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Navigating Methodological Concerns at the Data Collection Stage: Lessons from a Qualitative Indian-Irish Adoption Study

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Abstract

This paper was written to describe the experiences of the researchers in designing cross-cultural research on the culturally sensitive topic of adoptive parenthood, a field in which there is a dearth of literature. Taking the experience and examples from an Indian-Irish study on domestic adoptive parenthood, the paper details the steps as to how the researchers used their own relationship with adoption, and the different cultural contexts to which they belonged, as a starting point in designing and implementing this research. The discussion utilizes a conceptual framework involving insider-outsider positioning, reflexivity and five philosophical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology, and rhetoric) to show how cross-cultural research can be negotiated. Through the research design and data collection stage, researchers' understanding about themselves and about the adoption process in the two countries, is used as a backdrop for the exploration. While various deliberations and negotiations between the researchers are described, the paper also shows the differences and methodological concerns that can be steered through inter-cultural territory, where reflexivity is central to all stages of the endeavor. These processes and reflections are summarized in this paper, with recommendations for students and academics to promote the discussions around the design of qualitative cross-cultural work.

Keywords

qualitative, reflexivity, cross-culture, domestic adoption, adoptive parents

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Navigating Methodological Concerns at the Data Collection Stage: Lessons from a Qualitative Indian-Irish Adoption Study

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This paper was written to describe the experiences of the researchers in designing cross-cultural research on the culturally sensitive topic of adoptive parenthood, a field in which there is a dearth of literature. Taking the experience and examples from an Indian-Irish study on domestic adoptive parenthood, the paper details the steps as to how the researchers used their own relationship with adoption, and the different cultural contexts to which they belonged, as a starting point in designing and implementing this research. The discussion utilizes a conceptual framework involving insider-outsider positioning, reflexivity and five philosophical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology, and rhetoric) to show how cross-cultural research can be negotiated. Through the research design and data collection stage, researchers' understanding about themselves and about the adoption process in the two countries, is used as a backdrop for the exploration. While various deliberations and negotiations between the researchers are described, the paper also shows the differences and methodological concerns that can be steered through inter-cultural territory, where reflexivity is central to all stages of the endeavor. These processes and reflections are summarized in this paper, with recommendations for students and academics to promote the discussions around the design of qualitative cross-cultural work.

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Introduction

Cross-cultural research helps to develop a contextual understanding of human behavior, highlighting the similarities and differences across two or more cultures, with the purpose of identifying the impact of culture on a given phenomenon (Munichin, 2002). One of the options in undertaking cross-cultural research is qualitative methodology, which deals with both “subjective experience and situational meaning” while also conveying sensitivity (Davies et al., 2009, p. 6). However, there are gaps in the field of cross-cultural research and discussions on culturally sensitive methodologies are largely absent from the qualitative literature (Liamputtong, 2008) as compared to the quantitative studies (Choi et al., 2017; Sobota & Ozakinci, 2018). As a result, researchers who wish to work with socially sensitive topics, such as adoption of children, are often confronted with challenges inherent in cross-cultural research. This paper discusses the experiences of an Indian and Irish researcher through the planning, design, and conducting a qualitative cross-cultural study, the overview of which is given below.

Overview of the Indian-Irish Research Study

The Context of the Study

The Indian-Irish study was built on the foundations of an Indian study which was conducted as part of Dr. Mitra's doctoral work that commenced in 2012. The Indian study analyzed adoptive parenthood across different phases of the adoption process, through an ecological and psychological lens. Data collection from five sets of Indian adoptive parents was completed by 2014, before Dr Mitra travelled to Ireland to work for nine months with Dr O'Brien¹.

An initial period spent together was key in building trust between us. We worked in a mentor and mentee relationship and used the initial time to gain an understanding of the specifics of the adoption system and experiences in each other's country, as well as our relationship and position to the subject. We were curious to understand the experiences of domestic adoptive parents across the two cultures. Curiosity and openness to learn about each other's cultures and countries became central in the subsequent development of the study. Therefore, we decided to replicate the Indian study design in the Irish context, with cognizance that the design needed to change to consider the cross-cultural issues relevant to comparing the experiences of Indian and Irish adoptive parents. In this way, it can be said that the Indian-Irish study had its genesis in the Indian doctoral work of Dr Mitra. During the conceptualization of this study, as researchers coming from different cultural and professional backgrounds, we faced several dilemmas in planning and conducting the research with the Irish domestic adoptive parents. It was at this stage we decided to map our own experiences while embarking on this study, using a cross-cultural lens. Exploring our socio-political and historical context of adoption was a first step.

