

The following real-life accounts describe the constellation of Misattributed Parentage Experiences covered in this course. Pay specific attention to the common psychological experiences described among the stories: grief, loss, trauma, identity confusion and effect on family dynamics. In addition to these macro concepts, are the often more subtle micro concepts of belonging, self-esteem, family roles and social identity that a trained, experienced eye can see the cumulative effect on psychosocial stages and general psychological wellbeing.

The effect of an MPE discovery is not simply relegated to the psychological realm as the right to know personal information is now inherently tied to the legal and scientific realms that vie to define identity and the right to access genetic information amidst the right to privacy. The stories in this section speak to the variety of concepts influencing an MPE from discovery and all throughout the healing journey and are important elements of best practices when working with this population.

Jodi

non-paternal event (NPE)

I never asked my mom or dad the whole time I was growing up why I looked different than everyone in my family. But growing up in rural small-town Iowa, I was keenly aware of it and it affected everything I did throughout my childhood. I was the only "black" child in my class, my school, my town, and the neighboring towns! There were times I hated my life. I for sure hated the way I looked. My mother straightened my hair from the time it was long enough to do so. Through no fault of her own, she had no idea how to take care of it. I hated my skin, my hair, my lips, my long arms, everything. I just wanted to look like my family, anyone in my family.

Growing up looking so different provided a number of challenges. It was never brought up when I was young minus a couple of rare racist comments. It causes you to question your belonging and worth. But when I started to get good at basketball and branched out away from my small hometown, it became the subject of questions I had no answers to. In college, it caused me to act out in many self-destructive ways as I tried to figure out where I fit in. The "white" world I was raised in, or the "black" world my physical features put me in.

So fast forward to being married, having kids, still completely insecure about who I am and now I have this beautiful rainbow of children that ask me questions all the time. When I'm out with my girls, we get asked ALL the time. People really are trying to be nice, they say, "Your girls are so beautiful, what are you?" That question makes me laugh. I would never think of walking up to a stranger and asking "what are you?", but people do. Our canned response was always, we don't know. And we say thank you and smile and walk away.

A midlife crisis (that's what I'm blaming it on) caused me to take a DNA test through Ancestry at the ripe old age of 45. I got my results back on September 28, 2018, at 3:30 pm, a day that has changed my life forever! Within 72 hours of getting "the email", I had a name for who my biological father was and had emailed two new brothers! One brother I figured out had grown up literally 15 miles from me. We knew who each other was (we were both good athletes) but didn't know we were siblings! My world turned upside down when I found out my biological father was an African American, former NBA basketball player, his life so far from my rural farm

town upbringing. But the story's complexity magnified as I found out the true story of my conception, which was set in the middle of racial tensions of the 70's. My mother never spoke of the event to anyone until the day I confronted her with the test results.

I've been dealing with the emotions of finding out who my BF is and the longing to meet the man who gave me life and yet hurt my mother, the difficult relationship with my mother now because she refuses to talk about it and let me understand what happened, the roller coaster of emotions involved in realizing I have no full siblings and now a slew of 1/2 siblings, meeting those new siblings and cousins and other family, dealing with an ethnicity I never felt like I could explore or embrace, dealing with my brother and sister I grew up with and their lack of understanding what I'm going through. My marriage particularly has taken a lot of work as my poor husband navigates this journey with me,

Michèle

step-child adoptee

I am a step-adoptee. Until three years ago, I never said these words to myself. It's not that I didn't know that my stepfather had adopted me, I just didn't think it was important. Then, in 2018, something wonderful happened that sparked in me a hunger to know everything. I subsequently set out on a quest to uncover all that I could about my biological father's story.

My mother left Canada in 1958 at age 18 to attend the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. While in Israel she met my future father—a struggling opera singer who was working as a telephone technician at the national post office. My mom was a sucker for struggling artists. They fell in love, married in 1959, then moved to England with the hope that my father might break into the European music scene. But he didn't get the big break he was hoping for, and so they decided to move to Canada with their new baby (my older sister). Five difficult years passed in their marriage. My father could not find a foothold in his new country, his career, or in his marriage. My mother thought having another child would save their relationship and it was under this enormous pressure that I was conceived. Such

trying his best to support me in something he can't possibly understand.

