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**Open Adoption Narrative: Snapshot into Adoptees'  
Adoptive and Birth Mother Relationships**

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of**

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## ABSTRACT

Research on the open adoption practice and its effects has received little attention within Aotearoa New Zealand. Currently, there is a conspicuous gap, a missing voice, including mine, that does not account for adoptees lived experiences within the open system. There is very little understanding as to what the everyday ordinariness of navigating the boundary of normal and difference is like for open adoptees. The aim of this research was to bring open adoptees voices together to understand how open adoptees make sense of the complexities within our adoptive and birth mother relationships and making sense of having two mothers, within a space that did not question or challenge their knowledge of their experiences nor require them to explain their differences. Five participants volunteered to participate in conversational-style interviews that focussed on the lived experiences of open adoptees' adoptive and birth mother relationships. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using Riessman's (1993) narrative inquiry method of representation. Drawing from feminist standpoint epistemology and narrative inquiry, the analysis stories the participants' narratives of their negotiation of their adoptive and birth mother relationships and their lived experiences of open adoption. What is represented is a collective narrative to bring our voice to the call for changes to the Aotearoa New Zealand adoption legislation reform movement. What emerged from participants' narratives was that they are contextualised through a generic story that positions us as grateful, and therefore responsible, in a storyline of our rescue and we embody the burden of the secret of our circumstances. The narrative produced through the analysis attends to the storylines that bring about an understanding of our need to renegotiate the meaning of openness, by recognising the loss and the pain of living within structural (the Act) and sociocultural (good and bad mother) power relations. What we ask is that this voice is heard and becomes part of the movement for social and political transformation where belonging and connection can become possible.

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I am honoured and profoundly grateful for your willingness and trust to share your stories and experiences with me. I thank you for your openness and generosity, for which I will never forget.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **MY STORY**

All my life, I have known I was adopted.

There was no earth-shattering moment when I was told and having my world turned upside down. There was no moment for me because my adoptive mother, Leigh, lovingly embraced my birth mother, Karmenne, into my life and into our home at the very start of my adoption and continued to do so until she passed away when I was seven years old. She was my mother, and my sister's mother. Karmenne was always there: at bath times, birthday parties, and would take my older brother and I out on adventures together. When she moved away, she visited frequently, and we often wrote letters to each other. After my Mum died, Dad struggled with his grief for a while, and the family relationships changed as new relationships formed. I understand now that Mum was the person who held the relationships together. After her passing, contact with Karmenne became less frequent until a pattern of once a year or so emerged when I was about thirteen, and later, periods of infrequent contact became the norm. As I became more independent, the story of my adoption became more secretive. During high school, I became very aware, both at home and in my social life, that there was not a place for me to safely talk about the struggles I was dealing with, nor did there seem to be a way of 'speaking' about my experiences within my social relationships. Even now, as I write this narrative having completed the research, I am still navigating the meaning of my subjectivities.

There is also an emergent story that locates this research. In the context of an Advanced Psychology of Women Contact Course in 2018, we were talking about feminist standpoint epistemology, women's knowing, missing voices, and dominant sociocultural narratives of nuclear families and motherhood. Surprising myself, I unguardedly spoke of remembering family tree homework that I completed through a memory of sadness. This I explained as while 'knowing' who my birth mother and father were, I understood that I was required to complete my adoptive family history – and in that knowing, I experienced not belonging. I recognised my difference. It was this moment that was the catalyst for this research. I was interested in my own location in the research, both as a researcher and an insider.

As I began to engage with the current literature on open adoption, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, I noticed a conspicuous gap, a missing voice, that did not account for my experiences as an open adoptee under the Aotearoa New Zealand adoption legislation. I began to understand the history of adoption through legislative and social movements that imagined open adoption as a solution to the call for legislative change and the rights of adoptees to know “of each other” and may have “contact with one another”. What I noticed was an absence of literature that attends to the narratives of adoptees who were adopted through the ‘open’ adoption system. As a solution to the legislative and social activism movements that led to the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985, open adoption had the potential for adoptees to engage in meaningful relationships with their birth families, and yet it seems that there is little understanding as to what the everyday ordinariness of navigating the boundary of normal and difference within the ‘open system’ requires. I wondered about our experiences of having two mothers.

Through reflecting on my own struggles in managing my two mother relationships, I became interested in how other open adoptees have experienced having two mothers and what these relationships have entailed for them. I was interested in how we practice ‘fitting in’ within our relationships with two differing narratives of motherhood. Given the missing voices of open adoptees, I sought to honour the voices of the most marginalised persons within the adoption triad. The purpose of this research is to create a space to have our voices and stories heard and listened to. My own story also opens up along the way because being an open adoptee is part of my subjectivity. Its history is embodied in my everyday life and embedded in my sociocultural context.

As I have moved through the research process, I have begun to talk about my adoption story with varying degrees of openness, both with my adoptive and birth families, and in my relationships with others. What has emerged most significantly for me is that having a ‘mum’ - the experience of the mother-daughter relationship that is taken for granted in dominant narratives - is disrupted through the adoption process. I still struggle with the absence of a mum – the mum that my friends had going through their teenage years and alongside them now as they form new relationships and have children of their own. I became curious to know about my potential participants’ mother relationships and how they too made sense of the complexities within their experiences of their adoptive and

birth mother relationships. At the same time, through the analysis, I recognise the moments where I can make sense of the impact the legislation has had on our lives.

In this research, I join with other open adoptee stories to voice our experiences of being an open adoptee. I wanted to use the experience of research to talk with somebody who is like me. I wanted to connect our stories through a shared understanding of how it feels to us, where our understanding of ourselves is not questioned or challenged – a space where we do not have to explain our difference. We just get it. It was also important to bring our voice to the ongoing calls for changes to the Adoption Act 1955, but as I became more immersed in the conversations, I became increasingly aware that there also needs to be sociocultural transformation in the meaning of family in our sociocultural landscape.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### OPEN ADOPTION

*“adoption”*: a permanent legal arrangement of the child’s adoptive parents having full parental rights and responsibilities (Oranga Tamariki, 2020)

*“open adoption”*: birth parents, adoptive family and the child know of each other, may share identifying information and have contact with one another (Oranga Tamariki, 2020)

Since the introduction of the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985, thirty-five years ago, the practice of adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand has moved away from the wall of secrecy that cut adoptees from forming connections with their birth families towards a structural and communicative openness between members of the adoption triad: the adopted child, adoptive parents and birth parents; with the potential for ongoing relationships with birth families (Brodzinsky, 2005; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). Openness in adoption has been promoted on the grounds that it is more beneficial to all parties involved, especially for the adopted child (Law Commission, 2000). Open adoption supports the exchange of identifying information and the potential development of relationships between the adopted child and their birth parents/family. Social workers today encourage adoptive and birth parents to meet and to participate in the exchange of identifying information and negotiate some kind of contact with each other, and with the adopted child (Oranga Tamariki, 2020).

Brodzinsky (2005) conceptualises openness in adoption as comprising of two dimensions: structural openness and communicative openness. Structural openness refers to some degree of contact and a sharing of identifying information between the adopted child, adoptive parents and birth parents (Brodzinsky, 2005; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). Communicative openness includes a willingness to explore and discuss the child’s birth family and history, and their adoption-related issues (Brodzinsky, 2005; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011).

Open adoptions vary in regard to the frequency, intensity and nature of contact and type of relationship the adoptee and adoptive parents have with the birth parents/family (Law Commission, 2000; Siegel, 2012). It is best understood as a communicative continuum, ranging from little contact, acknowledgement and discussion of adoption to frequent visits and access, as well as a willingness to explore and discuss adoption-related issues (Brodzinsky, 2005). Contact and the exchange of information is mutually agreed upon by the birth and adoptive parents, and is continuously renegotiated over time, depending on the needs of each party within the triad (Brodzinsky, 2005; Law Commission, 2000; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). Contact can range between face-to-face visits, phone calls, video calls, letters, emails, or messaging. However, because of New Zealand's current adoption legislation, the practice of openness is structurally limited because the adoptive parents are the legitimate parents and have the power and legal protection of the adoption order (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Griffith, 2000; Law Commission, 2000). Barnardos (as cited in Law Commission, 2000) commented that the goal of open adoption is to ensure that the adoptee feels as psychologically secure as possible, with no secrecy about the adoptee's birth origins or who their birth family is.

Psychological research on the 'success' of open adoption has focussed on psychological adjustment for triad members (Brodzinsky, 2005; Siegel, 2012). Open adoption provides adoptees with the opportunity to establish a relationship with their birth parents, gain knowledge of their birth origins and heritage, and is related to their ability to construct a more positive identity, promote their self-esteem as well as helping them to understand the circumstances surrounding their adoption (Chapman, Dorner, Silber & Winterberg, 1987; Jones & Hackett, 2007; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). However, there is little understanding of the experiences that connect the structural and social narratives of open adoptees' ordinary everyday lives.

