own decisions (Allmark et al., 2009). Lastly, the researcher acted in a just manner to all participants and never favoured any participating couple over another, as this would be regarded as unethical and could negatively impact the research findings (Allmark et al., 2009).

As a researcher utilising *Zoom*, the researcher made sure that all ethical considerations were addressed. When using a platform like *Zoom* (a videoconferencing application), privacy and human rights violations become an essential focus point (Henry & Shellenbarger, 2020). For this reason, the researcher adhered to the POPIA (Protection of Personal Information Act), which came into effect on 1 July 2020, making the deadline for private institutions and organisations to comply on 1 July 2021. The primary goal of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) is to protect people's personal information and therefore protect them from harm. In addition, consent from participants was required for retrieving and evaluating personal information. *Zoom* can securely record and store video interview sessions without recourse to any software from third parties (Archibald et al., 2019). However, all internet-based platforms have a degree of interception or unauthorised access by hackers (Henry & Shellenbarger, 2020). Therefore, the researcher saved all transcripts, recording on a password-protected laptop.

This ethical dilemma can cause serious harm to the participants' human rights and dignity and interfere with confidentiality policies imposed by the researcher (Archibald et al., 2019). Therefore, the researchers' sole responsibility was to ensure that no harm (maleficence) would befall participants (Archibald et al., 2019). The researcher

ensured that the participant's (lesbian couples) privacy and confidentiality were protected. This was done through utilising real-time encryption of meetings, user-specific authentication, and securely backed-up recordings to an online remote server network (''the cloud'') as well as local drives, which could be shared securely for possible collaboration purposes (Archibald et al., 2019). These practices aided in protecting participant's privacy and ensured that there was no breach of confidentiality by imposing unauthorised intruders who could leak or share information.

Moreover, the researcher gained informed consent from the participants (*See Appendix B*). Due to lockdown regulations, the informed consent process differed, meaning that face-face contact was limited and alternative means to obtain consent would be advised (Archibald et al., 2019). Therefore, informed consent was obtained via email, where each participant was sent an informed consent form and required to sign it and send it back to the researcher. According to Archibald and colleagues (2019), this process infers that the researcher should explain all the risks/harm involved when participating in the research project to all participants involved.

The researcher explained the potential risks of the study and attempted to uphold a safe and secure environment for the interviews. Furthermore, the researcher assured the participants that anonymous identifiers would be used during the process of data collection, and the link to the specific subject identifiers would be stored securely (Archibald et al., 2019). Thus, no use of names, surnames, or addresses was used. Instead, the researcher utilised alternative pseudonyms to convey results (Henry & Shellenbarger, 2020). In the event that participants felt emotionally distressed during the online interview, as a direct result of this study, the researcher did account for assistance from the following health care professionals and platforms if needed:

a) A psychologist will assess participants via *Zoom* or a scheduled session.

b) Student Counselling and Developing centre on campus by following the link https://www.ufs.ac.za/supportservices/departments/student-counselling-development-home

c) An online counselling platform called MobieG. They can do so by following the link hereafter: https://www.mobieg.co.za/help/

It is important to note that whichever form of counselling a participant chooses to use, he/she/they would be attended to confidentially. In conclusion, the researcher received ethical clearance at the University of the Free State from the Research and Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities (see Appendix A).

3.12 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter provided details with regards to the research design and methodology employed within the study, followed by an explanation on data collection used, extraction of data, and analysis. Then the researcher provided the reader with a discussion on how trustworthiness would be ensured and how reflective practices were utilised. Lastly, the researcher discussed the disseminating process followed by the study's ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

4.1   Chapter Preview

In this chapter, the researcher reports on the findings from the Interpretative phenomenological analysis of 4 lesbian couples (8 participants in total), exploring the psychological and relational challenges that these couples face during the process of adoption in South Africa. The chapter starts with re-visiting the research aim and methodology, followed by introducing the participants by illustrating their demographic information and providing a concise description of each participating couple. Therefore, the chapter discusses and presents the main or super-ordinate themes and sub-themes that transpired from the participants' narratives. All themes are considered from a feminist paradigm using the theoretical frameworks as outlined in Chapter 1, section 1.5. The primary intention of the study is to explore the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process in South Africa.

4.2   Re-visiting the Research aim and methodology

As expressed in Chapter 1 and other sections of this thesis, the study's primary aim is to gain rich, in-depth knowledge about the lived experiences of lesbian women, specifically investigating the psychological and relational challenges they experienced during the adoption process. In order to reach an understanding of this phenomenon, the researcher employed the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses (IPA) to address the main objectives of this study, namely:

 The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Explore psychological challenges such as emotional distress, anxiety, depression, perceived social support, and inter-relational conflict experienced by couples during the adoption process in South Africa.
- Identify the lived experiences of lesbian individuals that have adopted children in South Africa and their views on discrimination and stigma experienced during the adoption process.
- To investigate lesbian couples social support or lack thereof during the process.
- To investigate to what extent the traditional notion of the family remains the same or changes in the context of lesbian adoptive parents.

The research objective and literature review helped formulate the interview schedule (see Appendix C). Furthermore, the researcher also made use of Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) guidelines for conducting IPA research and Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model for thematic analysis to analyse the data.

Tuffour (2017) suggests that qualitative research is best used when researching lived experiences and encompasses the manner in which humans construct or make sense of their world. Furthermore, qualitative research brings lesser known phenomena to the foreground (Tuffour, 2017). In this regard, the researcher deemed qualitative research methodology appropriate for this study and specifically chose to use IPA.

IPA is concerned with elucidating multiple realities of a specific event and phenomena through utilising an interpretative approach by the researcher (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For this reason, the researcher focused on exploring the lived experiences of lesbian couples during the adoption process.

4.3 The Data Collection Process

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted and yielded two themes with three sub-themes (see Table 2 in section 4.5). The same questions was posed to all participants and some interview questions needed further clarification and elaboration. All participants were interviewed by making use of the videoconferencing software *Zoom*. The researcher acknowledges that only one interpretation of lesbian experiences is presented, although many experiences are possible. In other words, the researcher's findings do not symbolise definitive truth as various interpretations of the phenomena in question (adoption) may exist.