I have always looked in the mirror and hated what I saw. I wanted blonde hair and hazel eyes, like my "family". I wanted straight hair, not unruly curls. I wanted to sunburn, not be tan all year round. Now I know who my biological father is, an African American professional athlete. I understand why I look the way I do, I know where some of my athletic ability came from, my curly hair, my tan skin, my dark brown eyes. I look in the mirror and I make sense now. I finally feel like I'm free to explore this part of me that I always knew was there. My faith has grown in immeasurable ways and I am understanding that this journey of growth and learning to "live" my truth is definitely a marathon, not a sprint. Each day, the emotions of learning this information are staring right at me.

resuscitation schemes usually fail, and it would be no different for my parents. They separated before I was born, and, in the year after my conception, my father sunk into an even deeper depression. He died by suicide three months after my birth.

Most of the above was unknown to me and my sister growing up. My sister was five when our father died, and so his sudden departure was difficult. But our mother was determined to leave trauma and sadness behind and married another struggling artist (a poet) two years later. This man adopted me and my sister—a decision legalized by a court decree—resulting in the change of our last names and the sealing up of any records that identified us by our birth names. Almost nothing was said of our previous lives from that point onward. Whenever my sister asked about our father, our mother would cry and defer. "When you're older," she always said to my sister's questions.

Having no answers was hard on my sister; the not knowing affected her entire life. Not mine. (Or so I thought.) I convinced myself

that I was lucky to have escaped the pain of absence that my sister endured. My duty was to be happy with the family I did have. My stepfather loved me, so why would I want to hurt him by asking questions about someone that had no relevance to the life I was leading? I believed my job was to take care of my older sister; she and I were bound by a secret that made us different, and I was the only one she could talk to about her longing for our father.

Decades passed. One day our father's family in Israel gave me twenty-five audio reels that had belonged to him. They said it was his music. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have the equipment to play old-fashioned audio reels and didn't have the time or interest to seek it out. So, I sent them to my sister. "He was more your father than mine," I said. "You should have them."

In 2018 she finally had them digitized. I waited for her to tell me that they were all just boring opera music. But she didn't. The reels contained much more than opera music. Our father had used the technology of his time to document his everyday life. He recorded himself singing to popular records, practicing his compositions, speaking to customers and friends, and—most importantly—interacting at home with his family. When my sister heard the recorded family scenes more than fifty years later, she was overcome with emotion. It was something she had waited all her life to hear. She contacted me over Skype so that I could listen.

I didn't know what to expect. I knew she was hoping for a big reaction from me. I was determined not to have one. I thought I was safe from being sucked into the vortex of unanswered questions and futile searching that had relentlessly pulled at my sister. But when I heard my father's voice, it was as if the earth opened up and swallowed me whole. In that moment, I began to care. I had never thought of my father as an actual person until the moment I heard him talk and laugh. And once I did, I realized all at once that something very important was missing in my life. I needed to know.

I started with the hundreds of letters my mother had kept from that period. They needed indexing and translating, which took nearly a year. From those letters, I found friends still alive and interviewed as many as I could. Then, of course, there was the information guarded by government bodies—some, but not all, released to me only after I successfully jumped through countless hoops. I had no idea how long my search would take me, and as the months dragged on and the obstacles multiplied, I asked myself, "Why do I care so much?" For the longest time, I couldn't answer this question. I only knew that I couldn't stop.

As I searched, I wrote. In the beginning, I thought I would tell my father's story as a straightforward account of a life uncovered through research and diligence. A memoir that excluded me. What I didn't expect was that the quest and the writing would transform me. I realized that in learning the details of my father's life I was, for the first time, able to fill in my own missing history. I had been missing Chapter One of my life, as psychologist Michael Grand describes in his book, *The Adoption Constellation*. Finally, I had my answer to why I cared so much.