Background of the Two Countries

India and Ireland differ enormously in geographical location, population size, and economic performance but share several socio-historical similarities. These include: both countries were former British colonies (Cairns & Richards, 1988; Kiberd, 1995; Lloyd, 2005), both place a strong emphasis on kinship ties and kinship care (Apparao, 1997; Richardson, 2003), both have a common legacy of derogatory treatment of unwed mothers and their children (albeit over somewhat different timescales) (McCaughren & Lovett, 2014; O'Brien & Mitra, 2019; Richardson, 2003), and both still follow the "clean break" or "closed" system of adoption² (Mitra et al., 2018). However, both countries have witnessed a gradual transformation in terms of socio-legal aspects of adoption. For example, religion-based adoption laws dominated the adoption process in both Ireland and India around the 1950s. In Ireland, Section 12(2) of the *1952 Adoption Act* stated that no adoption order could be made unless the applicant(s) were of the same religion as the child and his or her biological parents(s) or the religion of mother, if the child was illegitimate (The Adoption Board, 1954). While this is now changed in Ireland, similar criteria for religious compatibility in child adoption can be traced in the Indian system, with *The Guardians and Wards Act (GAMA) of 1890* that ensured guardianship rights to Muslim, Christian, Parsi, and Jewish communities. While for Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain communities, the adoptive parent rights were provided for under the *Hindu*

¹ Dr. Mitra got an Erasmus Mundus fellowship for a nine-month period from October 2014 - June 2015 that required her to travel to University College Dublin and work under the mentorship of Dr. O'Brien.

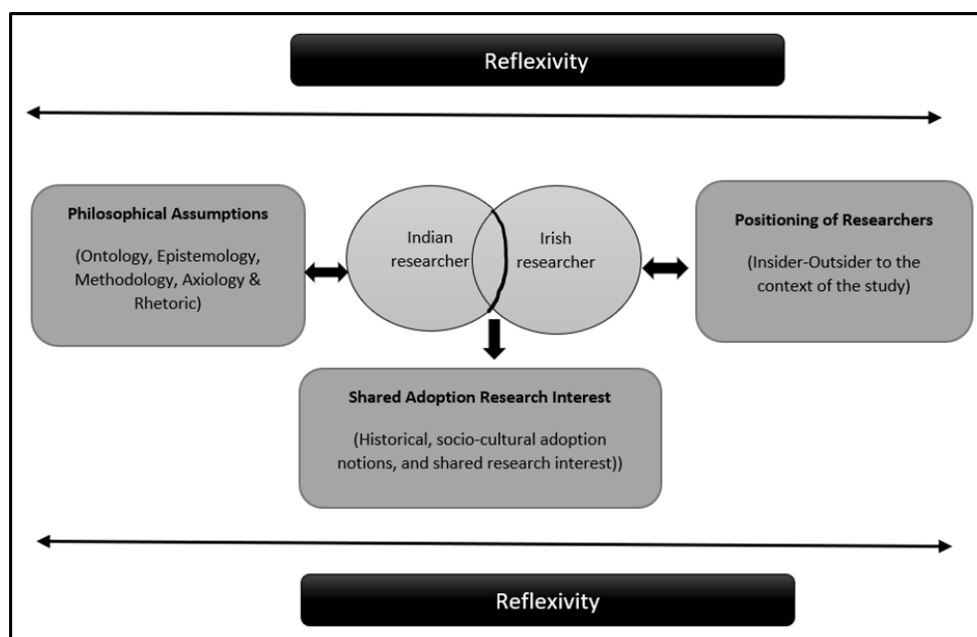
²The closed adoption system is one where there is no identifying information shared between the birth or first mother and the adoptive family and child. All legal connections between the birth mother and adoptive family are severed at the time of making the adoption order.

Adoption and Maintenance Act (HAMA) of 1956 (Bhargava, 2005). Hence, the orthodoxy of religious morality in both countries significantly influenced non-family domestic adoptions³. Over time, up to the 1990s, a gradual transformation towards the principle of the “best interest of the child” began to occur in the two countries, reflecting a modern and reformist process in child adoption. With these socio-legal-historical similarities, as academics and practitioners, we were aware of the strong emotional, political, and social discourses and narratives that surrounded the topic of adoption. Coupled with this awareness and our shared research interest (i.e., in areas of child adoption, social policy, family psychology and qualitative methodology), we proceeded to build the conceptual framework from which we approached the field.

Conceptual Framework

Our understanding of each other’s socio-cultural histories as well as child adoption knowledge, helped to narrow our focus to three aspects, which built a conceptual framework for the study. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework where the intersectional area depicts (1) the researchers shared adoption research interests with a particular focus on the similarities and differences in the socio-historical legacy of adoption in our respective countries as the starting point, (2) the considerations with respect to the philosophical assumptions in qualitative research (ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology, and rhetoric), and (3) “insider-outsider positioning” to appraise and depict our cultural positions and influences. All these aspects had a bi-directional influence on us as researchers, with reflexivity being all encompassing throughout the data collection process.