The researcher discusses each theme in detail, followed by extracts (participants own words as transcribed from interviews) as supporting evidence. All themes identified are central to the experiences of psychological and relational challenges of lesbian couples during the adoption process in South Africa. The researcher utilised pseudonyms in order to maintain the anonymity of the involved participants. Each narrative was unique, although some participants shared similarities.

4.3.1 Meeting the participants

The section below provides some background on the participants in this study, including their relational status, occupation, and the number of children adopted,

followed by biographical information on the couples and adoptees, including race, age, and gender (*see Table 2: Demographics of Participants*). During the interviews, participants appeared enthusiastic to partake in the study. Quotes presented within this study have been taken verbatim from the transcribed material and have not been altered and only represent the participating couples' lived narratives and opinions. Based on the interviews, the researcher noted that most couples were enthusiastic to talk about their journey of the adoption process. All participants were friendly and helpful during the interview process and provided unique narratives that will aid in the exploration of the researcher's aim and objectives. The following section discusses some of the themes that came to light during the interviews.

Table 2

Demographics of Participants

Couples	Age	Race	Occupation	Children adopted	Race of Adoptee	Gender of Adoptee
Jessica and Avril	58	White	Physiotherapist	2	Black	Female
	57	White	Occupational therapist		Black	Female
Morgan and Sue	37	White	Occupational therapist	1	Black	Male
	40	Coloured	Special Needs teacher			
Leona and Clara	36	White	Manager at Gym	1	White	Male
	39	White	Branch Manager			
Zanib and Amy	45	White	Lecturer	1	Black	Female
	42	White	Counsellor			
Number of participants			4 Couples (8 Individuals)			
Age Range			36 years to 58 years			

Jessica and Avril

Jessica and Avril are a married lesbian couple who reside in Johannesburg. They have been a couple since 1996. They met in 1996 when Avril travelled to New Zealand from South Africa to work on a feasibility study at an outpatient clinic. The couple had a commitment ceremony in May 1999 before the right for lesbian couples to wed was

imposed by the Civil Union Act 2006. Later the couple married in December 2008. Below is an extract of their narrative.

> **Jessica:** Um, so I was managing a rehab outpatient clinic in New Zealand and Avril came to do a feasibility study at the clinic. So it was the first and last time I was her boss.

> **Avril**: Our Civil Union was small. We had 30, 40 guests in our garden, but the commitment ceremony, which feels like the main one and is the one we mainly celebrate. We had about 120 guests and this was the week before my parents relinquished their very big property and garden. So we had huge space and help from a lot of friends.

Morgan and Sue

Morgan and Sue are an interracial couple and have been together for about ten and a half years and have been married since 2012. They met at an inclusive church in Bloemfontein, the city where they are residing and were friends for several years before entering into a relationship. Morgan is an occupational therapist at the department of health and Sue is a special needs teacher and both study full-time.

> **Sue:** So it was actually at a church and inclusive church. That's where we met and we were friends for a while, for a couple of years and then we just found each other. We were friends for about two or three years or so. Yeah, and then our eyes were open to one another.

Leona and Clara

Leona and Clara live in Bloemfontein and have been together for 14years and married for five years. They met through a mutual friend who introduced them to each other. Initially, Leona and Clara tried to get pregnant, but this route was unsuccessful for Leona and the couple decided to pursue both the adoption path and the route to become guardians for children who were in need of safety by volunteering at *Free State Care in Action*, a non-profit organisation in Bloemfontein. During the guardianship and placement, they met their son, whom they adopted three years ago. They are currently fostering another boy whom they are not sure will become available for adoption and await clarification about this process in 2022.

> **Leona:** We have been together for about 14 years and married each other five years ago. We met through a mutual friend. I first tried to become pregnant, but that did not work, so we decided to adopt, but also at the same time volunteered to become a home of safety for children in need and that is when our son was a God sent, crossed our paths and we stopped the route of adoption through

public services. We did not want to be foster parents, we only wanted to be guardians but then realised you get so attached and like them so much that you want them to stay and that is when we adopted our son.

Zanib and Amy

The fourth couple that was interviewed is Zanib and Amy, a lesbian couple who lives in Cape Town. They have been married for six years and met through a mutual friend. They dated for two years prior to their marriage and adopted their two-year-old girl in 2019. This was their first adoption and neither of the two had children prior to the adoption process. Zanib and Amy were very enthusiastic and talkative during the interview process. Below is a part of their story.

> **Amy:** We met through a mutual friend who introduced us to each other, I was first not sure what to expect and I did not like blind dates or anything like that. I felt fine and did not want a relationship, but then something in me said to just take a chance and here we are eight years later.

4.4   The Researcher's Reflection

> The qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others-to indwell- and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 123).

An Interpretative Phenomenological analysis is dependent upon the researcher's interpretation of the data about the phenomena in question (Nieuwenhuis, 2020a). For this reason, the researcher made use of an insider-outsider[18] approach and recognised that her own belief and attitudes could influence the research process. Therefore, the researcher made use of constant reflection throughout the research process. This involved bracketing and keeping a neutral stance during the entire research process.

When conducting qualitative research, I needed to manage subjectivity and minimise the negative effects of any biases. To ensure that my study adheres to trustworthiness and rigour, I needed to evaluate my experiences and background and how this may affect the study. Whilst embarking on the research journey, I reflected on my personal

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[18] According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), insider research refers to research that is conducted that share similarities with the researchers stance in society, like race or language. In this regard the researcher is also a member of the population under investigation.

and professional values, belief and attitudes by keeping a reflective journal. I am a 31year old, married, white, lesbian woman living in South Africa. Although my sexual orientation aligns with my participants, I have never adopted a child. Therefore, the insider-outside method was employed to better understand the adoption process through the lens of the participants. When conducting interviews with my sample, I tried to remain objective and did not subconsciously coerce my participant's responses by any means of intimidation. I remained open to their experiences and not my own. I was respectful of their culture, even if it differed from mine.

I am more experienced with qualitative research than quantitative methods in terms of methodological orientation. However, this may lead to researcher bias (Confirmation bias) and overconfidence, as I could unknowingly interpret data to meet my hypothesis or include specific data that I think are relevant. This would affect the trustworthiness of the study and impact the credibility of the findings. For this reason, I constantly engaged in supervision and self-reflective practices.