As of the end of 2021, it has been three years since I embarked on my quest. In many respects, the search continues. Hearing those tapes sent me down the path of claiming my history and understanding the importance of knowing my biological origins. I believe everyone has the right to know their story. I am overjoyed to finally know mine!

As a mom and someone who dealt with infertility, I truly understand the desire for and joy of having children, and I try to balance that understanding with the need to put the needs of those children first and foremost. I am a late-discovery, transethnic, sperm donor-conceived person.

I discovered my truth in September 2017, right before I turned 35. I received surprising results from a 23andme DNA test I had taken as part of a research study and as a way to further my fascination with genealogy and family history. I found I was, unexpectedly, half Ashkenazi Jewish, and had a half-sibling match I did not recognize. My mother admitted the truth when I confronted her later that day. I was able to find my biological father very quickly, through my DNA match and clues my mother had, even though he was anonymous and there were no records kept.

My biological father has been overjoyed to have a relationship with me and the small group of siblings we have found so far. I take after him not only in looks, but in personality as well; it is an indescribable experience. Since my discovery, I have worked on awareness of issues surrounding donor conception. My focus has included educating parents on best practices, advancing legislative changes for reforming the fertility industry, writing, speaking, performing, and other creative outlets, delving into the emotional impact of 'donor' conception, particularly the trauma of late discovery, exploring the complexities of finding significant ethnicity changes, and revealing the dynamics of families dealing with secrecy.

I write about donor conception a lot — on an ethical level but also on an emotional level — sharing a lot via social media, for transparency about the effects of this practice and the effects of lies and family secrets. Along with a lifelong commitment to family history and culture, I have a background in psychology and in health care, which have shaped my interest and passion for the importance of accurate medical history and the recognition of the psychological impact of trauma and family separation.

I have written and performed two performance art pieces: one on the challenges of finding a new religious and ethnic identity, and the other on finding the truth behind your own face.

I am fascinated by the similarities and parallels, and also the unique differences in the worlds of donor conception, adoption, and other MPE experiences, as well as the wide variety of differences of experience of donor-conceived individuals. I am passionate about the value of ethnic and cultural history to those who are separated from biological family.

I live in New Jersey, USA, and am currently working with my state legislature on a bill to do away with donor anonymity (donors will be made aware that their identity cannot be kept a secret), set up a state registry, and mandate updated medical records, for starters. There is so much we need to do and I hope we can get as much as we can passed into law.

I have done this work while dealing with the difficulties of my own trauma recovery, raising my family, and immersing myself into my newfound Jewish heritage. Unfortunately, with my discovery has come ostracization by my family of origin; this happens all too often with discoveries like mine. I have struggled with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the wake of all of this. Advocacy, along with the support of dear friends and professional mental health care, have helped me heal and find purpose and integration.

We are not shameful secrets. We are not at fault for discovering the truth. I am committed to helping future donor-conceived people so that they have it better than our generation.

What makes you...you? What shapes your identity? There are many answers to this question, but I'm going to focus on one that I think is under-appreciated. In 2018, at the age of 45, my identity was upended. In an instant, my life would have a before and an after.

"Predicted relationship – half brother." Those were the words I read when I opened up my 23 and Me app to compare my brother's results with my own.

Unlike many people who have this experience, I instantly knew what it meant and didn't question the accuracy or validity of the results. It immediately made sense of my life and my deeply held internal feelings. An author I've read expresses it as having a feeling of 'other-ness.' In very real ways, I always had a feeling of being 'out of place' and like I didn't quite belong somehow. Those words..."predicted relationship – half brother" meant that I was 45 years old, and did not know who my father was.

Over the course of the following week, my brother and I speculated who it might be; who was around us as kids. After a week, I told him I was driving out the next day so we could talk to mom.