While the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 enabled the pathway for open adoption, there is an assumption that access to information or knowledge of birth origins involves meaningful connections and relationships with birth families. In this research, all parties have the information required by the Act but I'm interested in the meaning of openness in adoptees' experiences. What does this openness look like in adoptees' ordinary everyday lives? This research is interested in the experiences of 'knowing' - of biological origins (structural) enabled through the Act, and the potential for meaningful

relationships (communication) for open adoptees. To begin to address these questions, it is also important to understand the socio-political history of adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Early debates about contact and ‘openness’ focus on whether it is good or bad for the adopted child, adoptive parents and birth parents. These days, there is a general acceptance that it is dependent upon a myriad of variables specific to the adopted child and their context (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). As the narrative of adoption has shifted toward openness, the concerns about ‘open’ adoption, such as adoptive parent insecurity over parental rights (Brodzinsky, 2005; Ryburn, 1991); psychological adjustment through the grief process for birth mothers being unresolved (Brodzinsky, 2005; Siegel, 2003) seem to remain. For open adoptees, and me, our difference is marked through our lack of adjustment (attachment, security, self-esteem and so on) within these debates (Brodzinsky, 2005; Ryburn, 1991). The transformation to open adoption is embedded in a history of both legislative and colonial social power relations where contemporary understandings of adoption fail to serve many New Zealanders, and calls for adoption reform have been occurring for the past three decades, with little effect (Blake & Coombes, 2016; Law Commission, 2000).

## **AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND HISTROY OF ADOPTION**

### *ROAD TO SECRECY*

Aotearoa New Zealand became the first country in the British Commonwealth to legislate adoption. Adoption during this time was a well-established practice but there was no legal protection for adoptees or for the adoptive parents (Griffith, 1997). George Waterhouse introduced the Private Member’s ‘Adoption of Children Bill’ in 1881, which became New Zealand’s first adoption act in 1885. Waterhouse argued that to encourage the care and protection of neglected or deserted children, a legal contract was needed (Blake, 2013; Griffith, 2000; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). The Bill “was simply to declare that the benevolent might find wider scope for generous action; and that the results of their generosity might obtain some security by law” (NZPA, 1881, as cited in Griffith, 1997, p.5). Waterhouse had no interest in concealing the child’s birth relationships, and these relationships were acknowledged by the recording of both the child’s birth names and the birth parents’ names on the child’s birth certificate (Blake, 2013; Griffith, 1997; Rockel

& Ryburn, 1988). Rockel and Ryburn (1988) argued that Waterhouse's goal was to give adoptive relationships legal status, to protect the adoptive parents' interests and investment in the child, and to remove fears of the child being reclaimed by their birth families. This adoption law was heavily influenced by the Victorian era's morals and values: children were seen as parental possessions, power was with the parents, and "birthmothers of bastards should be punished and banished" (Moody, 2008, para. 3). At this time, Māori whāngai customs were not affected by the 1895 Act (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988).<sup>1</sup>

Initially, there was considerable opposition and suspicion of legal adoption, mainly concerning issues of property/land inheritance, legitimisation, beliefs about inheritance of 'bad blood', and assumptions of adoption encouraging immoral behaviour and increasing the abandonment of children, especially among the poor (Griffith, 1997; Moody, 2008). However, by the 1950s, social attitudes about adoption had shifted, and adoption had come to be seen as the best solution for all concerned (Griffith, 1997). Changes in social attitudes towards adoption was influenced by the loosening of Victorian ideas of propriety and illegitimacy, the introduction of new legislations, the end of WWII as well as the push for the nuclear family structure (Blake, 2013; Griffith, 2000; Law Commission, 2000).

Two legislations known as the Birth and Deaths Registration Amendment Act 1915 and Child Welfare Act 1925 had significant implications for the future practice of adoption and to the changes in social attitudes towards adoption. The Birth and Deaths Registration Amendment Act 1915 allowed adoptive parents to amend their child's birth certificate to only show the child's new adoptive name and name of the adoptive parents (Blake & Coombes, 2016; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). The Act did not intend to conceal adoptees' birth history, but to protect them from the stigma of illegitimacy (Griffith, 1997). However, the Act was used in such a way to introduce secrecy into the practice of adoption, and thereafter, it took on a new purpose: to give adoptees a new public identity and to disguise their 'shameful' birth origins (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). The Child Welfare Act 1925 increased adoptive parents' power, control and recognition as legitimate parents while reducing birth parents' rights and power, by bringing in the

<sup>1</sup> There is a section further down on whāngai practices.

current requirement for adoptees to take their adoptive parents' surname (Blake, 2013; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Ultimately, the Act prohibited adoptees from accessing their birth history, making the Adoption of Children Act 1885 intention of 'open' adoption practices superfluous (Blake, 2013). These legislative changes were influential to the ratification of the 'complete break' theory and introduction of secrecy into adoption practices within Aotearoa New Zealand.

### *ADOPTION ACT 1955*

In 1951, the Aotearoa New Zealand adoption law went under review once more, which resulted in the current adoption legislation, the Adoption Act 1955. The implementation of this Act reversed the intent of the 1885 legislation, and for the first time in New Zealand's history, a birth parent could consent to adoption without knowing the adoptive parents' identity (Blake, 2013; Haenga-Collins, 2017). All birth parent identifying information was confidential, with the child's original birth certificate inaccessible and a new birth certificate with the adoptive parents' details was produced, resulting in no indication of the adoption occurring (Haenga-Collins, 2017). It was the beginning of the closed stranger adoptions that lasted for the next thirty years.

The Adoption Act 1955 sought to reform adoption practices and implement a 'complete break' ideology. During this time, it was believed that the environment could overcome heredity factors and was considered untenable for a child to have two sets of parents and two families. The 'complete break' ideology stemmed from the belief that by completely severing ties between the birth family and the adoptive family, it would best for everyone involved, resulting in the child being 'as if born to' the adoptive parents and 'as if' the birth relationships were dead and destroyed (Blake & Coombes, 2016; Griffith, 1997; Weaver, 1999). An illusion was created. The adoption legislation introduced a legal fiction for adoptees who, 'as if born to' the adoptive parents, are legitimated through extinguishing all birth relationships. But gradually, legal fiction became general fiction, involving a web of secrecy, lies and denial enacted within everyday social relationships (Blake & Coombes, 2016; Else, 1991). The ratification of the 'complete break' theory into law produced secrecy as necessary to adoption practices to be able to foster 'normal' colonial nuclear family relationships. Secrecy was intended to protect birth mothers and adoptees from excessive stigma and the shame of illegitimacy. However, the privacy and

integrity of adoptive families and the protection of adoptive parents from fear of potential birth parent(s) interference in their investment in the nuclear family was legitimated through this practice of secrecy (Griffith, 1997; Haenga-Collins, 2017). The ‘complete break’ theory also had significant implications for Māori, as it openly prohibited Māori values, beliefs and practices of customary whāngai placements (Else, 1991; Walker, 2001). The ‘complete break’ and secrecy shaped Aotearoa New Zealand’s adoption policy for the next thirty years.

*“Closed adoption brought about the permanent separation of mother and child, but that was seen either as a necessary evil for the sake of the greater good, or as a positive benefit, because it freed each of them forever, legally and socially, from the embarrassing presence of the other”* (Else, 1991, p.26).

The Adoption Act 1955 and its practices was introduced and rationalised as an unproblematic ‘solution’ to the problems children faced with being either orphaned, unwanted, illegitimate or facing adversity (Douglas & Philpot, 2003). There was no consideration of the future adverse consequences adoptees would experience from severing birth relationships (Griffith, 1997). The Act focussed on the rights of adults rather than on the needs and rights of children (Law Commission, 2000). Distinguished New Zealand adoption writers and advocates for reform, Keith Griffith and Anne Else, have both argued that the Adoption Act 1955 and its practice of closed adoptions was a social experiment conducted on a mass scale that had unknown and uninvestigated consequences, which resulted in significant loss and trauma for adoptees throughout their entire lives (Else, 1991; Griffith, 1997).

## **THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND THE REFORM**

### *ROAD TO OPENNESS*

Social movements and calls for legislation reform led by a collective of closed adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers led to the transformation of adoption practices in Aotearoa New Zealand to become more open. It is important to understand these social movements to understand the current open adoption practices used today.

## *DEMISE OF THE CLEAN BREAK THEORY*

The ideology of secrecy and the clean break theory, embedded in the 1955 Act and adoption practices, has been subsequently questioned and challenged since the 1980s due to its detrimental impact on those affected by closed adoption (Blake, 2013). Alongside changing social values such as a softening morality towards illegitimacy, the emergence of birth mothers and adoptees' pained testimonies of their struggles with closed adoption, and increasing understandings of child development, the effects of closed adoption practices became untenable, and led to the demise of the clean break theory (Blake, 2013; Moody, 2013).