Prior to the interview process, I believed that most participants would have encountered homophobic attacks, which would be the main challenge for lesbian couples during the adoption process. However, I needed to refrain from this preconceived idea and let the participants discuss and express their own experiences. Throughout the interview process, I ensured that participants felt safe and comfortable sharing personal information and regularly reminded them that mental health professionals were available to assist them if they became overwhelmed. To conclude, I valued the refective process as it kept the research process on track and helped me elucidate any biases that might impact my results, and I strictly listened to the participants as they were the experts on the phenomena.

4.5   Themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme represents important information that connects to the research question and depends on the researcher's judgement and interpretation of the data. This study aims to explore the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process in South Africa. In this regard, the researcher is interested in the subjective accounts of the participants.

This section provides the super-ordinate themes and sub-themes that emerged during the data analysis procedure (see Table 2). Supporting literature will serve as evidence for each theme. The thematic analysis yielded two strong themes that depend on the researcher's aim of the study, as mentioned in section 1.3. The first theme, *Psychological Introspection,* evaluates any irregularities that couples experienced within their personhood and relationship. The theme has a sub-theme, namely, *Feelings, Emotions and Actions,* which include stress, anxiety, fear and depression as parameters for discussion.

In Love and War, the second theme focuses on the conflict and challenges the adoption process imposes on the couple and has two sub-themes: *Differences and Antagonism*, which investigates couple's social support or lack thereof. This sub-theme involves an investigation into the opinions of family and friends about parenting and adoption, specifically looking into interracial adoption concerning racial and cultural issues that might emerge during the process. The second sub-theme, *Tolerance, Trusting and Compliance,* refers to the challenges that lesbian couples experienced regarding discrimination, homophobia and the legal process of adoption. This includes social worker's attitudes towards adopting same-sex couples and the South African legal system.

Table 2:

The super-ordinate themes and sub-ordinate themes pertaining to the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process.

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-themes
Psychological Introspection	• Feelings, Emotions and Actions
In Love and War	• Differences and Antagonism • Tolerance, Trusting and Compliance

4.5.1 Psychological Introspection

Montero (2014) states that many same-sex couples face difficulty when applying for adoption. This includes the idea that homosexuality is unAfrican and unacceptable in the eyes of the Christian church (Lewis, 2011). Therefore, the first central theme,

Psychological Introspection and its subordinate theme*, Emotions, Feelings and Actions,* elucidate all psychological challenges that could impact a person and couple during the adoption process.

Foli et al. (2017) indicate that transitioning to parenthood can result in physical and emotional distress as many couples face legal battles, stigma and discrimination associated with adoption. Goldberg and Smith (2008) agree with Foli et al.'s notion and concluded that the adoption process causes higher anxiety levels as adoptive parents enter into an uncertain and stressful realm. For lesbian couples, the adoption process can be more difficult as discourses and stereotypical views on homosexual relationships persist in society (Breshears & Lubbe-De Beer, 2016).

4.5.2 Feelings, Emotions and Actions

A challenging barrier for same-sex couples in society is the prejudiced and false belief that same-sex parents cannot provide the same quality of parenting compared to heterosexual individuals (Montero, 2014). According to Rich (1980), Western traditions assume that women are inevitably drawn to men and denote the heterosexual relationship to be the only "real" and "normal" sexuality. For this reason, lesbian feminists strove to abandon heterosexuality as the norm in society (Hale, 1996). In this regard, women can deviate from the norm and love other women, as demonstrated by lesbianism (Thompson, 1992).

Therefore, these social factors, which privilege heterosexuality over homosexuality, can lead to difficulties in psychological and relational aspects of the prospective lesbian adoptive couple. This sub-theme highlights some of the constructs discussed in Chapter 1, namely: (a) changes in mood and behaviour; (b) stress; (c) anxiety; (d) fear; and (e) depression, and how these factors impacted the couple during the adoption process.

During the interview process, the researcher asked the participants how the adoption process affected their individual psychological well-being and how the process impacted their relationship. Below is an example that illustrates some of the psychological and relational challenges experienced during the adoption process:

> **Zanib:** I felt overwhelmed, the pressure was hard. The process was challenging. We had no one. I stressed so much during the process, you know my stomach cringed. We barely slept. It was really challenging.

> **Amy:** For us, I think it was a lonely process we felt abandoned by our family, had few friends. The things they said to us were heartbreaking and hurtful. I never felt so confused in my life. I felt disconnected and then started to question my ability to be a mom. I feared the process. So yes, for us it was stressful. I started to expect the worst to happen, also it was financially much. I felt like giving up.

In the study, *Social Support and Psychological Well-being in Lesbian and Heterosexual Pre-adoptive Couples,* Goldberg and Smith (2008) eluded that lesbian couples experience higher levels of chronic stress during the pre-adoption process than their heterosexual counterparts. In the lived experiences of these participants, the findings as mentioned above correlated with the researcher's findings, and the following description is evidence to this:

> **Leona:** The hardest part was the waiting, especially for the biological mother to sign. She had 30 days to change her mind and reclaim the child. This was very stressful and I felt like you counted down the minutes of those 30 days until it got done.

Leona refers to the process where the biological parents end their parental rights. In the South African legal system, biological parents are given a 30 day period to change their minds. She further stated that the process could be very difficult for a couple as many factors are at play (biological parents, social workers, legality, family and marriage).

> **Leona:** Of course, there was some tension and I do suffer from depression and you become scratchy with one another and there is some pressure on the marriage but also it is a time that brought us together and strengthened our relationship.

One participating couple stated that they did not experience severe psychological implications and noted the following:

> **Sue:** I would say it was rather a building of excitement and expectation. We could not wait for him to come home.

Morgan: Early on, it was small, slight irritations like waiting for things that were beyond our control. So it wasn't anything of a psychosocial aspect. It wasn't an internal issue. It was, as I say, an irritation, not even frustration. So I think that is the worst of the emotional aspect of the time.

4.6 In Love and War

In Love and War is the second theme identified from the data and this focuses on the social support and conflict encountered during the adoption process. The following two sub-themes, *Differences and Antagonism,* and *Tolerance, Trusting and Compliance,* investigate the relational challenges these couples face, followed by the impact of family and friends' opinions on adoption and parenting, and how these factors affect the couples' relationship and psychological well-being. To elucidate findings, the researcher will evaluate the constructs discussed in section 1.5: (f) relational conflict and (g) cultural stigma.