My brother and I were raised by a single mother, who alone, along with our church family, raised us to be strong, independent, educated, hard-working, faith-filled people. She struggled to provide, but she did it. If our lives are a judge of her life's work, I think you'd have to render a more than a successful verdict.

I'm also a happily married man with a wife who has been very supportive through this entire process. And I have 4 beautiful children I love more than life. In spite of all of this, in making this discovery, I became unmoored. I did not know who I was; who made me. I looked in the mirror and couldn't fully recognize myself. The most basic parts of my life story were no longer true.

As I was told my father's name, I learned he was alive; a little about who he was; and that he had 3 children. I had more brothers and a sister. It's amazing how quickly you can find information about people online when you really want to know.

I never had a father in my life, and now as I learned this truth, I was intent on making sure that as little time as possible passed before we met. And so 17 days after my discovery, I sat down at a restaurant table with my father. It was a surreal 2 hours that included some laughter, tears, awkwardness, questions and good conversation. Those moments are forever etched in my mind. During our visit, that feeling of 'other-ness'...like I didn't quite belong in some way...disappeared. Many of the feelings of not knowing why I was a certain way...felt answered.

We continued to meet together for dinners over the next several months. They are cherished memories I will always have, of just getting to know each other, and I hope those can continue for some time. Eventually, he agreed to share this news with his other two living children...my sister and my brother.

About 13 months after my discovery, I sat in my father's home and met my family I didn't know existed for the first 45 years of my life. We talked, laughed and shed a few tears for several hours that day. We shared photographs and stories. Words can't describe how happy and grateful I was to see the burden of this secret lifted off my father's shoulders. It was palpable and something I will never forget.

Genetic connection and identity are inseparable. Please read that sentence again. I believe this to be an irrefutable truth that has profound implications. Those who have not experienced this could never fully comprehend it. I feel like I could have been a human experiment in the debate

of nature versus nurture. Think about your mannerisms, appearance, your laugh, manner of speaking, aspects of personality, the way you walk, things you like and dislike...to name just a few...all more highly connected to genetics than I think people realize. Not seeing that genetic connection in your life has implications.

Though challenging, my journey has been a profound blessing for which I'm profoundly grateful. Not everyone is so lucky. I am grateful to my father, my sister, my brother, and other new family for warmly and graciously accepting me into their lives.

The day my brother and sister learned of my existence, they immediately told their children. I broke down in tears in my office at work when I was told they did that. That decision said all I needed to know about the kind of people they are. Though COVID has interrupted some of our opportunities to get together, I cherish every time we are able to be together.

Learning you are a 45-year secret is hard. Learning you are no longer a secret was healing beyond belief. Maybe that's part of why sharing my story matters to me.

Early in my journey, I discovered a photograph of my grandfather and it was life-altering. I got chills as I saw myself in a photograph of someone else. It sealed that sense of belonging. When I met my brother and sister, the family had put together a collage of photographs they found of me on Facebook alongside photos of our grandfather. That genetic connection in physical appearance has also been a profound part of my journey.

My journey is still active. I continue to grow my relationship with my 'new' family. And I appreciate them and their presence in my life. All I know is that I have a father, brother, sister, nieces, nephews, and cousins who all live less than 90 minutes away. I am immeasurably thankful to my Father in Heaven for learning this and for having them as part of my life.

My message to others is we are all human. Good people, even great ones, make mistakes. But every human being and child of God has a fundamental right to know who they are...who made them. That truth, whether known or unknown, helps form your identity. I believe it is best for people to learn of their origins from those closest to them. And if you are ever on the receiving end of a contact from someone in my situation, please think of that person searching for answers that only you can provide.

Family secrets damage lives and cause pain. The lack of awareness of the truth of one's biological heritage is psychologically damaging in ways that are not easy to explain, but trust me, it's real...even when you aren't consciously aware of it. In today's technologically advanced world, if you are the keeper of a secret like this, the question to ask yourself is not 'will they find out?' The question is 'from whom will they find out?' If you carry a similar secret, they should learn it from you.