Concerns about the impact of secrecy on adoptees' wellbeing and development were initially raised by members of the adoption triad and adoption professionals (Brodzinsky, 2005). Testimonies from adoptees expressed their need to have the right to know their birth origins while birth mothers wished to be reunited with their relinquished children, both of whom were being heard and listened to (Aburn, 2014). These testimonies were supported by developmental, psychological and sociological theories developed by Erikson (1987), Kirk (1964) and Triseliotis (1973). Research from Kirk (1964) and Triseliotis (1973) highlighted the importance of knowing one's birth origins and the damaging impacts of closed adoption on the wellbeing of adoptees. What Kirk (1964) and Triseliotis (1973) found were the benefits of communicative openness about adoption-related issues, which included problems with identity, belonging, self-esteem, rejection and abandonment, insecurity and grief, for all members of the adoption triad. Formation of adoption support groups were also influential in the demise of the clean break theory, as they provided a network of support and were at the forefront of political action for legislative change (Aburn, 2014). Support groups such as Jigsaw, a collective of adopted adults, birth parents and adoptive parents, advocated and lobbied for legislative changes and greater openness in adoption practices, which led to the introduction of MP Jonathon Hunt's Private Member's Bill into Parliament in 1977. After seven years of debate, the Adult Adoption Information Act was enacted on September 13<sup>th</sup> 1985 and fully in effect by 1986 (Aburn, 2014). The power of this legislation was to overturn the suppression of adoptees' rights to know their birth origins and provided a process for adoptees and birth parents to seek contact with each other (Adult Adoption Information Act, 1985). The Act enabled adult adoptees over the age of twenty to access

to their original birth certificate and seek contact with their birth parents, and vice versa. This transformation was a long-anticipated change for the adoption reform movement at the time, and the movement from secrecy to openness in adoption practices gained momentum (Griffith, 1997). Social workers and open adoption advocates led a shift in practices that extended knowledge of birth origins toward a more nuanced practice of connection to their social and cultural histories. As a solution to the challenges faced by adoptees in the closed system, open adoptees experiences seem unremarkably absent in the ongoing call for reform, and this research aims to bring that voice into the movement. However, over this time, other social transformations informed the sociocultural landscape.

### *DECLINE IN ADOPTIONS*

Other structural and social changes in Aotearoa New Zealand have led to a decline in adoptions since 1971. Firstly, there has been a shift in morality associated with illegitimacy, evidenced through the introduction of the Status of Children Act 1969, resulting in less social pressures for mothers to adopt out their children and greater acceptance of co-habitation (Griffith, 2000; Moody, 2008). Secondly, the Domestic Proceedings Act 1968 and the Domestic Purposes Benefit 1973 provided solo parents with (arguably) economic independence enabling mothers to care for their children, and as a result, there was a steady decline in adoptions. The introduction of the Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Bill 1977 has resulted in fewer pregnancies and children available for adoption because women and men have greater access to reproductive control (Blake, 2013; Griffith, 2000; Moody, 2008). Ministry of Justice (2016) statistics show that the total number of adoptions granted per year have decreased from their peak of 3967 in 1971 to 128 in 2015 and are continuing to steadily decline. In contemporary times, this decline renders adoptees too few for recognition at a political level in a contested space that has a focus on the right to adopt for same sex couples (Blake & Coombes, 2016). The effects of the current legislation on adoptees and their relationships with their families continues to be ignored.

### *OPENING UP ADOPTION*

In the past thirty years, adoption has a new purpose of breaking the old chains of secrecy embedded in adoption practices by opening up communication and contact between

adoptive parents, birth parents and adopted children (Brodzinsky, 2005; Chapman, Dorner, Silber & Winterberg, 1986; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). No longer are closed stranger adoptions encouraged or understood as best practice.

Because the Adoption Act 1955 only specifies the necessary procedures to obtain an adoption order and its legal effects, and does not define practices of adoption, social workers and advocates have been able to explore more open practices to adoption (Griffith, 1997; Moody, 2008; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Despite the constraints of the 1955 Act, social workers and advocates have been able to employ practices such as birth parents choosing the adoptive parents; adoptive and birth parents meeting each other before the birth of the child and sharing identifying information to begin developing a relationship with one another; and adoptive and birth parents negotiating a mutual agreement of contact of varying openness (frequency, intensity and nature of contact), depending upon the needs of each party (Brodzinsky, 2005; Cushman, Kalmuss & Namerow, 1997; Law Commission, 2000; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Siegel, 2012). While open adoption practices might value connections to families of origin, the legislation continues to delegitimise relationships with birth families.

Children's relationships and connections to their families of origin are necessary to protect, preserve and uphold a child's identity, self-esteem, mana and whānau (Bradley, 1995; McRae & Nikora, 2006). Māori social workers and advocates were effective in transforming the meaning of a child's best interests through privileging customary principles of whanaungatanga and whakapapa in the practice of whāngai.

## **PRACTICE OF WHĀNGAI**

*“atawhai”*: fostered child (Keane, 2017)

*“whāngai”*: adopted child – to feed or nourish (McRae & Nikora, 2006)

While this definition is a literal definition of whāngai, the practice of whāngai is a customary Māori practice where a child is raised by someone other than their birth parents, usually by other family members, without regard to the legal status of the relationship (Keane, 2017). The literal meaning of whāngai suggests that the child is

being nurtured in the fullest sense, including education, culture and affection, as well as food security (Bradley, 1997). To Māori, whāngai is an absolute whānau promise that ensures the future care and cultural interest of the tamaiti whāngai is protected by the whānau, hapū and iwi (Bradley, 1997). The values of aroha, whanaungatanga, mana and whakapapa inform the practice of whāngai (McRae & Nikora, 2006). With customary whāngai placements, the preservation of three things: knowledge of kin, culture, and whakapapa; connection to wairua (spiritual values) and whenua; and upholding one's self-identity, self-esteem and mana; is ensured (Bradley, 1995; McRae & Nikora, 2006). Whāngai placements provide children an open and supportive environment to grow in and to form intimate relationships with birth parents (McRae & Nikora, 2006). Circumstances in which children became tamaiti whāngai include: death of a parent(s); helping childless couples; helping young or large families who struggle to raise their children; to strengthen kinship links; or for grandparents to pass down hapū knowledge, whakapapa and tikanga (Haenga-Collins, 2011; McRae & Nikora, 2006; Newman, 2013). Usually the whole whānau, and sometimes the hapū, are involved in the placement of the child (Bradley, 1995; Newman, 2013). Whāngai placements can either be temporary or permanent. The practice of whāngai recognises and promotes the welfare of the child, as well as establishing, nurturing and cementing relationships between individuals, whānau, hapū and iwi (McRae & Nikora, 2006).

Whāngai is often equated with the Pākehā notion of adoption or fostering, however, there are very significant differences between these relationships. In Aotearoa New Zealand, adoption is a permanent legal arrangement where the child's adoptive parents have full parental rights and responsibilities, and while it is recognised that there are obligations to the birth family, the birth mother relinquishes any legal rights to the child. The child's name will be changed, and they will be raised with a new history that matches their adoptive family. Under the closed adoption system, any knowledge or contact with the birth family was strongly discouraged. The concept of 'adoption' is foreign to Māori, as a child being placed outside of its whānau, hapū and iwi to strangers was rare and unusual (Newman, 2013; Walker, 2001). Raising children is a shared responsibility within the whānau. Whāngai placements significantly differ from Pākehā adoptions, as whāngai embodies the concepts of kinship and openness (McRae & Nikora, 2006; Newman, 2013). Māori do not view children as possessions, rather children are positioned as valuable resources and gifts of love (Bradley, 1997; Else, 1991; McRae & Nikora, 2006).

Māori also view the severance from the birth family and whakapapa as an act of cultural violence (Newman, 2013).

#### *DISMANTLEMENT OF WHĀNGAI PRACTICES*

Aotearoa New Zealand's first adoption Act, Adoption of Children Act 1885, did not impinge on the practice of whāngai or the status of whāngai (Bradley, 1995; McRae & Nikora, 2006; Newman, 2013). By 1901, the Native Land Act required tamaiti whāngai to be registered to be able to inherit whāngai parent land, after concerns that some whāngai might receive tribal land from both their whāngai and birth parents (Keane, 2017; Newman, 2013). It was the first Act to start eradicating whāngai rights and prohibiting whāngai to be practised in its customary form. In 1910, the Native Land Act declared that "adoption in accordance with Māori custom" would not hereafter be recognised as legal, making it compulsory for Māori to legally adopt through the Native Land Court (Adoption Act, 1955, s.19; Else, 1991). As early as 1946, the Māori Land Court recognised that "nothing should be done to conceal the relationship of an adopted Māori to his natural parents" (Chief Judge of the Māori Land Court, 1946, cited in Else, 1991, p. 179). However, the implementation of the Adoption Act 1955 ended the period of cultural autonomy for Māori practices of whāngai (Bradley, 1995). This Act enabled many Māori children to be transracially adopted, an institutional practice that has had severe consequences for the mana and wellbeing of generations of (stolen/dislocated) Māori (Blake & Coombes, 2016; Newman, 2013).