Lesbian headed families are more egalitarian than their heterosexual counterparts, meaning that lesbian women share equal responsibilities about household duties and parenting (Riley, 1988). In this regard, some lesbian families face ostracization from their community as they pose a threat to the so-called traditional nuclear family system, which constitutes a man, woman, and children (Harris, 2011). Society further believes that sexual relationships should occur between the opposite sexes and should not occur between same-gendered individuals (Harris, 2011). This idea created the false notion that the heterosexual cohort is better at raising children than homosexual individuals (Harris, 2011; Schumm, 2016). Therefore, societal barriers can make the adoption process more difficult for a lesbian couple as they are confronted with daily heterosexism and homophobic bias.

4.6.1 Differences and Antagonism

As mentioned earlier, 61% of the South African population consider homosexuality unacceptable (Breshears & Lubbe-De Beer, 2016). Although section 9 (3) of the Bill of Rights (1996) states that discrimination on sexual orientation is prohibited (*see section 2.3),* homophobia persists in the country. The lack of social support can further influence psychological well-being, as evidenced in research findings by Cochram, Sllivan and Mays (2003), which indicated that lower levels of well-being were reported among same-sex individuals who had an absence of social support. This is also

evident in the research findings as two participating groups (4 individuals) experienced difficulties regarding their social networks. Below is an example:

> **Zanib:** I think for my parents it was a difficult situation. They are very religious and struggle to accept having a gay daughter. They did not want to be part of the adoption process and rejected us all together. They did not speak to us for eight months. It's better now but at the time, they were very angry. They were mad that we will adopt a child of a different race. They had a lot of questions about culture.

One couple, when asked if they did have social support, commented the following:

> **Morgan:** I would not say a lot, but just from the people we allowed in because it's a private issue like any kind of family issue. You know, bringing a child into your home, making this big decision. It's a very personal issue. So the people we allowed in provided support within the limits that we allowed it. I just want to say; you must understand that it's a very organised and sensitive kind of process. So it's not something you can just put out there because of the child's identity that must be kept secret and everything is actually quite high profile, so you don't just splash everything out there.

From Morgan's quote, one can deduce that social support is vital in the adoption process but to a limiting extent where it does not overwhelm or further disrupt the couple. In this instance, Morgan maintains that having good boundaries with your support structure will aid in the process.

> **Sue**: Mine were also excited. I think my mother was almost relieved that we went that route. She said it was almost a better fit or something like that. My father took longer to let the idea grow on him if I can put it like that. He also took longer as well in just fully accepting us as well.

By analysing Sue's quote, it is clear that the process of adoption is complex and that social support is a contested subject. Although you receive support from family, there may be some individuals who are not as supportive as the others. This could be because people hold preconceived ideas and perceptions about specific events or issues like homosexuality and are influenced by aspects like religion or heteropatriarchy (Scherman, Misca, & Tan, 2020). This aligns with social constructionism and the idea that all constructs are socially and culturally embedded (Andrews, 2012). Data on queer families are limited and several arguments are held against queer parenting (Lubbe, 2007; Redding, 2008). This could be due to society receiving queer individuals and families as a threat to the heteropatriarchal system

(Lynch & Morison, 2016). The negativity towards queer families is duly influenced by the traditional heterosexual nuclear family's ideology (Pearce et al., 2015). In this regard, society criticises lesbian parenting for the absence of a father figure (Bos et al., 2005). The following quote illustrates this false assumption:

> **Leona:** The parents wanted to know who the father would be, and whether the child will have a father. So they asked who would be the male figure in the child's lives and this was something we also considered and you will never know the outcome. So we might ask this until he is grown up and out of the house. My brother was also a bit sceptical about two women raising a boy. Our friends were very understanding and supportive. It was mostly family that raised concerns.

Leona's words illustrate how society still upholds strong heteronormative and patriarchal ideology even though research suggests that lesbian and heterosexual mothers invest more time towards their children than heterosexual fathers. During the interview process, it became clear that social constructs govern people's perception of reality. In other words, the view on homosexuality is culturally and historically embedded (Andrews, 2012). For many decades, homosexuality was viewed as a mental illness and as a result, false assumptions about same-sex relationships became the norm (Andrews, 2012). For this reason, heteronormative social constructs heavily influence society's view on queer parenting. As a result, lesbian couples psychological and relational milieu becomes affected. Regarding queer theory, one can note that gender roles in South African society still rely on heteropatriarchy, which privileges heterosexuality over homosexuality. Therefore, queer theory set out to dismantle gender expectations and challenge the normative structure of the so-called "normal" or "acceptable" sexuality that is heterosexual.

When applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) to the interview data, one can note that the interrelationship between individuals and their environment is of vital importance. The manner in which the microsystem operates, thus the interaction between the individual and the interpersonal relationships including friends and family, affect the couples individual and relational well-being (Visser & Moleko, 2012). Additionally, couples are influenced by the interaction of several microsystems that form the mesosystem. This means that there is an interaction between the individual, the family and the community's perception about specific issues and

constructs like homosexuality which can further impact the couple (Weiten, McCann & Holder, 2019). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), individuals derive meaning from all of their experiences. This includes all systems: (a) micro-, (b) meso-, (c) exo-, and (d) macrosystems and (e) the chronosystem (Van Dam, 2003, Visser & Moleko, 2012), and in a sense, these systems become reciprocal and complex. In this regard, individual development becomes affected by their past experiences, upbringing and personal belief system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Participants in this study engaged in the adoption task whilst being influenced by social and historical environments in which the chronosystem becomes vital. In other words, the time-dimension includes the change of homosexual relationships from being criminalised to now being legally accepted. Therefore, lesbian couple's psychological and relational stance is duly influenced by social constructs. Social constructionists place great emphasis on word usage and indicate that people make sense of reality through words (Burr, 2003). In this regard, society operates on a duality between objectivity and subjectivity. In the following section, the researcher discusses this notion further.