Figure 1.1



Note. The conceptual framework of two researchers for designing and executing the Indian-Irish study.

³The term “non-family domestic adoption” includes those families who adopt a child who is not related to adoptive parents and “the adopted child becomes the lawful child of his/her adoptive parents with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that are attached to a biological child” (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2015, p. 2). These adoptions are also called stranger adoption or non-relative adoptions.

Research Questions

The development of the conceptual framework may precede, occur concurrently, or follow the formation of research questions (Miles et al., 2014). However, in the present study, the research questions and the conceptual framework developed and evolved through our interaction with each other and with the Irish adoption participants during the fieldwork. Reading and review of literature in the context of cross-cultural study design facilitated further condensing of the research questions. This approach of reading and interacting eventually gave a more definite form to the methodology-related research questions in the study. These questions fitted within a larger research question which aimed to explore the similarities and differences between Irish and Indian adoptive parents' experiences.

The questions as outlined below are exploratory and descriptive (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and helped to restate the cross-cultural aspect of the study in more specific terms (Creswell, 2007):

1. How did the researchers' attunement to their own relationship with adoption and cultural contexts propel the development and use of an "insider-outsider" positioning?
2. How was reflexivity, or self-awareness of the relationship between the researcher, the researched, and context (Cruz, 2015) utilized in research design and data collection?
3. How were the five philosophical assumptions explored between the two researchers while conducting the study?
4. What adaptations related to data collection were needed in the Indian study design to fit with the Irish context?

Discussion of the Findings

As we engaged and focused on exploring Irish and Indian adoptive parents' experiences, several observations were made in relation to the methodology related research questions. This section provides findings in terms of the methodological processes and practices that were undertaken during the design and data collection phase.

The Beginning of the Research: Interpersonal Reflexivity

Following the assertion of Jootun, McGhee, and Marland (2009), reflexivity was integral to the entire research process and became an essential part of knowledge generation through all phases of our study. As qualitative researchers and clinical practitioners, we realized that the process of reflexivity begins before developing the research design. This is in line with how Mann (2016) describes reflexivity as being, "focused on the self and ongoing inter-subjectivities. It recognizes mutual shaping, reciprocity and bi-directionality, and that interaction is context-dependent and context renewing" (p. 28). We were also aware of Roger et al.'s (2018), assertion that the interplay of the researcher's "inward view," or introspection, with the reflexivity process is virtually absent from the qualitative literature, while researcher's understanding of their outer "world view" in relation to the data was better understood.

Therefore, from the outset we fore-grounded reflexivity as central. As part of the process, we were aware that the construction of knowledge in the adoption field can influence and structure relationships, that attitudes and beliefs are influential in the field of study, and that maintaining a balance between us as researchers was central across the research stages of cross-cultural research. Moreover, our professional backgrounds and training, O'Brien as

social worker and family therapist and Mitra as psychologist, facilitated us in creating and maintaining a reflexive attitude in the study. This helped us to become attuned to the importance of self-awareness and being as explicit as possible about self and other when working together. It also contributed to understanding bidirectionality between the researchers and the researched and gave us a consciousness of the mutual influences that may occur in that domain. This focus on reflexivity intersected and was aligned with the interpretative paradigm (discussed in later section) from which we conducted our research (Lavis, 2010; Ponterotto & Grieger, 1999). Therefore, reflexivity not only included how our knowledge and its construction in the adoption field influence and structure relationships, but also how our attitudes and beliefs related to the field of study were significant to maintain a balance between us as researchers. This was central across the various research stages of the cross-cultural research.

As part of the reflexivity process, we engaged in several discussions about our past research experiences including people, places, and topics. We were both interested in getting to know each other not only as researchers and clinicians but also as people. Our discussions and interactions took place in professional, research, and personal spaces in the university, in clinical contexts and in spaces across the city of Dublin and beyond. It was the knowledge of professional and personal selves, having an openness to knowing our own and each other's interests, strengths, and weaknesses, trusting our intuitions and judgements about ourselves and each other and the field of study, which formed the part of "interpersonal reflexivity" (Ibrahim & Edgley, 2015; Walsh, 2003). This strengthened the planning and the execution of the cross-cultural research, discussed further in following sections.