Transracial adoptions served the purpose of assimilative policies that promoted colonial representations of constructed families instead of whānau-based systems (McRae & Nikora, 2006). As such, the Adoption Act 1955 is institutionally racist (Bradley, 1995; Haenga-Collins, 2011). The 1955 Act does not uphold the fundamental rights of transracial adoptees, as determined in the Treaty of Waitangi, the United Nations Convention on the Rights for Children 1989, the United Nations Declaration of Rights for World Indigenous Peoples 2007 and the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989 (Bradley, 1997). It openly rejects Māori values, beliefs and practices, and disregards the purposes of whāngai placements (Walker, 2001). By implementing the Act, the State did not consider or value the importance of whānau and whakapapa

connections for Māori, which are fundamental to positioning oneself as Māori and to the development of Māori cultural identity (Haenga-Collins, 2011).

Structurally, interracial adoption refers to the adoption of a child of a different race or ethnicity than of the adoptive parents (Issaacs, 1994). Recent research and transracial adoptees testimonies has revealed that interracial adoptions violate the best interests of the child and birth community, as adoptees are unable to develop a positive sense of self and of their birth community (Issaacs, 1994). They must navigate the intersections of race, ethnicity, culture, and adoption, to be able to develop an integrated positive identity of who they are (Haenga-Collins, 2011; Ung, O'Connor & Pillidge, 2012). To understand these dimensions, one must acknowledge the influence power, oppression and social values has on adoptees' racial identity development (Ung, O'Connor & Pillidge, 2012).

Many transracial adoptees struggle with their identity, understanding who they are, and are disconnected from their cultural histories (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Haenga-Collins, 2015). The need to belong and feel a sense of connectedness to somebody or something is strong among transracial adoptees, as they are isolated not only from the culture they were born into, but also the culture they were raised in. They do not have a secured sense of belonging in either (Haenga-Collins, 2011; Haenga-Collins, 2015). For Māori adoptees, this sense of not belonging or the experience of walking between two worlds is a consequence of not knowing their whakapapa and not being able to connect with their whānau and Māori identity. To fully participate and experience feelings of belonging in the Māori world, it is essential to have knowledge of one's whakapapa. Knowledge of whakapapa is what enables a person to securely identify and participate as Māori (Haenga-Collins, 2017). The loss of knowledge of one's whakapapa is one of the most damaging aspects of closed stranger adoptions for Māori adoptees and their children (Haenga-Collins, 2017). Testimonies of Māori adoptees all support the notion that not knowing your whakapapa has serious implications for being considered 'authentically' Māori or walking easily within the Māori world (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2016; Webber, 2008). Māori adoptees speak of continual challenges from others about 'not being Māori enough' as a result of their upbringing that was largely devoid of Māori knowledge, practices and understandings (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2016). Māori adoptees also state that not knowing your whakapapa makes you "being Māori in the world, and you being in the Māori world difficult" (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2016, p. 9).

In response to the increase of interracial adoptions of Māori and its damaging effects, Māori continue to advocate for legislative changes to be made (McRae & Nikora, 2006). As an indigenous movement, Māori have fought against the 1955 Act, and argued for whāngai practices to be forefront of the 1985 legislative changes. However, while Māori advocacy for indigenous rights were able to shape the transformation to open adoption legislation and practice, the government's responsibility under the Treaty of Waitangi and indigenous rights to ensure the customary rights of Māori children are protected has not been met (Bradley, 1995; McRae & Nikora, 2006).

### **ONGOING CALL FOR REFORM**

The opening up of adoption practices has exposed a desperate need for a re-examination of Aotearoa New Zealand's adoption legislation. Adoption in New Zealand is still governed by the Adoption Act 1955. It is one of the oldest statutes still in regular use. Advocates for legislation reform argue the 1955 Act is from the colonial social context that no longer represents or is appropriate for today's social needs (Else, 2011; Moody, 2008). In 2000, the Aotearoa New Zealand Law Commission reviewed the legal framework for adoption in New Zealand. They set out to recommend how the adoption legislation should be modified to better address contemporary social needs (Law Commission, 2019). The report states that the adoption legislation "reflects value judgements that are inconsistent with today's standards" (Law Commission, 2000, p. 3) for the best interests of children and their birth families. The current legislation fails to serve societal needs properly, as it does not embody principles of informed consent and equality, disregards children's welfare and rights, is discriminatory towards single men, same-sex and de facto couples, provides limited access to adoption information, and does not allow Māori to conduct their whāngai customary practices (Else, 2011; Griffith, 1997; Law Commission, 2000; McRae & Nikora, 2006; Moody, 2008). For nearly forty years, successive governments have promised to review the Adoption Act 1955, but as of 2020, none have delivered.

Contemporary debates have emerged within the context of equality in legal marriage and has a focus on a non-discriminatory right to adopt, rather than a much needed focus on recognising the social injustices of the Adoption Act on those who are most affected. The

ongoing failure of the government to recognise the sociocultural harms, according to advocates (Blake & Coombes, 2016; Griffith, 1991; Henaghan, 2006; Ludbrook, 1997), is a breach of international standards for the best interests of children, and meaningful connections with whānau. Arguments have been made that the New Zealand government should take a page from the Australian government who addressed and apologised for their responsibility for the discriminatory adoption practices and breaches of indigenous rights that resulted in the ‘stolen’ generation of aboriginal children (Blake & Coombes, 2016). It has been argued that the government should apologise to Māori for the destruction the Adoption Act 1955 has had on Māori customary practices of whāngai, whānau, hapū, iwi and the thousands of adopted Māori children who have had their Māori identity, whakapapa, culture and whānau ‘stolen’ from them (Blake & Coombes, 2016).

Despite open adoption being practiced, the Adoption Act 1955 continues to exclude customary whāngai practices and ‘openness’ is limited to the birth information adoptees receive, it does not necessarily include the openness of relationships and connections with birth families. This research adds to the calls for reform to the 1955 Act, through the voices of those who embody the effects of the discriminatory legislation that severs meaningful relationships between triad members.

## **ADOPTION TRIAD**

The adoption triad is composed of three parties joined through the process of adoption: the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the adopted person. The triangle symbolises that each party is interrelated and inter-dependent on each other. There is a history of research that argues adoption is a life-long bond that cannot be severed by time, distance or denial (Chapman, Dorner, Silber & Winterberg, 1987). The adoption experience affects every member of the triad. Listening to triad members testimonies and adoption research has made professionals and advocates aware of the intense pain that triad members experienced because of the way adoptions were handled in the past (Chapman et al., 1986). Open adoptions are neither easy nor problem-free, however, it has been the preferred alternative practice to closed practices for the past thirty years by social workers, as it removes secrecy surrounding adoptees birth origins and opens up the possibility for adoptees to form relationships with their birth families. With current adoption practices advocating for greater communicative openness between triad

members, we must ask ourselves: Has the practice of open adoption addressed the concerns raised by members of the triad that led to the change in legislation? To be able to understand how adoptees experience ‘openness’, understanding the research narrative that lead to the ‘solution’ needs to be examined.

### *BIRTH MOTHER EXPERIENCES*

Birth parents are inextricably connected to the adoption story, even if they are or are not known to the adoptee. Within the triad, birth parents, especially birth mothers are not legitimated within the Act. Legislatively, they have no rights to their child, and only at the generosity of the adoptive parents may they be included in their child’s life to some degree. The ongoing legislative abuse of mothers and children that severs their relationship has a significant effect on adoptees social and cultural connections.

The relinquishment of a child for adoption is an experience like no other. Through closed adoptions, birth mothers had long-lasting, traumatic experiences that affected their psychological wellbeing long after the placement (Brodzinsky, 1990). Research about birth mothers’ experiences of closed adoptions convey a lifetime of guilt, loss, and unresolved grief, resulting in feelings of low self-esteem and self-worth (Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy & Grotevant, 2007; Logan, 1996; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Birth mother grief is a complicated and complex process that mostly remained unresolved in closed adoption placements (Henney et al., 2007). Birth mothers’ grieving processes were often severely impaired, as a result of members of society not acknowledging or allowing the acknowledgement of the event and loss at all, plus receiving little to no support from friends, family or the adoption agency afterwards (Logan, 1996; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988; Ward, 1991). Birth mothers have spoken of not feeling comfortable or welcomed to express their feelings of loss, guilt and shame, or to talk about the impacts of their experience (Logan, 1996). The professional community often assumed that the placement was the end of the problem, resulting in birth mothers being told to forget about their child and to move on with their lives, as if, it never happened (Brodzinsky, 1990; Logan, 1996; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). However, it was the beginning of a bigger problem – the long-lasting suppression of their unresolved feelings. Studies have highlighted that relinquishment of a child in closed adoptions lead to the development of psychological, physical and social-interpersonal grief reactions, such as feelings of loss, sadness and

guilt; depression; anger; regret; remorse; low self-esteem and self-worth; and negative impacts to later romantic relationships (Henney et al., 2007; Logan, 1996; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Keeping the secret for some, is life long.