4.6.2 Tolerance, Trusting and Compliance

A difficulty that same-sex couples encounter during the adoption process involves the attitudes of social workers and adoption agencies. Although social workers are required to uphold the law of the country, this is not always the case. Many adoption agencies and social workers have a negative bias against same-gender couples and play a significant role in denying them the right to become parents (Schumm, 2016). In this instance, queer families are in a contradictory situation. On the one hand, they are included and protected by law and on the other they are discriminated against (Lynch & Morrison, 2016). Three of the participants described that at some point during the process of adoption, they felt discriminated against. The following quotes provide evidence if this:

> **Leona:** We did approach another NGO to place our names on the adoption register and initially, the woman was quite excited about my interest. She then asked me if I was married and I said yes. She then asked what my husband's name is and I then told her no-no, I am married to a woman and when I said that, she immediately changed her attitude towards me and said that there will

be no chance for us to become adoptive parents and it is not something they (the NGO) believe in.

Morgan and Sue stated that they reached out to adoption agencies in previous years (2015-2016) but never heard back from them. However, during their initial adoption process that was applied for in 2019, they did not experience any negativity or homophobia.

> **Morgan:** We didn't have any problems. We actually had a very… I would say, we were pleasantly surprised by the efficiency with which everything was handled.

> **Sue:** The social worker was amazing.

Both Morgan and Sue, and Jessica and Avril experienced issues relating to documentation. When applying for birth certificates, and paper forms, the digital system did not allow for two mothers, and still reflected mother and father. In this regard, one can note that the legality of the process is still influenced by heteropatriarchal ideologies that privilege the heterosexual nuclear family. Even though adoption by same-sex individuals has been allowed since 2002, in the case of *Du Toit v. The Minister of Welfare and Population Development and others* same-sex couples were allowed to adopt jointly (De Wet, 2007) following the Civil Union Act in 2006. In this instance, forms are still not inclusive. After 20 years, The Department of Home Affairs has not addressed this issue.

> **Morgan:** We were preparing ourselves for that (homophobia), but literally up until the guy at home affairs who was actually apologetic that the forms were not inclusive, because at that point it still had mother and father and they would make it parent A and parent B.

Although the couple did not experience this as direct discrimination to same-sex couples, the researcher believes that this is a form of indirect discrimination as forms are still outdated almost two decades after the first same-sex adoption was approved. Below, Avril indicates that she and Jessica encountered the same issue:

> **Avril:** We discovered another flaw last week (December 2021) when we needed to apply for a new passport for one of our girls. Department of Home Affairs, despite all the legal changes and everything. Their system does not allow for two mothers.

In another instance, discrimination was also indirectly experienced when Leona and Clara were at the final court hearing to adopt their son and were confronted by the

magistrate, who asked whether it is legal for two people of the same sex to adopt a child.

> **Clara:** So the day we were in court, the magistrate just looked at the paper and asked: "Is this even legal? Where does it say that two people of the same gender can adopt?" and then the social worker and lawyer showed her something in a little book and she then signed and threw the paper to one side and continued with her work. It was quite anti-climactic. We were still in shock and processing when our social worker congratulated us.

One can analyse the findings from an Ecological Systems Theory perspective in that the individual becomes affected by occurrences within her/his/their macrosystem, which involves the culture and customs of the community or government. This also includes assumptions on homosexuality within the community and social workers attitudes towards same-sex couples. Herek (1991) points out that assumptions about homosexual couples are based on the idea that same-sex partners are not mature or stable in relationships. Social workers often discourage same-sex individuals from pulling out from the adoption process (Messina & D'Amore, 2018). The following statement by Zanib illustrates this:

> **Zanib:** We approached an adoption agency and they were really harsh. They said that they are Christians and will not allow gays to be parents. It's sinful and we should not call them again. Then they hung up.

Research further denotes that the negative assumptions on homosexual individuals are found within conservative and religious beliefs (Scherman, Misca & Tan, 2020).

4.7   Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher obtained data through the lived experiences of lesbian couples during the adoption process and formulated an interpretation of the results considering the literature review and the theoretical frameworks to support the research findings. The researcher concluded that most participants felt frustrated by the documentation and legality of the process and were not so much affected by their same-sex status. For this study, participants provided rich accounts of their lived experienced and aided in bringing forth unknown phenomena. In this chapter, the researcher discussed the key themes identified and elucidated and provided an interpretation.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1   Chapter preview

This chapter aims to clarify and refine the results by presenting a summative description of the findings, including discussing the most prominent themes identified in the data analysis chapter. The researcher will provide a critical reflection on the research process followed by an evaluation of each of the previous chapters to remind the reader of the most central elements of the study. Thereafter, the researcher will identify the strengths and limitations of this study and provide recommendations for future research. Finally, the researcher will comment on the value of the study and end with a conclusion that sums up the research project.

5.2   Reflection on Previous Chapters

5.2.1   The Research Process.

The lived experiences of lesbian couples during the adoption process provides a rich and relatively unknown narrative that has positive implications for future research. The study provided the opportunity to explore a variety of narratives and identify similarities as well as opposing information about a specific phenomenon (adoption) and brought forward lesbian narratives that are primarily limited in South African research to the surface. Participants have been selected specifically for their lived experiences and knowledge of the adoption process, especially evaluating their psychological and relational challenges experienced during this process. In this regard, the research process through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) created the opportunity to capture participant's life experiences through their own narrative, words and expressions.

Several participants felt that the interview process enabled them to reflect and make sense of the adoption process by talking to the researcher, who used active listening to communicate understanding and sensitivity. The researcher incorporated several theoretical frameworks which underpinned the study. These included the use of feminism as a paradigm for investigation by using Lesbian Feminism, Queer theory, Social constructionism and the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner. All theories were deemed appropriate to the research focus of this study and contributed

to the understanding of lesbian couples' experiences of the adoption process and the challenges posed for them in the 21st century.

The study has been motivated by the scarce amount of research conducted on the psychological and relational challenges of lesbian couples during the adoption process. In South Africa, a country that is still heavily homophobic, regardless of the country's constitutional law, the researcher aimed to bring lesbian narratives to the centre in a society that remains highly heteronormative and heterosexist.