"Insider-Outsider" Positioning of Researchers

Alongside reflexivity, we also drew on the concept of "insider-outsider" positioning to gain an understanding and to navigate our similarities and differences as researchers and professionals in the study. Theoretically, a researcher is defined as an "insider" if they have membership in the group due to sharing similar characteristic, role, or experience of the participants under study (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). An "outsider" is defined as a researcher that has knowledge and experience of a topic but does not share the cultural characteristics of the participants or the insider researcher. In this study, Dr. O'Brien was viewed as an insider in the Irish context, due to her familiarity with the socio-cultural history of adoptions in Ireland, knowing the contextual features of local adoption, as well as sharing certain social, cultural, and linguistic characteristics with the research participants (Laverack & Brown, 2003). On the other hand, Dr. Mitra was seen as an outsider as she was new to the people, culture, and context involved in the Irish adoption system. We were conscious that, when it came to understanding the Indian aspect of the study, these positions were reversed. A focus on this concept helped us to attune to the influence of culture and context in our understanding, knowledge, and experience of adoption. We followed the assertion of Ely et al. (1991) that the insider and outsider researchers need to both situate themselves in the research and appreciate change that takes place over the duration of the study, arising from the immersion in experiences and narratives. While utilizing the space within and between insider – outsider to understand more fully our own and each other's cultures, different positions, and movement were understood as they can exist along the insider-outsider positional reflexivity (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). For example, at the beginning of the research, Dr. Mitra was situated more as an outsider on the insider – outsider continuum. As Mitra immersed herself in the history and current context of Irish adoptions (through reading the literature, attending lectures/participating in seminars, and interacting with academics and social workers in the field), her growing understanding enabled her to be more central to planning data collection, undertaking field work and to answer queries

from research participants on the Irish adoption system. Our experience fits with the claim of Ritchie et al. (2009) that the positions of insiders and outsiders can be viewed as existing along a continuum, with the potential to alter during a research project, where the researcher is “neither fully inside nor outside” (Milligan, 2016, p. 239). For instance, it soon became apparent that Mitra’s position as outsider was perceived as an advantage by Irish adoptive parents, who showed great interest in having the opportunity to meet an Indian person and perhaps saw Mitra as less an outsider than she saw herself! For example, one of the Irish adoptive mothers asserted:

In Ireland, everyone knows everyone else, it’s a small place. Its good in a way but also a problem as then there is no privacy, which one wants. It’s good to discuss things with you as you’re not from here.

This assertion from the participant became a catalyst to change our data collection design. Initially, we had decided to do joint interviews but having reflected on the feedback from the first interview (which was more to build rapport, have a general conversation about the study, and adoption in the Indian and Irish context), we decided a follow up interview would be conducted individually by Dr. Mitra. We thought this might facilitate discussions which participants may not feel as comfortable having with an Irish researcher present. By opening this space, it was felt that curiosity about Indian adoption might also prompt conversations about sensitive adoption-related topics connected to adoptive parents’ experiences with social workers, birth parents, and search and reunion.

At that time, we were aware there was less possibility for O’Brien to immerse herself in the Indian adoption system, and, therefore, her cross-cultural knowledge would remain less developed, compared to Mitra’s understanding of the Irish context. Nonetheless, much as Mitra started out being an outsider in the Irish context, O’Brien’s knowledge of the Indian adoption system grew as both Mitra and O’Brien were immersed in the study and mutual experiences were discussed. This growing appreciation of each other’s context, while continuing to acknowledge the differences in our understanding, enabled us to offer reflections during the interviews on the comparative nature of both adoption systems. This proved to be an area of great interest to the Irish participants, who asked many questions about the two systems. These interactions and discussions with participants about the two-adoption system facilitated us in turn to critically appraise our own positions to adoption research and practice in our own cultures, while also acquiring knowledge of the other. Through this positioning, over the course of the study, as reflexivity was used to channel our focus and understanding on our positioning throughout the study, we also utilized the space between insider – outsider to understand our own and each other’s cultures.

Navigating Data Collection Process in Cross Cultural Research

In this section, the processes involved at the data collection stage are selected to discuss how differences in context need to be considered when undertaking cross-cultural research and how positioning and reflexivity, were used to navigate this element of the work. Examples discussed include the drafting of letters of introduction to adoption agencies, seeking their cooperation to notify adoptive parents of the study, constructing letters to adoptive parents inviting them to participate in the study, and interview preparation.

The Introductory Letters to Gatekeepers and Study Participants. In India, writing formal letters utilizes a concise and brief style. Thus, when writing to Indian adoption agencies in their role as gatekeepers, and to Indian adoptive parents as potential research participants,

letters were objective, carefully worded with less emphasis on a narrative style. Limited information was contained in the letter (e.g., type of questions that would be used in the interview). This approach was also undertaken as, at an early stage in the Indian study, due to a dilemma of providing sufficient information while recognizing that if too much information was provided, participants might opt out of partaking in the research (Mitra, 2017). The concise and brief approach fitted with the Indian cultural context also, where secrecy plays in Indian adoption and only few adoptive parents openly share aspects of adoption with others. As a prelude to the Irish study, the letters from the Indian study were reviewed and adapted through a process of discussion and negotiation between both researchers. In the Irish culture, O'Brien argued, based on her knowledge of Irish context, for a more narrative style of writing and a need to include more detailed information. The changes were largely determined by cultural expectations and included the importance of the researchers being adaptive and open to new as well as tacit learning. Reflexivity was key in this process - we had to trust each other in relation to suggestions for changes or modifications, while remaining sensitive to the influence of our own and each other's positions. Appreciation of the differences between the two countries in terms of formality, style, and consideration of how adoption is constructed in different societies at a point in time was key to these adaptations. As a result, the researchers' backgrounds, specifics of the study, types of questions to be asked, length and number of interviews and opt-out possibilities were included in letters to both Irish adoption social workers and adoptive parents.