Most birth mothers desire some contact with or information about their child, and with the introduction of openness within adoption practices, it has opened the possibility for birth mothers in some instances (Henney et al., 2007). Research has indicated that greater openness in adoption practices, such as contact and information about the child and adoptive parents, is associated with significantly better long-term adjustment and grief resolution, and reduced feelings of guilt and loss (Cushman et al., 1997; Field, 1991; Henney et al., 2007; Lancette & McClure, 1992). Openness allows birth mothers to confront and process their grief by being able to: experience the pain of the loss in a supportive environment; commemorate the loss of the child; have knowledge of their child's wellbeing; and the opportunity to choose their child's adoptive parents giving birth mothers participation in the adoption process (Brodzinsky, 1990; Chapman et al., 1986; Cushman et al., 1997; Henney et al., 2007; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Cushman et al. (1997) found that all birth mothers desired some degree of openness, though their satisfaction with the degree of openness played a vital role in their grief process, adjustment and happiness with the relinquishment (Henney et al., 2007). Also, it is important to note that birth mothers still experience loss and grief in open adoptions, and while their participation in the process may have an ameliorative effect, they still experience the loss of being a mother (Henney et al., 2007).

#### *ADOPTIVE PARENTS EXPERIENCES*

Adoptive parents as the legitimate parents have the authority in the triad. The Adoption Act 1955 constitutes adoptees 'as if born to' their adoptive parents who gain all legal rights to the child and puts adoptive parents' interests and rights first (Blake & Coombes, 2016; Griffith, 1997). Adoptive parents hold power to decide how 'open' contact will be (Neil, 2009). Adoptive parents have the power to withdraw from their contact agreement with the birth parents at any time, as it is a non-legal, nonbinding, 'handshake' agreement. Adoptive parents are privileged within the triad, with their narratives being most commonly sourced and heard.

Historically, adoptive parents were seen as having the most to lose if there was not a complete break between the birth family and child. In times of closed adoptions, social workers told new adoptive parents to go back home and to live as if the child had been born to them (Blake & Coombes, 2016; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Ryburn, 1991). They were told that it was the best for everybody involved, otherwise it would destroy any chance of developing attachment and family bonds (Ryburn, 1991). From the beginning of the placement, fears and possible threats were being instilled into adoptive parents, creating a belief that any kind of contact would be detrimental to their family and child (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Adoptive parents were given very little information about the birth parents and family of origin or the circumstances of the mother, resulting in adoptive parents seeing birth parents as unreal or shadowy figures who might threaten their family. Because of the lack of information provided, adoptive parents found it very difficult to tell their child about their adoption, and to answer any of the child's adoption-related questions (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Adoptive parents also spoke out about feeling as if they had to be perfect parents. Adoptive parents were very conscious of the fact that they were raising someone else's child who most likely had not chosen them to be the child's parents, so they felt like they were constantly being judged and scrutinised for their parenting (Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Adoptive parents were led to believe that it was in the best interests of everybody to shut out the past. However, adoptive parents could not ignore that their child had come from somewhere and began to speak out about the 'protection' they did not ask for or want. Adoptive parents expressed a need for greater openness and communication with birth families, believing it would help in solving difficulties, worries and fears that developed because of closed adoptions (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988; Ryburn, 1991).

Open adoption arrangements require adoptive parents to reconceptualise the meaning of kinship and to redraw the boundaries of family (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). Studies have found that the level of openness and communication between adoptive and birth parents will indicate how secure and positive adoptive parents feel about birth family contact (Logan, 1999; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Neil, 2007; Neil, 2009; Siegel, 2003). When talking about their experiences of open adoption, adoptive parents spoke of contact being seen as beneficial for themselves and for their child (Chapman et al., 1987; Fratter, 1991; Neil, 2009; Ryburn, 1991; Siegel, 2003). Adoptive parents stated that

building relationships with birth parents helps them to understand that these are real people, not shadowy figures threatening the security of their parenting role or family (Chapman et al., 1987; Fratter, 1991; Ryburn, 1991). Parents noted that contact quelled their fears, worries and anxieties they initially had about parental security and birth parent interference, as their fears did not materialise (Chapman et al., 1987; Neil, 2007; Ryburn, 1991; Siegel, 2003). Adoptive parents spoke of being more understanding of the birth parents' circumstances, and are able to share the joys, gains and development with somebody else who deeply cares about the child (Chapman et al., 1987; Fratter, 1991; Neil, 2007; Ryburn, 1991). With open adoption, adoptive parents have found it easier to answer their child's questions, as they have access to birth family information and know of the circumstances surrounding the adoption (Chapman et al., 1987; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Ryburn, 1991). Neil (2007, 2009) and Siegel (2003) found that the type of contact to be most successful is when adoptive parents are highly communicatively open and birth parents display positive acceptance of the adoption. Research has found that contact is least likely to succeed when adoptive parents have low communicative openness and birth parents do not positively accept the adoption (Logan, 1999; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Neil, 1999).

Greater education about open adoption and its possible impacts and challenges is needed for prospective adopters (Chapman et al., 1987; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Neil, 2007). Adoptive parents from both closed and open adoptions have spoken about feeling underprepared to parent somebody else's child, as well as dealing with adoption-related issues that arose for them (Neil, 2009; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). Chapman et al. (1987) study highlighted the little preparation adoptive parents receive and suggested that prospective adopters should partake in social worker-led courses in the preparation stage and to continue these once living with adoption.

### *ADOPTTEES EXPERIENCES*

Adoptees are the focal point of the triad. Adoptees are bonded forever to their adoptive and birth parents, with a deep, complex connection to each parent that other members of the triad cannot comprehend. Adoptees carry the burden of embodying the complexities through the experience of difference. Adoptees' live their entire lives in a non-normative, stigmatised way, with many closed adoptees either not knowing their birth origins, have

severed relationships with their birth parents and families, or live the harmful effects of not being able to construct an integrated identity of their birth origins and adopted status (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Beckett et al., 2008; Chapman et al., 1987).

Closed adoptions are always a painful and potentially traumatic event for adoptees (Law Commission, 2000). As adopted children become more aware of being adopted, they often start to ask questions such as ‘Why was I adopted?’, ‘Who are my birth parents?’, ‘Was I abandoned?’ and ‘Who am I?’ These questions relate to adoption-related issues that adoptees experience within closed adoptions: absence of birth family history - ‘genealogical bewilderment’; unacknowledged losses; fear of rejection and abandonment by birth parents and adoptive parents; problems with identity; difficulties with self-esteem and self-worth; and concerns about their feelings of belonging and connectedness (Chapman et al., 1987; Mahmood & Visser, 2015; Partridge, 1991).

Adoptees’ experience many losses that remain unacknowledged, by themselves, their adoptive parents, professionals, and in their social relationships. These losses include the loss of birth parents; the loss of growing up in a biological-related context (loss of the physical experience of connectedness to the birth family); and the loss of birth history information and relationships (Chapman et al., 1987; Partridge, 1991). There is little sociocultural understanding of the loss, especially where the social narrative assumes an adoptee should be grateful for being chosen (Blake, 2013). By not acknowledging adoptees losses, adoptees experience unresolved grief, a lack of ‘realness’ in their lives and their adoption is felt as something negative or sad (Chapman et al., 1987; Partridge, 1991).

Knowledge of adoptees’ birth origins is important for a number of reasons. Adoptees must integrate their birth history with their adopted status, in order to resolve issues faced by being adopted (Campbell, Silverman & Patti, 1991; Chapman et al., 1987). Under closed adoptions, integration is difficult to achieve because of the little amount of birth family information known by the adopted person and adoptive parents, and because of the many layers of ‘different-ness’ that sets adoptees apart from their adoptive family (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Chapman et al., 1987; Grotevant, 1997). The inability to fully integrate their birth history with their adopted status can lead to problems with identity development, self-esteem and self-worth, sense of belonging, and psychological

adjustment (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Chapman et al., 1987; Demick & Warner, 1988; Mahmood & Visser, 2015).