During the interview process, it became evident that the adoption process was severely frustrating for the participants, especially about legality, documentation and challenges experienced at the Department of Home Affairs. Most of the participants felt that adoption is a complex process but would recommend it to individuals who would like to become parents. In addition to this, two out of the four couples indicated that the adoption process itself causes difficulty for anyone pursuing this route and that the factor of homosexuality did not play any part in their initial application and finalisation of the adoption process. Other participants stated that issues arose in the state departments. In other words, difficulty with documentation that did not allow for two mothers on the forms and a dysfunctional digital database are examples of this. Although these two couples did not encounter any form of discrimination directed towards them, the documentation process was strongly reliant on heteronormative ideology and patriarchal underpinnings and, to some extent, indirectly discriminated against them.

5.2.2 The Literature review.

In the second chapter, the researcher discussed the history of adoption and the traditional view of a family and discussed the equality clause within the Bill of Rights (1996), followed by the Civil Union Act of 2006. More than 61% of South Africans still believe that homosexuality is sinful and wrong. In this regard, biases against same-sex couples and their pursuit of parenting are still judged with prejudice and false beliefs that lesbian couples cannot provide the same quality of parenting as a heterosexual couple. Moreover, the researcher discussed how several adoption agencies apply their own regulatory standard to the application process and elucidated that many oppose same-gendered applicants.

The comprehensive review of the academic literature on the psychological and relational challenges that were experienced by lesbian couples during the process of adoption yielded limited findings and specifically for this reason, the researcher set out to explore these challenges. The researcher was fascinated to uncover narratives that held different opinions about the adoption process and set out to investigate homophobia, social worker's attitudes, social support, adoption agencies and the legal process as potential triggers for psychological and relational challenges. From the literature review, it became apparent that many societies still hold negative assumptions about homosexual relationships as the normative, traditional structure of the family is constructed by the biological model of reproduction (Lubbe,2007). In addition, many beliefs are duly informed by historical social constructs, which denotes that homosexual behaviour is a pathological disease, resulting in the myth that same-gendered individuals would be less capable of rearing children than their heterosexual counterparts (Schumm, 2016).

Some cultures still believe that homosexual individuals would physically and sexually harm children (Schumm, 2016). Although no evidence for the above can be found in academic research, most South African citizens uphold this notion. While the literature review included many readings and studies on lesbian parenting, little research has been conducted that illustrates the psychological and relational challenges these couples experience during the adoption process.

5.2.3 Methodology.

A qualitative research approach was utilised to provide a theoretical grounding to the study. The chapter discussed the employment of Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses in depth. The results obtained are dependent on the methodology used. For this reason, the researcher remained neutral and allowed participants to report on their lived experiences. Several constructs were identified prior to the investigation as mentioned in Chapter 1, which included (a) changes in mood and behaviour; (b) stress; (c) anxiety; (d) fear; (e) depression; (f) relational conflict and (g) cultural stigma. These constructs were used as a basis from which several themes emerged after data collection. In line with Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses, the researcher continuously evaluated her own biases and attitudes that could affect the research results and tried to maintain a rational, objective and neutral stance.

The researcher adhered to sensitivity and ensured that participants felt safe and comfortable in sharing personal information. As discussed in Chapter 3, the researcher ensured that the research quality and trustworthiness was of high priority. In this regard, the researcher implemented the use of four measures, namely, credibility, transferability, conformability and dependability, to ensure that the study is of sufficient academic standing. Credibility was ensured by the participants' narratives, thus investigating similarities between couples' experiences and identifying patterns. The findings of this study were specific to these research participants and their unique experiences of the adoption process. For this reason, findings cannot be transferable (generalised) to a broader population. Conformability was implemented by constantly engaging with my research supervisor and reflecting on personal biases, beliefs, and contributions that could affect the research. Lastly, dependability was achieved by providing a detailed account of the research process by reading and re-reading transcripts, coding and organising themes as presented by the interview data.

The study employed Interpretative Phenological Analyses to explore the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process. Two themes were identified, each with their respective subordinate theme/s, namely, *Psychological Introspection and In Love and War*. The discussion of these themes led to the successful completion and achievement of the research objectives.

5.2.4 *Analyses and results.*

In this section, the researcher will provide a summative discussion on the main themes and findings as extracted from the interview data (transcripts). The research aim was to explore the psychological and relational challenges experienced during the adoption process by lesbian couples and during the adoption process. In this study, it became evident that 75% of participants, thus three out of the four couples, felt that the adoption process was aggravating with regards to documentation and legal aspects. For most participants, being a same-sex couple, was thus not their biggest challenge but formed part of the challenge.

One participating couple felt that issues such as waiting for the child to become theirs legally was more challenging, as the waiting period of 30 days, in which the biological mother could refrain from the initial agreement and reclaim the child, were more psychologically and relationally challenging than being a same-sex parent or couple.

Two participating couples experienced discrimination and homophobia from adoption and foster care services and decided to pursue a different organisation which yielded success. Another participating couple felt overwhelmed by the screening process and financial implications of adoption and contemplated abandoning the adoption process altogether.

Three out of the four participating couples received excellent support from friends and family. The reason for one couple not receiving any social support could be due to the fact that the couple's families come from a strong religious background and do not accept homosexual relationships. A summative discussion of the most central theses identified during the analysis is provided in the following section. The researcher interpreted the data gathered from the lived experiences of lesbian couples, adhering to the research question and aim. During the analyses process, two strong themes emerged, namely: *Psychological Introspection,* and *In Love and War.*

5.2.4.1 *Psychological Introspection*

The first super-ordinate theme encompasses the psychological challenges that the adoption process poses for the individual and couple. From the onset of this study, it was vital to understand how the adoption process affects lesbian couples psychological and relational stances. This theme was heavily dependent on the constructs mentioned in section 1.3. A common thread in participant's transcripts arose, which indicated that homosexuality was not the dominant factor that hindered the adoption process but rather that issues within governmental and state-owned institutions contributed to their psychological and relational difficulties.

Data analysed does not address adoption in its entirety as it only demonstrates the current participating cohort's experiences. However, rich narratives were extracted to elucidate findings on a reasonably unknown phenomenon. Another important aspect is that multiple realities were at play and the researcher cannot adequately account for all variables (family, friends and society), and their impact on the lesbian couple's experience. In other words, the narratives specific to this group are discussed. The study set out to explore the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process from a qualitative approach. Theories were used to uncover the multitude of realities of lesbian couple's experiences. The

analysis allowed for the exploration into various levels of social influences (family, friends, community, social workers and adoption agencies).