I always knew I was adopted. My adoptive parents used to say, "When we got David" as compared to "When David was born." I suppose that's what parents say when they aren't the birth parents.

I was adopted into a family of three; two biological children and another adopted girl. We lived in Southern Alberta in Canada and attended a small country school for grades 1 – 6. My adopted sister is Indigenous. Together we suffered no small amount of racism. From taunts on the long bus ride to and from school, to jeers in the schoolyard, we got it all.

At the time I was completely confused by the abuse because by my reckoning I was exactly the same as my classmates. At home, there were discussions about "what is David," like I was an archeological discovery. My birth records were somewhat vague about ethnicity. The father listed on my birth was blonde and blue-eyed. I have dark brown eyes and hair. Spoiler alert – he was not my father.

Alberta adoption records were sealed though a passive search was available. I registered for the passive search hoping that perhaps my mother would also be looking for me. I was constantly looking at people and wondering if I was related to them. I was always looking for someone who looked like me.

Years went by with no response to the passive search. Eventually, Alberta opened its adoption records and released non-identifying records to anyone who wanted them. Naturally I requested my records. I learned that I had uncles and aunts and that my mom was from rural Saskatchewan. They included medical records that echoed what my family had wondered; the doctors and nurses speculated that perhaps I was "Oriental (sic)." Eventually, they also opened up identifying information which I eagerly requested.

With my newfound information, I began looking for my mother. By chance, I happened on a Facebook group that focused on

searching for Canadian adoptees. I entered what little information I had and pressed send. Not thinking anything would happen, I carried on with life.

A number of weeks later I got a message from a lady saying she had taken on my search and she had found my maternal family. Being from a small Saskatchewan town and having a Scottish last name made it pretty easy. Fast forward and I found my birth sister, brother aunts, uncles, and a whole raft of nieces and nephews, who all welcomed me with open arms. Sadly, our mom had passed away years before, so I never got to meet her. Mom also didn't tell anyone about me. No one knew I existed nor anything about who my father might be other than it was not mom's husband. There was one aunt who was rumored to know something.

Having sorted out one side, I took a DNA test to see if I could find my father. I anxiously awaited my results. After a couple of false starts with an insufficient sample and a lost test, I finally got my results. A nearly equal mix of Chinese and Scottish. After 40 odd years of wondering, I had the answer to "what is David" and the racism finally made sense.

Finding my father would be like finding a proverbial needle in the stack of needles. I loaded my DNA into every database I could find. Fourth or fifth cousin was the best I could do. Without much corroborating information, those matches were too far down the family tree to be much help. I threw caution to the wind and emailed my aunt to tell her my newfound information. Shocking no one more than myself she wrote back and gave me details that became the seeds of my search.

After I was conceived my mom left her job and basically vanished. I know my father was looking for her because he had called and even visited my aunt wondering where my mom was but at the time she didn't know. Had she known, my life may have taken a completely different turn.

My mom and my dad worked at a university, she was a 'steno', he ran the print shop so presumably, that's how they met. My partner is a university-trained researcher and I have my black belt in Google-fu. With the information from my aunt, we poured over business directories from the appropriate time period and within a couple of hours, I found my father's name in black and white: Wailun (William) Quan. With his name, it was fairly easy to track down my family. I made some phone calls and hit the jackpot with my paternal sister. I also found a brother from my father's first marriage. Amazingly, they had never known each other existed.

My sister was shocked to say the least and wondered if I was scamming her to get information. The more we talked, the more she was convinced that I was indeed her brother. She agreed to take a DNA test and the results confirmed that we were half-siblings. Fast forward to the summer of 2019 when we all met at my brother's home. In attendance was my dad's cousin who recalled hearing my father talking about my mom. I strongly believe that my father didn't know that I existed and that if he did he would, he would've loved to have known me.

There are no experiences in my life that equal the emotions of walking into a room and seeing people who look like me. At long last my search was over, and a new journey began.