Research has categorised the effects as intimacy problems, feelings of isolation, limited ability to develop secure attachments to others (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Partridge, 1991; Passmore, Feeny & Foulstone, 2007). Closed adoptees testimonies within the research community has illustrated that closed adoption did not serve the mental health needs of adoptees through their lifetime (Chapman et al., 1987). The little research that does focus on open adoptees experiences assumes that with knowledge of birth origins and greater communicative openness, it may help lessen feelings of loss, abandonment and rejection; may increase feelings of self-worth and belonging; may lead to greater self-esteem and integrated identity; and may establish closer connections to adoptive family and birth parents (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Chapman et al., 1987; Demick & Warner, 1988). Open adoption is offered as a ‘solution’ with the knowledge of their origins, and so, it is assumed that adoptees can ‘come to terms’ with oneself in the family and cultural context that they have been adopted into and integrate their birth history with their adopted status (Grotevant, 1997).

Adoptees have spoken about their lifelong fears of rejection and abandonment, as a result of the initial loss of their birth parents and subsequent grief process (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Chapman et al., 1987; Partridge, 1991). Research has shown that as children, adoptees struggle with the issue of whether their adoption was an act of love or rejection, as in closed adoptions there is little evidence of the circumstances of the adoption (Chapman et al., 1987). Research with adoptees from the closed system argue that the search for birth mothers matters for them to make sense of who they are, and why they were adopted. And while this information is exchanged under the amendment to the Act, it does not necessarily enable meaningful relationships. Wrobel, Grotevant and McRoy (2004) argue that searching for birth mothers is a normative developmental task for adoptees that is not related to dysfunctional behaviour or family functioning. Campbell et al. (1991) outlined four common motivations for adoptees to search: experiencing life-cycle transitions; desire for birth history information; hoping for a relationship with birthparent(s); and a wish for greater self-understanding. Searching often produces a complex set of emotions for adoptees, however, studies have illustrated that they do not regret searching, and would do it again, if not sooner (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Campbell

et al., 1991). Searching and reunion often fills the void that adoptees speak of if they are able to form connections to themselves and their birth family. Reunions offer adoptees the chance to access information, to deal with their losses, abandonment and rejection issues, to reframe their adoption experience, to construct their integrated identity, and to reposition themselves within the two-family contexts of which they belong to (Chapman et al., 1987).

Narratives from adoptees under the closed system give testimony to their legal exclusion from their birth families and have participated in collective action to support law reform. However, within Aotearoa New Zealand, despite being located in the research and literature as the solution to the problem, the voice of open adoptees has not been visible. We do not know how open adoption has made a difference for open adoptees. It is crucial that researchers begin to listen to open adoptees and their experiences, so we know the impacts of open adoption on adoptees, highlighting why this research is important. As of now, we have very little understanding of the issues that open adoptees face in their ordinary, everyday lives as they negotiate the expectation of an integrated identity. Without this understanding of open adoptees lived experiences, how can we make informed, legitimate changes to the outdated legislation to benefit the lives of current and future adoptees? Without this understanding of open adoptees lived experiences, how can we open up spaces for other ways of understanding family, and the experience of having two mothers? The experience of having two mothers is linked to the history of adoption through dominant narratives of legitimacy and illegitimacy and the positioning of good and bad mothers (Blake, 2013). Normalised narratives of motherhood do not open space for adoptees to account for their relationships with their birth mothers as they are positioned outside the responsibilities of a legitimate mother. Research with closed adoptees has found that '*knowing*' their birth mother does not necessarily resolve the tension in their relationship between adoptive and birth mother (Blake, 2013). Without understanding the experience of having two mothers, the tension that is our embodied difference is unresolved.

## **ARE YOU MY MOTHER?**

The motherhood mandate requires that all women should bear and rear their own children (Russo, 1976). The construction of motherhood promotes unconditional love, sacrifice,

selflessness, and sole responsibility of care. In this narrative, the ‘good’ mother must always be self-sacrificing, must privilege their child’s needs over their own, and that it will be the most emotionally rewarding and self-fulfilling act they will ever undertake (Gotlib, 2016; Jacques & Radtke, 2012; Mamabolo, Langa & Kiguwa, 2009). Many women experience the pressures of having children, and find that by having children, they are only then considered a ‘real’ woman. The ability to bear children is perceived as the most valuable aspect of being a woman and the most important thing a woman will ever do in her life (Park & Wonch Hill, 2014). The processes mandating motherhood are varied and complex but has been accomplished through social, cultural, political, medical and religious institutions, reinforcing the concept that motherhood is central to the purpose of womanhood and defines feminine identity (Gotlib, 2016; Mamabolo, Langa & Kiguwa, 2009). Women still highly value motherhood as being an integral part of their identity (Jacques & Radtke, 2012; Mamabolo, Langa & Kiguwa, 2009; Park & Wonch Hill, 2014). Although, with the changing landscape of society, there have been significant social, economic and cultural changes that have extended ways of practising motherhood in Western societies (Maher & Saugeres, 2007). In New Zealand, while there have been disruptions to the mandate through women’s decisions to delay motherhood, the rise of infertility and diversity in alternative families (Ulrich & Weatherhall, 2000), there still remains a motherhood mandate that positions mothers as good or bad. Both adoptive and birth mothers disrupt the normative biological narrative of womanhood. However, the current legislation reproduces the moral position of ‘good (adoptive) mother’ as legitimate, and the birth mother as other.

The practice of adoption does not fit the normative social and cultural narratives of motherhood and mothering. Relinquishment and infertility are both personal losses for women, both reproductive losses that are often understood as a failure of femininity (Jacques & Radtke, 2012; Ulrich & Weatherhall, 2000). How do open adoptees make sense of these relationships as we navigate the sociocultural boundaries of normal and different?

## **AIMS OF THIS RESEARCH**

Tracing the structural and social history of adoption practices, there is an assumption that open adoption is a better practice that causes less harm to adoptees than closed adoption

practices. However, it has become evident while reviewing literature that there is a dearth of current published research from Aotearoa New Zealand that attends to the experiences of adoptees in open adoption. What we do know about open adoption and its effects in New Zealand has tended to come from adoptive parents and birth mother research. Since the 1990s, Murray Ryburn had been critiquing this way of doing research to understand the effects and impacts open adoption has had for all triad members. By only conducting research on adoptive parents and birth mother experiences, and thereby hearing second-hand the experiences of adoptees, has resulted in a very adult understanding of open adoption. Siegel (1993) stated that the “true test of open adoption will come when adoptees who have been raised in confidential adoptions and various forms of open adoption can compare stories” (p. 21).

Adoptees from the early stages of open adoption practice in Aotearoa New Zealand are now in their twenties and thirties, and it is both timely and critical that research focused on open adoptees and their experiences of open adoption is brought into view.

After scouring for open adoption literature conducted in New Zealand, Hesselting-Green’s (2015) Masters thesis was the only piece of research I found. Within her research, she identified common themes in her three participants’ narratives to provide insights into open adoptees’ lives, in particular, how they integrate their adopted status into their daily lives, the relationships they have with their birth family and their reflections on open adoption. What she reported was that many adoptees felt pressure in their social relationships to explain their difference through storying their often painful experiences. They also experienced their difference through a lack of fit with both their adoptive and birth families, supporting the need for law reform because ‘knowledge’ of birth origins does not necessarily achieve a sense of belonging or connection. In her research, there was a clear understanding that there was a difference between their birth and adoptive mothers that was ‘felt’. They struggled to find a term that described the familiarity and closeness of their birth mother relationship, with Hesselting-Green (2015) suggesting that this could be because no such term for this relationship exists. This research aims to understand the experience of two mother relationships for open adoptees.

Hesselting-Green (2015) also found that aspects of ‘closed adoption’ persisted in their narratives. These aspects of ‘closed adoption’ within open adoption has led me to ask, is

it the way the Adoption Act 1955 was designed (structural) that also limits the practice of open adoption (sociocultural) that continues the experience of secrecy?

Hesseling-Green's (2015) research is the only piece of local research I can find that includes open adoptees voices, and for that, I acknowledge her work as beginning the conversation. Interestingly though, the excitement I first felt at her intention to give voice to adoptees diminished as I recognised the pattern of research that focuses on the triad. Adoptees stories returned to their third place, and their voices were barely mentioned in the discussion.

This research places adoptees at the forefront so that we have a greater understanding of the experience of open adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand. Open adoption has been practised in New Zealand since 1985, if not earlier. To me, it is astounding that open adoption has been practised for nearly forty years, and no further research, apart from Hesseling-Green's (2015) thesis, has been conducted on open adoptees' experiences. Keith Griffith and Anna Else described closed adoption as a social experiment conducted on a mass scale with unknown consequences and I believe open adoption in New Zealand has been the same. What is the effect of the solution on our everyday lives? This research takes up a position for the 'child's best interests' and therefore privileges the voice of the 'knowers' of the experience.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **FEMINIST STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY**

To break down relationships of domination and oppression, research must begin with the marginalised within society. From a feminist standpoint, qualitative research allows marginalised persons' voices to be heard. It attends to power differentials in the research process through listening to the narratives that women tell and through the collaborative meaning making that opens space for counter narratives to be told (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Harding, 2004).