The researcher incorporated the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to aid in the IPA process. The themes identified aided in the exploration of same-sex parenting and adoption. *Psychological Introspection* was dependent on the constructs mentioned in section 1.3, thus (a) changes in mood and behaviour; (b) stress; (c) anxiety; (d) fear; (e) depression. Within this theme, most participants expressed that their psychological well-being was minimally affected. One participating couple felt overwhelmed by the process and another was impacted by the biological mother who could reclaim the child before the 30 day period grants parental right termination. The findings in this theme correlated with the literature review.

5.2.4.2 In Love and War

In the second super-ordinate theme, challenges experienced by lesbian couples with relation to social support, adoption agencies, homophobia and cultural stigma are discussed. This theme elucidates lesbian experience of the adoption process by acknowledging different role players and their effect on the couple and the broader adoption process.

The analysis yielded that most participants had received sufficient social support and professionalism from social workers, excluding one participating couple. However, some forms of homophobic discrimination became apparent from analysing these lived experiences. In this regard, governmental institutions are lacking inclusion policies for same-sex couples wishing to adopt. This could be because South African society's view homosexuality as unAfrican and uphold heteronormative ideas, or it could be due to poor managerial processes and administration.

This theme explores difficulty the couple encountered outside of their internal realm, including external factors like family, friends and society's view on same-sex couples adopting and becoming parents. Participants expressed that the adoption process was taxing with regard to documentation, social worker's attitudes, and bias from adoption agencies. The analysed data did not explore all issues identified within the adoption process and future research is recommended. Both themes presented the shared

experiences of lesbian couples during the adoption process and indicated that South Africa is a country that is strictly influenced by heteronormativity, heterosexism, homophobia, and racial prejudice. Although the researcher assumed that homophobia would have the highest impact on the couple adopting, it was not as significant as anticipated. This research contributes meaningful data to the existing body of knowledge available on lesbian adoption.

5.3   Value of the study.

The need to investigate the psychological and relational challenges from the perspective of lesbian women during the adoption process will provide valuable contextual information to the existing body of knowledge because little research on lesbian adoption is currently available. This study will provide rich data from a South African perspective and contribute to the body of knowledge at a national and international level. Furthermore, few studies explore the ways in which same-gendered families operate and function in a largely heteronormative society.

The study will provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of lesbian couples in South Africa and the adoption process by providing a detailed account of the psychological and relational challenges experienced through the use of several theoretical underpinnings, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

5.4   Strengths and Limitations

The study was qualitative, which denotes that research findings cannot be generalised to a larger population and can thus be criticised for the lack of generalisability. Another limiting factor is that the researcher made interpretations from participants accounts of their lived experiences and no guarantee of objectivity can be assured. In this regard, another researcher might have presented different themes and conclusions. For this reason, the study's findings cannot be viewed as absolute truths as it depicts only one cohort's (4 participating couples) lived experiences during the adoption process in South Africa. In another study, participants may express different challenges as to this group.

The study used voluntary participation through advertisements on social media and snowball sampling. The chosen sampling technique limited the number of participants

involved; however, a homogeneous sample was achieved. The time-limited nature of the study can be viewed as a limitation, and a longitudinal approach might yield more information about lesbian couples' experiences during the adoption process.

The study highlighted that most lesbian couples experienced positive and negative aspects of the adoption process; these results may differ with a different cohort. Another limitation to the study was that personal information was collected from participants several months and even years after the adoption process, which could impact the study results as many facts could have been forgotten. Regarding the participants, a limitation could be that only one woman of colour was part of the cohort, and seven out of the eight lesbian women were white. This can be a limitation to the study as narratives from other races are not presented or evaluated and could yield different results about culture and race.

A strength of the study is that it explores the psychological and relational challenges of the adoption process through the lens of the participant's unique voices, which allows for multiple possible realities to emerge, which aligns strongly with the purpose of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Throughout the process, the researcher remained aware of bringing forth the participants' narratives and not the researcher's own opinions concerning the research topic. For this reason, participants were allowed to communicate their own life stories as they were the experts on the phenomena in question.

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

The information gathered was interpreted according to meanings derived from the lived experiences of four lesbian couples as described in the participants' words. Therefore, the following recommendations can be made: The study had a limited and small sample size and therefore, the researcher will recommend that when the study is repeated, a larger number of participants are required. In addition to this, the researcher recommends that a diverse group be selected, incorporating different races and cultures. Furthermore, the researcher would recommend using a different methodological approach to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. It may be beneficial to use cross-sectional and longitudinal research in the future. Quantitative methodologies can also provide statistical value to the study of lesbian couples

adopting that was absent from this qualitative study. Additional research into lesbian adoption and the psychological and relational challenges experienced is advised.

5.6 Chapter Conclusion

The researcher aimed to provide an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis by exploring the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process. The researcher aimed to bring lesbian narratives to the foreground. This study offered a unique insight into the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process. First, the study examines how the adoption process affects the lesbian couple on an individual psychological level, and second, on a relational level.

The results indicate the complexities of the adoption process by evaluating potential risk factors, namely, homophobia, lack of social support, and utilised constructs mentioned in section 1.3., (a) changes in mood and behaviour; (b) stress; (c) anxiety; (d) fear; (e) depression; (f) relational conflict and (g) cultural stigma to derive conclusions which resulted in unique narratives from participants. A central goal of the study was to add to the current body of knowledge on lesbian couples and the adoption process in South Arica and to gain a better understanding of how the adoption process impacts the couple psychologically and relationally.