This adaptive positioning included attunement to attitudes and use of cultural knowledge across different phases of the research including negotiations with gatekeepers, adaptation and development of the interview schedule, conducting interviews and analyzing data. These qualities and attitudes are significant in designing and implementing cross-cultural research.

In-depth Interviews. Collection of data in Ireland took seven months to complete. The Irish interviews were undertaken by both researchers, with one follow up interview conducted individually by Mitra, in the homes of the adoptive parents and each interview lasted between 2-3 hours. We placed great emphasis on building relationships between researchers and study participants. Meeting children, family pets and drinking tea all assisted in the getting to know each other. Attention was drawn to the different backgrounds and experiences of the researchers as part of this process. The adoptive parents were then invited to tell of their experiences. Reflexivity was used in the development of the co-researcher positioning in the interviews. It was agreed that researchers would take turns in asking the main or leading questions, while the other offered reflections or follow-up questions. An example of this process is given below. In this episode the adoptive parents are discussing the time period between hearing about the referral, meeting the child and the child joining them in their home (H: Husband, W: Wife, S: Sahana, V: Valerie):

V: Was it difficult for you to wait before the child joined your family from the foster family?

H₈: Yeah...it was... like over 10 days we went to meet him when he was with his foster family. The place was quite at a distance like an hour and a half, and we were trying to finish our work and schedule the meetings. The whole week went like a blur... like we were just doing it. It was the most difficult week for us.

S: How was it difficult?

W₈: Well, it was difficult in terms of... emotional and physical... it was very difficult to be in somebody else's house, meeting your child and feeling that you are being watched. It was just very uncomfortable.

This kind of co-ordination between the researchers enabled a dialogical space to be developed in which reflections were freely offered or paraphrased, and observations could be made and clarified. The focus on reflexivity alerted us to the need to give each other the opportunity and space to act if felt that such an intervention would assist the process. Coordination was further enhanced as, immediately following each interview, observations of the interview and the experiences including our own processes within it, were discussed on the drive away from the interviewees' homes. Furthermore, each researcher committed to write a detailed memo of the interviews from their perspective and including the post-interview reflections, within 24 hours and to make it available to each other. Our memos and field notes helped to check individual and joint observations and to explore if there were discrepancies between what researchers thought participants had said, how they said it and what they did (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This process continued as we listened to our recorded interviews and read through the transcripts, and all became part of and facilitated interpersonal reflexivity (Walsh, 2003). Hence, reflexivity, became "a means for critically inspecting the entire research process" (Hiles & Cermák, 2008, p. 152) and acted as a reminder of our own thoughts and feelings while collecting data and moving towards analysis.

Interpretivist Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions

As the focus of the study was to understand the world (i.e., in hermeneutic tradition called *Verstehen*, a German word which means "to understand") from the viewpoint of the couples participating in the research in the two contexts, it was important for us to work within a paradigm⁴ that fitted this brief. With this aim, an interpretivist paradigm was chosen (Creswell, 2007). This synced with the use of dialogic exchange, our orientation towards similarities and differences in the field and how we, as researchers, used these observations. This paradigm provided us with the scope to utilize a central tenet of the "symbolic interactionism approach," which emphasizes that the researcher and participants in their respective roles in the research process are central to making meaning (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Therefore, we prioritized a design for the study that enabled interactive researcher-participant dialogue to develop. This was achieved through enabling participants to share experiences in their own way and at their own pace and provided a space for our thoughts and understanding to be included as the research progressed. Hence, this paradigmatic approach enabled us to build a mutual trust with the participants, as well as with each other, where we could share our deliberations and question each other's ideas and in turn, we gained a more in-depth understanding of the adoption process. Five philosophical assumptions (i.e., ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology, and rhetoric) under this paradigm provided a scaffolding for us as researchers and our interactions with the participants. Each of these is discussed in turn:

(a) Ontology. Concerned with the nature of reality and being, and what can be known about reality. According to the interpretivist paradigm, "there exist multiple, constructed realities (known as the *relativist* position)" rather than a single true reality (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130). Hence, the ontological assumption for our cross-cultural research was one of

⁴ A "paradigm" refers to a "set of interrelated assumptions about the social world which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for the organized study of that world" (Filstead, 1979, p. 34).