Standpoint theory is a feminist critical theory that places significant importance on the relations between the construction of knowledge and practices of power and seeks to develop an 'oppositional consciousness' to oppose, resist and counter dominant narratives (Harding, 2004; Hekman, 1997; Williams, 2014). What we know and how we know depends on who we are as standpoint theory argues that the 'knower' and the 'known' cannot be separated (Hekman, 1997). Standpoint theory claims that individuals' social-and-political situatedness and perspectives influences their production of knowledge (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Hekman, 1997). It enables us to question how dominant social norms and the production of knowledge affects marginalised persons lives, and how these shape institutional and social oppression and inequality (Hekman, 1997).

Standpoint theory within research has a goal to empower marginalised groups by acknowledging and valuing the subjectivities of their lived experiences (Hekman, 1997). Standpoint theory can enable researchers to represent the voice of previously silenced groups. Traditional psychological research has excluded and disregarded the voices of marginalised persons in the production of knowledge and the meaning behind their experiences that are important to them (Furumoto, 1998). Open adoptees are a marginalised group within our social and cultural narratives, and are missing voices within the academic literature and socio-political context. Feminist standpoint theory enabled me to question and make sense of the power relationships involved in open adoption. The nature of standpoint theory helps to make sense of adoptees' experiences of their adoptive and birth mother relationships and their experience of having two

mothers because it enabled me to understand the context of dominant social narratives of mothering and the nuclear family.

By locating my research in feminist standpoint theory epistemology, I must, as the researcher, take up a reflexive position to recognise and examine my situatedness. I must critically reflect upon my own and my participants social, cultural, and historical contexts to be both aware of my own situatedness and to make an effort to minimise power differentials. I began this thesis through a narrative standpoint that locates me both as a researcher and an open adoptee. These aspects of the research emerged through the process of 'doing' the research as my own story became more understandable as I listened to the voices of my participants, both in our conversations and through the analysis.

## **NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

By using narrative inquiry analysis, this research represents the experiences of open adoption for adoptees. Narrative inquiry is a methodology that attends to stories because it is through stories that we make sense of how we understand ourselves (our subjectivities) embedded in social power relations (Fine, 2007). It seeks to bring volume to many marginalised voices that otherwise have been silenced by institutional and social power relations, and enables us to express stories of loss and marginalisation, and bring about, in this research, political change.

Narrative inquiry is a form of communication where the stories people tell in the research space requires them to explicate an account of an experience, and as such, narrative inquiry can bring volume to marginalised voices in particular socio-cultural contexts (Riessman, 1993; Squire, 2005). In our everyday relationships, we negotiate normative storylines to make meaning about our experiences with those who we interact with. This process of meaning making shifts and moves in relation to other experiences and as a response to the present telling of the story. In other words, narratives can be understood as an entanglement of institutional, sociocultural, emotional and embodied experiences, all at the same time. Stories do not have meaning until placed within conversations with others, and only then do they take on meanings within the socio-political and cultural context of our narratives by the narrator and listener (Harré & Davies, 1990).

Stories are very rarely clearly packaged for what they are, instead they must be located through an interpretative process. The decisions a researcher makes when engaging and interpreting the stories constructs their meanings, as a researcher's interpretation is informed by their socio-political and cultural contexts. The sociocultural resources that a story draws from, and how a story enables or limits our experiences is important. Understanding that all narratives are knowledge of our everyday lives, narrative inquiry enables us to represent common elements of a story and configure them into a co-constructed whole (Riessman, 1993, 2008). As we story our lived experience of open adoption, we are also positioned within the Adoption Act, highlighting the way in which sharing stories and discussing particular experiences also position us in particular ways. Positioning theory therefore fits within a narrative framework because through the unfolding of storylines, we make sense of ourselves in relation to each other (Morgan, 2002). It is a way to "speak ourselves into our communities, producing ourselves as subjects and communities of voices simultaneously and reproducing them in various versions through multiple relationships" (Morgan, 2002, p. 468).

## **POSITIONING THEORY**

Positioning theory focuses on the analysis of the meanings of actions, in relation to storylines, to reveal previously unnoticed assumptions about what is occurring within a conversation or story (Harré & Slocum, 2003). Positions refer to the ephemeral clusters of rights, duties and obligations used to think, act and speak in certain ways, with regard for the social acts one is enabled and constrained to perform within evolving storylines (Harré, Moghaddam, Pilkerton Carrie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & Slocum, 2003). Positions tend to be situation-specific and are features of the historical, social and cultural moral landscape (Harré et al., 2009; Harré & Slocum, 2003). Positioning theory enables us to make sense of the production of our subjectivities as we move in and through our socio-political situatedness and power relations.

Positioning theory and narrative inquiry analysis enables us to understand the ways that stories come to be meaningful within narratives of social power that are embedded in our everyday experiences of adoption. What storylines unfold within a conversation is mutually determined by the speech-acts people heard or produce, which is mutually determined by the positions they occupy, as positions influence how we perceive and

understand situations, events and people (Harré & Davies, 1990; Harré et al., 2009). It is through the positions people occupy within their stories that meanings are generated (Harré & Davies, 1990).

This research is interested in how adoptees experience their position as open adoptees, and how they position themselves in relation to differing narratives of mother.

## **METHOD**

### *ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS*

The Massey University 'Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants' (2017) and the Treaty of Waitangi principles were taken into consideration when considering the potential ethical concerns and issues that may have arisen within this research. Prior to the commencement of participant recruitment, an ethical application was submitted and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B SOB 19/23.

#### *Privacy & Confidentiality*

Privacy and confidentiality were essential to this research given the multiple relationships with birth and adoptive families. To maintain participant privacy and dignity, all participants were able to choose the location of their interview. All identifiable information, such as names and locations, was omitted from the transcription and research report. Participants were given identifiers, such as P1, to protect their identity and privacy. Any excerpts from the transcriptions included in the research were incorporated in a such a way to avoid identification with any participant. All recordings were destroyed once transcripts were returned, and transcripts and consent forms were stored separately.

#### *Informed Consent*

Prior to the interviewing process, participants were given the research information sheet (see Appendix A). I explained the information sheet with each participant, outlining their rights, assured them of their secured privacy, and answered any questions the participants had. Participants were informed the interview would be audio recorded and that they

could ask to stop it at any point during the interviewing process. For the Skype interview I conducted, written informed consent was gained prior to the video call. Through an exchange of emails, I informed the participant the interview would be audio recorded, went over the participant's rights, and answered any questions the participant had before he signed the consent form. By signing the consent form, the participants consented to participating in the study under the conditions set out in the information sheet.

### *Ethical Care*

Drawing on feminist standpoint theory and the assumption that knowledge is situated, I valued the adoptees understandings and positions in the conduct of this research. The experience of adoption is part of an open adoptees' ordinary everyday life, however, retelling stories may evoke strong emotions. Conversational interviews enable a practice of ethical care because they are relational and include a connection that attends to emotions where trust and respect are enabled through negotiating safe space.

As a researcher, I have a duty of ethical care to my participants, and to me, to protect our physical and psychological wellbeing. Therefore, another aspect of my ethical duty of care was to negotiate the power relationship between myself and each participant by being respectful of participants' storytelling and listening to the stories they chose to tell.

I also had an ethical duty towards myself to ensure my own wellbeing. Some interviews did produce strong emotions. Before the interviewing process began, I formed a safety network with a group of family and friends, and had the opportunity to debrief with my supervisor after each interview. I also kept a journal of my emotional processes as a form of self-care.

As part of my duty of care towards my participants, I provided follow-up care after interviews by remaining in contact with participants to continue to support their ongoing stories, so that they could continue to ask questions about the research process.

## *SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT*

Because I was asking my participants to share highly personal and potentially vulnerable stories with me, participants were recruited for this research through the use of purposeful snowballing. Open adoptees are a very specific population that are difficult to locate, and so, purposeful snowballing was the most appropriate recruitment method to use as it is widely used to locate marginalised or socially silenced people (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaei, 2017). This recruitment method was the most appropriate method to use in my case because I did not know any people like me who met the criteria for inclusion, and this method resulted in people reaching out to me that I would have never been able to contact and meet within my own social relationships. Because the research was located within New Zealand's open adoption context, participants had to be New Zealand citizens and been formally adopted under the Aotearoa New Zealand Adoption Act 1955. As part of the research aims, participants must have had a relationship with their birth mother.

Initially, I discussed my research aims with both my peers and family members who then passed on my research information sheet on to possible suitable people, and so on, and so on, creating a snowball effect. One participant recommended that I forward the information sheet to a senior practitioner at the Oranga Tamariki Adoption Services to pass on, which I did. Potential participants then made contact with me through email or txt, expressing an interest to participate. To ensure participation was voluntary, participants made first contact.