In this chapter, the researcher re-evaluated all previous chapters, followed by an analysis of the data by providing a summative description of the most prominent themes and findings. Thereafter, the researcher discussed the study's strengths and limitations, followed by the value of the specific study, and made recommendations for future research.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

29-Oct-2021

Dear Miss Leandra Joubert

Application Approved

Research Project Title:
Exploring the Psychological and Relational Challenges Experienced by Lesbian Couples During the Adoption Process in South Africa: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Ethical Clearance number:
UFS-HSD2021/1221/21

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Adri Du Plessis
Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

Dr Adri du Plessis

Digitally signed by Dr Adri du Plessis
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APPENDIX B: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

DATE

30-11-2021

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Exploring the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process in South Africa

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Leandra Joubert   2009051653   0643344046

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Faculty of Humanities
Centre for Gender and Africa Studies

STUDY LEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Dr. Nadine Lake
051 401 3813

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study's primary purpose is to investigate the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process in South Africa. The researcher aims to understand lesbian couples' social and psychological challenges encountered during the adoption process, and how these challenges may have affected their relationship.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

I, Leandra Joubert, will be conducting the research. I am currently enrolled as a Masters student in Gender studies at the University of the Free State. I am conducting my research on lesbian couples by exploring the psychological and relational challenges experienced by these couples during the adoption process in South Africa. I am registered for the module GSMM 7900 (Minor Dissertation in Gender Studies), and any data collected might be used for publication in journals and/or conference presentations.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: *UFS-HSD2021/1221/21*

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Dear participant, you are invited to participate in this study as you are currently lesbian women (couple) who undertook the adoption process in South Africa. You are between the ages of 25-50 years and will be one of four couples participating in the research. You are invited to participate by completing a 1-hour interview with me (Leandra Joubert) during the months of November and December of 2021.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

I am interested in exploring the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian couples during the adoption process in South Africa. Therefore, it would be required of you to complete a 60-minute interview where you discuss your experience of the adoption process and any relational challenges that may have emerged. A recording of the interview will be made followed by a transcription of the interview into document form.

CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Neither incentives nor coercion will be utilised in the recruitment of participants. Should you decide to participate in the study, you will be provided with a copy of this information sheet and asked to sign a written or electronic consent form. If you want to decline or withdraw from the study, you may do so without giving a reason and without any negative repercussions.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The information that you share with me as a lesbian couple might not hold a direct benefit to you but will contribute to understanding the psychological and relational challenges experienced by lesbian women who have gone through the adoption process or are considering adoption. In addition, findings of this study will contribute to the limited body of knowledge on LGBTQIA+ sexualities and adoption in South Africa.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The questions asked in the interview process may at times be uncomfortable for some individuals and could even evoke an emotional response. Should any discomfort or distress occur as a consequence of contributing to the study, a psychologist (Ms. Ester de Beer), will be available to assist you in this regard. In addition, Participants who feel emotionally distressed, as a direct result of this study, can seek help from the following platforms:

1. Student Counselling and Developing centre on campus by following the link:
https://www.ufs.ac.za/supportservices/departments/student-counselling-development-home.
2. An online counselling platform called MobieG. They can do so by following the link hereafter:
https://www.mobieg.co.za/help/.
It is important to note that, whichever form of counselling a participant chooses to use, he/she will be attended to in a confidential manner. The interview process is entirely anonymous and

confidential. No unjustified influence can or will be done. Pseudonyms will be used in the study and all information will be handled with confidentiality and care.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Confidentiality will be ensured by specific data collection methods. Only the primary researcher (Leandra Joubert) will have details of the individuals being interviewed. It is the researcher's priority to protect participants from any possible harm. When there is a need to refer to you in the written document, pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. Participants' identities will remain anonymous with regards to articles published or presentations made. The principle of confidentiality will be upheld throughout the research process and beyond its conclusion. Data analysis might be evaluated by an external party or supervisor, but a confidentiality agreement will be signed (no details of the interview process will be shared). All Biographical information regarding specific information (i.e., name, age, race and gender) will be protected and only be available to the researcher. The researcher will adhere to the POPIA (Protection of Personal Information Act), which came into effect on 1 July 2020, making the deadline for organisations and private institutions to comply on 1 July 2021. The primary purpose of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) is to protect people from harm by protecting their personal information.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

Data will be stored on my personal computer using a protected password. The data will be collected and stored until the project has been completed (minor-dissertation submitted), and it will then be deleted permanently. All data analysis will be conducted in South Africa. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no payment, incentives or reward offered for participation in this study. Participation is voluntary and thus involves no payments or material benefits.

HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Leandra Joubert on 064 3344046 or at leandra.nora@gmail.com. Should you require any further information or need to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact my study supervisor Dr. Nadine Lake on 051 4013813, or via email lakenc@ufs.ac.za

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

I, the Participant, agree to the recording of the interview process

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): _____

Signature of Researcher: _____Date: _____

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview schedule:

Interviewer: Leandra Joubert

<u>Demographic information</u>

1. Where in South Africa do you live? _____

2. What are your ages: Partner A _____ Partner B _____?

3. What is your race: **Partner A?**

   a) Black African

   b) Coloured

   c) White

   d) Indian

   e) Other

What is your race: **Partner B?**

   a) Black African

   b) Coloured

   c) White

   d) Indian

   e) Other

4. Are you co-habituating or married/civil partnership?

<u>Questions pertaining to the research question.</u>

5) How long have you been a couple?

6) How did you two meet?

7) What are your occupations?

8) How far along in the adoption process are you?

9) Was this your first time adopting?

10) Have you talked to any other lesbian or straight couples that have been through the adoption process as part of your research? What did they suggest and was it helpful to your process?

11) How did your family (parents, brothers and sisters, and friends) respond to you as a couple trying to adopt/adopting?

12) Were your family supportive or discouraging when you were in the process of deciding to adopt or not? Can you elaborate on some of the challenges that you experienced while deciding to adopt?

13) Did you adopt a child different to your own race (transracial) if yes did you experience any cultural stigma? Please elaborate on your experience and how this affected your mental and relational well-being?

14) Were you concerned about your parental abilities as adoptive parents?

15) What would you say were some of the most challenging aspects involved during the adoption process?

16) Would you say that your relationship was affected in any way during the process? What are some of the strategies that you used to deal with conflict? And to what extent do you think the lack of social and state support impacted on some of the conflicts or challenges you may have experienced?

17) Did the adoption process affect your mental health in any way? What were some of the emotions that you experienced? Did you have any type of support (psychological or relational) during this time?

18) Did you experience any form of anxiety, stress, or depression?

19) Did you notice changes in your partner/spouse's mood or behaviour?

20) What was your initial experience regarding the legality of the adoption process, thus documentation, court hearing and home visits?

21) Did you experience any negativity (homophobia) from authority figures like the adoption agency, lawyers, social workers, or judges?

22) Do you think the adoption process is more challenging for lesbian women in South Africa? To what extent to do you think your sexuality influenced the process? Do you think that gay men or straight people would find it easier to adopt?

23) Do you think that your race had any influence on your experience of the adoption process?