constructivism, where experientially diverse realities of the researchers as well the participants were considered (Schwandt, 2000). Our objective was to learn and incorporate our shared understanding in the study design which had two spheres of influence: (1) our similar professional backgrounds and research interests, and (2) our understanding of adoption being a culturally sensitive topic in both countries, whilst recognizing that there were differences and similarities in the lived realities. Mindful of these influences, we engaged in critical discussions about the adoption field, read each other's published/unpublished work and continuously questioned the dynamics and ethical responsibilities of being a researcher and practitioner in the field. This mutual understanding enhanced the robustness of our cross-cultural research design, as there was greater openness and transparency to each other's feedback and approach towards research – which was essential in our interview process. However, an awareness that there are limits of understanding - both mutual and individual, is key to cross cultural research. An example of how hard it is to fully appreciate the limitations in understanding practice until one is immersed in data collection is illustrated. Herein lies the nuance involved in cross cultural research. Mitra realized that, even though a legally closed adoption system is a feature of both countries, the sharing of the adoption story with the child and others, was different in the two contexts. For example, in India, identifying information of the birth mother is not shared with the adoptive family before the placement, the system is closed by law and it is rare for any contact between birth parent, adoptive parents and child after the placement. In Ireland, on the other hand, adoption is also closed in law, but in reality, over the last thirty years, the relationship between birth and adoptive parents has changed and many remain loosely connected, largely through letter box contact. This knowledge was shared between the researchers, and O'Brien further clarified that, in Ireland, adoption sharing/contact occurs largely on an informal basis, is mediated through adoption agencies and is more letter-based than face-to-face contact. Whilst we had arrived at an understanding of open and closed adoption systems across the two cultures prior to the interviews, in listening to the stories of the adoptive parents, both of us realized that hearing the realities of each family's situation challenged our previous understandings and perceptions. For example, one of the families shared that, even though they write letters to the birth mother with their adoptive son and daughter, they never receive any information from her but only gifts on Christmas. Another family with two adopted sons from different birth mothers shared that there is a regular exchange of letters only between one of the birth mothers and the adoptive parents once a year, but they have difficulty sharing the specifics with their child, as they don't want to highlight differences in the levels of birth mother contact between their two adopted children. For another family, there was no contact at all. We came to realize that while we understood at a theoretical level how openness and contact in the adoption systems operated, the differences between the stories told and stories lived was immense, not only across countries but also within countries. This realization necessitated a re-examination of our own and each other's meaning-making of the context and the field of study.

(b) Epistemology. Concerns itself with “the relationship between the ‘knower’ (the research participant) and the ‘would-be knower’ (the researcher)” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131) and the positioning by which researchers strive to get as close as possible to the meanings relayed by the participants being studied (Creswell, 2007). Within the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher/participant relationship is both transactional and subjective and relates to the concept of *Erlebnis* utilized by various qualitative researchers, which in German means “to experience.” In our context, we focused on our lived experiences as researchers – what pre-suppositions we had about each other's cultures (e.g., both facts and stereotypes about Ireland and India), about the adoption system (e.g., similarities and differences), about the capability of generating a comparative research design (e.g., belief in ourselves and then in each other),

and having an empathic stance towards each other (i.e., where we come from, our backgrounds, our experiences, and understanding). This focus facilitated our aim to achieve an appreciative stance towards the participants. As we became more attuned to ourselves and to each other as researchers, this helped to create a dialogical space with our participants in which we wished neither to act as judges nor question the external validity of what the participants shared (Willig, 2012). Our job was not to probe but to listen attentively and respectfully. For example, when the adoptive parents shared that their decision to adopt stemmed from the infertility of one of them, it was of utmost important to us as researchers not to question their stories but to pay attention to the use of pause, silence, respectful questioning and sensitive language to convey empathy, for example, "... it must be a hard time for you, and we hope that you got a good doctor at that time.... the strength of you both is amazing in how you two dealt with the situation." At the same time, we were conscious throughout the interview of the body language of the participants as a means of communication, which differ across cultures. For example, in one interview, a participant was fidgeting whilst answering the question. One of us thought it was more to do with unease whilst the other thought it was more to do with a skin condition that was noticeable, but not obvious. In this scenario, O'Brien thinking the unease was more connected to the skin issue continued the conversation. Mitra noticing the unease of both participants intercepted and said:

Again, it is important that no one feels any pressure to have a conversation on a topic that is perhaps too sensitive. Is it ok with you both that we continue or is this a time that we should take a break for a cup of tea?

The management of our empathic stand towards each other as well as towards the participants, added to the epistemological foundation of the researchers.

(c) Methodology. Silverman (2000) defined methodology as "a general approach to studying research topics" (p. 88) which governs the direction of the research and how the participants are heard and the text is seen (Fidyk, 2009). The study followed a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of the participants and their "intentionality," that is, how their conscious choices construct and influence their experiences (Husserl, 1970), while also being aware of our assumptions in the process. Since bracketing (i.e., to set aside or *epoche* in Greek) is one of the elements in phenomenological research, it was practiced through use of reflexivity by being aware of our own personal bias, attitudes, and perspectives (Larkin et al., 2006; Moustakas, 1994), about the aspects of adoption in both cultures and our relationships with various elements. This became part of our personal reflexivity journey. Prior to data collection, we discussed pre-conceived assumption we held that were connected to our own and each other's contexts – examples identified were: women may be more comfortable discussing infertility as compared to men, parents may not share the fact of adoption with their kinship network, and their readiness to share the adoption story may have changed over time in response the actual rearing of the child. Identified assumptions were bracketed and checked continuously throughout the study. This was achieved in part by maintaining a diary in which we wrote memos, and asking ourselves questions such as: "When we think in this way, what are we not seeing, hearing, or understanding? What are the ideas that I/ we are so in love with, which potentially prevents us from letting other ideas emerge? What were the preconceptions I/ we have of each family and how has that changed or stayed the same during and following the interviews?"

The diary method and creating space for dialogue aided in recognizing the ideas and assumptions as well as bracketing our assumptions of each interview. It further enabled us to distinguish between our private attitudes (e.g., male participants might be less responsive

during the discussion on infertility) and the realities of the situations in the field (e.g., male participants were sometimes initiators in discussing infertility as the driver that led to the choice of adoption). Therefore, bracketing helped to challenge our assumptions and in this work, we took account of time, place, context, age, culture, gender, class, ethnicity, disabilities, power, etc. Openness, mutual respect, trust, and an appreciation that we were not always right were important throughout this journey.

(d) Axiology. The researchers' values and lived experiences that can influence the process and the outcome of the research (Ponterotto, 2005). So in addition to using bracketing to work with our pre-conceived ideas/assumptions, we also adopted a position of detachment. This involved movement across time and space, and we were drawn by Attia and Edge's description of how to "step back to reflect and step up again to action" (2017, p. 36). For example, we used detachment during data collection in terms of negotiating expert positions and how we navigated our dual experience as researchers and clinicians. We saw participants as "experts" in terms of their knowledge and experiences of adoption but, on the other hand, the participants routinely considered us as the "experts" due to our background as a psychologist (Dr. Mitra) and a social worker/family therapist (Dr. O'Brien). Participants regularly asked what we considered counselling-related questions on topics related to parenting, child development, couple, and family relationships. We strove to keep "professional roles" as separate as possible from "qualitative researcher" roles through using the "detached positioning." This is much in line with what Guillemin and Gillam argue that a reflexive researcher is aware of factors that influence the research and can "step back and take a critical look at his or her own role in the research process" (2004, p. 275). We recognized the power dynamic inherent in this situation and, in this space, we spoke of general differences we had encountered in our examination of the Irish and Indian contexts amongst professionals, amongst the families and researchers. While we shared ideas from these contexts, we always suggested to the participants to hold our ideas lightly. We responded usually by stating:

While we understand your concerns about family relationships and parenting issues, if it is ok with you, we will now focus on your adoption story. We can certainly discuss this issue later and we will let you know where you may be able to find resources, etc.

This approach facilitated both participants and researchers to realign attention to the stories that were the central focus of the study.

Paraphrasing was another tool we used to summarize the perspectives of the participants at different points during the interview. This enabled us to check the validity of what we understood from the participants' perspective and vice-versa. It also facilitated giving direction to the interview as well as ensuring accuracy of the perceptions of what we were hearing and understanding. For example, one of the women interviewed shared this account when discussing the impetus for adoption:

...the time of infertility was our longest couple time where we felt that how the presence of a child would have added more meaning. It was like we both talked to each other but then how much we can talk and share. (Mother 1)

This was paraphrased as follows: "As a couple, you spent a lot of time with each other which was fulfilling and satisfying. However, you have the idea that a child's presence would have added more meaning to your relationship" (Mitra). Care was taken while paraphrasing that our statements should not be overtly influential on the participants, that is, not shaping the

participants thoughts but facilitating the conversation such as seen in the above example, as well as being aware of the need to involve both the spouses equally in the interview questions.

Detachment and paraphrasing both assisted in creating a space in which the balance between hearing, understanding, and interpreting could be achieved during the interviews. We were conscious of the influence of polarized discourse surrounding adoptive parenthood, so we sought to inquire not only of the positives such as fulfilment, joy, or contentment but also to enquire about parent's fears (e.g., attachment), beliefs (e.g., parenting style), anxieties (e.g., concerns related to adoption), or the unspoken or more invisible stories related to infertility, loss of biological parenthood, and continued hope for a pregnancy. This added a richer understanding of the adoption journey for the participants and our part in it.

(e) Rhetoric. The “language used to present the procedures and results of research to one's intended audience” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 132). We decided to use a personalized style of writing, for example, the “I” and “we” when speaking about our own part in the study as well as preserving the confidentiality of participants by using descriptors such as Mother 1 and Father 1 for Family 1. This afforded us an opportunity to be coherent in relation to our position along the “objective – subjective” continuum in research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) and to make our part in the research process explicit and therefore more accountable.

In summary, the five philosophical assumptions underpinning qualitative research outlined above helped us to position ourselves in designing and conducting the research. It also enabled us to have conversations with participants in a way that brought forth rich descriptions of cross-cultural experiences and to manage the power dynamics inherent between the researcher and researched.

Final Reflections

This paper aims to explore issues from the perspective of two researchers involved in conducting cross-cultural research through an examination of methodological issues and challenges encountered during the planning and data collection stage. A final reflection on the work offers a summary of what we learnt about conducting cross-cultural research and about ourselves through our engagement in this research.

Perception about ourselves as researchers in a cross-cultural setting became clearer through our interaction with each other, where trust and transparency played a significant role. This laid the foundation for openness in accepting the feedback related to developing contextual understanding of the adoption field across both countries. The initial period spent together where we worked in a mentor and mentee relationship was key in building trust between us. We continued to build on that trust and mutual respect whilst making explicit how power differences associated with roles might be influencing. Our aim was to conduct a co-researched study which examined Indian and Irish adoptive parents' experiences and was also one in which the cultural aspects of the study participants and researchers would be fore-fronted.

We also realized that this study was possible because we had sufficient time – whilst we had other demands on our time during this period - we had in fact a period of nine months when we worked, talked, and played together on a very regular basis. We are aware that many researchers involved in cross-cultural research may not have such time available. Hence, the central tenet becomes how to work within the circumstances given to build a co-researcher relationship and a cross-cultural research design.

The conceptual framework of reflexivity, insider-outsider positioning, and an attunement to the differences and similarities of each context, alongside five philosophical assumptions underpinning qualitative research, is proposed as useful in navigating such an

exploration. At a technique level, we have shown how bracketing, detachment, paraphrasing, diary-keeping, and writing/sharing memos were used. Use of these techniques added to the opportunities offered by our open, curious, respectful, honest, and reflexive attitudes. Our questioning stances to each other was enhanced by our individual and mutual engagement, with reflexivity as central, at a process level.

Perception about phenomenon (adoption) being studied: We continued to hold curiosity as a central tenet and continuously questioned each other on aspects of adoption (how is it similar/different across cultures?; what is ethical and unethical?; whose voices are privileged or silenced?; what is known and unknown) and culture (e.g., what is different and similar in terms of mannerisms, sense of time, way of greeting, use of language?; what is seen as respectful, non-respectful, etc.?). The insider-outsider positioning, along with the use of bracketing, facilitated us to understand the taken-for-granted assumptions about our culture, its structure, and policies (e.g., “what exists in a closed adoption system?” and “how it is perceived by the adoptive parents?”) while at the same time to gain the knowledge of the other culture and context (Asselin, 2003). We became increasingly aware of how insider-outsider positioning can change over time and is influenced by the way participants see the researcher as well as the way researchers reflect, interact, and adapt to new culture and knowledge. Being a researcher from outside in this research held a particular meaning for the participants, as discussed previously. We noted that Mitra’s presence added to the novelty of the research and the ideas she brought were valued. The participants liked talking to Mitra about Indian adoptive parents’ stories as they could relate to them. As time went by, we were able to intercept these experiences with those of Irish adoptive parents. This understanding gave us enhanced insight into the insider-outsider positioning as fluid and dynamic in nature and that reflexivity in this process is largely inter-actional and inter-subjective. As Reay (2007, p. 611) asserted, reflexivity is “about giving as full and honest an account of the research process as possible, in particular explicating the position of the researcher in relation to the research.” This became possible with the help of both positional and inter-personal reflexivity, which gave an understanding of how to approach each other as researchers within the cultural context and in the research field.

Hence, both perceptions about ourselves and perceptions about the phenomenon of adoption were understood through the socio-cultural, legal, and psychological lens. Using these lenses not only brought our focus on the realities of the field of adoption as it exists in both countries but also contributed to our reflexive attitude, clarifying, and strengthening our understanding about the “researcher in the process of research” and “researcher in the process of cross-cultural research.” This became the central point in our discussions while understanding adoption system across both countries.

The understandings that developed in this study gives rise to several core recommendations in terms of cross-cultural research. These include the importance of researchers immersing themselves within the culture of the other, taking time to understand their history, and being aware of the limitations of their own cultural knowledge before designing qualitative cross-cultural research. Secondly, balancing what each researcher knows about their own culture and how they want to present that knowledge to each other and to the research participants to facilitate maximum understanding and sharing, is important. Attunement to power and role differentials is key to this exploration. Finally, appreciating the importance of building trust, openness, and curiosity between cross-cultural researchers, and how this process takes time, is key to the work.

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