Through the use of the snowballing technique, four women and one man, aged nineteen years to thirty-nine years old and representing twenty years of open adoption practice, chose to participate in this research, and all contacted me directly. Experiences of openness with their birth mothers were diverse, and complicated. All of the participants were adopted out at six weeks or under, and all had ongoing, regular contact with their birth mother except one participant who had no contact apart from Facebook check-ups. There was diversity across participants' ethnicity, socioeconomic status and adoption placement: three participants identified themselves as Pākehā, one participant identified herself as Māori Pasifika, and one participant identified herself as Māori, and was a transracial adoption. This participant spoke of having knowledge of her birth iwi, and that just knowing where her blood was from was enough. Participants' relationships with their

adoptive and birth mothers and adoption stories are not static, instead, they are constantly evolving and transforming.

Once participants contacted me, I promptly contacted them asking if they had read my information sheet and if they had any questions about my research. Once I had clarified any questions and received a confirmation for their willingness to participate, interview date, location and time were negotiated on an individual basis.

Initially, I intended to recruit six-ten participants for this research, however, recruitment of participants was still reasonably difficult despite using the snowballing technique and having considerable help from the Adoption Services senior practitioner at Oranga Tamariki. However, the difficulty in recruitment did not come as a surprise since I was targeting a hard-to-reach population about an experience that may not be talked about. Despite this difficulty recruiting more than five participants, a high repetition of storylines and experiences occurred.

### *INTERVIEWS*

At the beginning of each interview, I went over the information sheet with participants, explaining their rights and answering any questions before participants gave written and verbal informed consent (Appendix B). Participants were made aware the interview was being audio recorded and were able to ask to turn it off at any point. I presented myself as much as I could in the position of an insider to open the space for conversation, and orienting them toward a shared voice, providing personal information about myself as an open adoptee and about my own adoption story. I did this with the intention to establish greater rapport with participants as well as to help them feel more comfortable about sharing their own personal stories. Since this is a missing voice piece of research working with marginalised persons, it was important that the power relationship was negotiated, and participants were comfortably positioned as experts of their own experiences and stories.

Interviews were held at different locations, depending on participant's preferences and comfort. Some interviews were conducted in private homes while others were conducted in more public environments such as cafes and libraries. All interviews were conducted

face-to-face, apart from one Skype interview. The interviews lasted between 50 and 110 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded, enabling me to fully immerse myself and solely concentrate on the conversations, without having the distraction of taking notes.

The interviews were a collaborative process and were conversational in nature. I would listen to participants' stories and experiences and would ask questions to elaborate on particular storylines. I would ask questions related to areas of interest that were used as conversations starters to open up the dialogue as well to gain greater understanding and insight into the meaningfulness of stories told (see Appendix D). With that said, I had no specific schedule of questions to ask. The interviews were co-productions of adoptees' stories and experiences, which were led by the participant so that they could tell their personal narratives in ways that were meaningful to them, within a context where their voices were honoured (Blake, 2013; Muylaert, Surubbi Jr, Rogerio Gallo, Neto, & Reis, 2014). This interview style provides a setting of flexibility and responsiveness to participants' stories while still be guided by the research aims. Because participants knew of my insider status, I would, on occasion, be asked about my experiences as an open adoptee, and I responded openly and honestly (Blake, 2013).

In one interview, the audio recording stopped midway through. The participant offered to reschedule another time to talk again, if the last half of the recording contained any important storylines that I might find useful. After transcribing the first half of her interview, I took the participant up on her offer and we organised another time to talk.

In follow-up contact after the interviews, many participants felt positive about the opportunity to talk openly with somebody who understands probably more than anybody else about what it means to be openly adopted. Participants were eager to talk about their lived experiences and share their stories as they believe it is important to share our experiences to bring greater awareness and understanding about adoption as well as to remove stigmas that surround adoption.

### *TRANSCRIPTION*

The audio recordings were transcribed by me as soon as possible after each interview so that the interview experience and context was still relatively fresh in my

mind. I listened to and reread the transcripts multiple times over several weeks. By personally transcribing each interview, I was able to deeply immerse myself in the stories to generate meaningful storylines and pay respect to the significance of participants' sharing their personal experiences of their adoptive and birth mother relationships. As I transcribed the interviews, the analytical process had already begun as storylines began to emerge.

The transcripts were electronically sent to the participants to review before signing the transcript release form, (see Appendix C) confirming their consent for extracts from the transcript being used in reports and publications arising from the research. Reviewing their transcript gives participants the opportunity to read, request changes, and also with the opportunity to stay involved with the research. This included continuing to talk about their experience of the interview and hopes for having their voices heard (Blake, 2013). Participant involvement throughout the research process produces more credible research as it preserves the quality and integrity of the narratives. Only one participant made changes to their transcript to ensure that I was clear about what he meant. One participant did not give written consent to release her transcript after multiple contacts with her. Her inability to continue to engage further with the research at this time was respected. I have continued to contact the participant in a support role, with no further expectation. I carry her story throughout the analysis, as a voice in the narrative that at this time cannot appear as text.

#### *METHOD OF ANALYSIS*

Researchers are not provided with direct access to individuals' experiences; we are only provided with ambiguous representations of the experience (Reissman, 1993). Every time an individual retells a story or experience, it is altered in a way to correspond with the context, audience and purpose of storytelling, and so, as a researcher undertaking narrative analysis, the participants' narratives I heard all served a particular purpose, to bring voice to the experience of open adoption and of having two mothers, and in doing so, contribute to the call for legislative change.

Instead of questioning what happened, we question why the story was told in that particular way (Reissman, 1993). Through the process of narrative analysis, I gathered

common aspects of participants' stories and organised them into a purposeful, meaningful, amalgamated story. Narratives bring a sense of order, meaning and coherency to our stories and experiences, to help us understand and make meaning in our lives (Crossley, 2000). In this research, I bring my own experience to the co-construction of the interviews, transcription and analysis, to represent the collaborative story made together.

Riessman (1993) helps us to understand narrative analysis as a process of representation that frames our final understanding. She provides five levels of representation that speaks to the research process. It is important to understand that narrative analysis does not provide us with access to an individual's experience. The narrative produced through the conversational interview is embedded in the relationship between the participant and researcher. The research itself was already embedded in my own experience as an open adoptee, and my relationship with the literature and emergent questions. The participants were also informed about the aims of the research prior to the interviews taking place and brought their understanding of what that might mean for them.

The first level of representation, *attending to the experience*, is the idea that as the experience is unfolding, we describe what we notice about the experience. What we attend to and what feelings are evoked is a process that also depends on other experiences and interactions that make that experience meaningful (Reissman, 1993).

The second level of representation is *telling about the experience*. It is about the performance of the narrative, as a person talks to others about the experience from their socio-political and cultural contexts. Together, the interviewer and the interviewee co-construct the narrative and storylines through talking, listening and asking and answering of questions. There is an inevitable gap between the lived experience and the telling of it, as well as the differences in the meanings of the experience generated by the interviewer (Reissman, 1993).

The third level of representation is *transcribing the experience*. This stage is important to the analytical process as it involves changing the nuances of telling stories into written form, and the story becomes subject to the researchers' interpretations. Here it is recognised that the researcher does not have complete access to the experience and selects

certain parts of the storyline to attend to, and so, we produce gaps within the experience (Reissman, 1993).

The fourth level of representation is *analysing the experience*. This stage involves deep thoughtfulness and reflective immersion in and across the transcripts to generate themes and storylines within the narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Decisions are made about the form, order and style of presentation of storylines, as well as the extracts included. In the end, an amalgamated story was created by bringing together my own context including my epistemological position, that informs the method to identify the storylines from the narratives produced and turning them into a hybrid narrative (Reissman, 1993, 2008).

The fifth level of representation is *reading the experience*. This stage is where you, the readers, encounter the written narrative and attend to your experience through your socio-political context. Recognising this stage is important, as there is no master narrative of an experience, but rather, new and counter narratives continue to evolve (Reissman, 1993, 2008). And so, knowledge is co-produced by participants, researchers and readers (Harding, 2004).

What follows in the analysis is a hybrid story through the process of engagement with multiple stories that enabled me to represent the social power relations, both legislative and social, that emerged through the telling of shared stories. I looked for patterns across the stories and as they emerged, I also looked for the ways the participants positioned themselves within dominant narratives and how they understood their relationships through their legal and sociocultural location. The following chapter is organised as a hybrid narrative that begins with the storylines of knowledge of their birth and the ongoing trajectory of relationships and connections between their birth and adoptive families. The analysis also tells a narrative of the burdens adoptees carry, as they negotiate the tensions they experience and the embodied felt effects of their position as ‘other’.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### CLOSED OFF

Open adoptions are comprised of structural and communicative openness between members of the adoption triad: the adopted child, adoptive parents and birth parents (Bodzinsky, 2005). However, like Hesselting-Green's (2015) research, a storyline that emerged from the participants' narratives, including my own, was that the meaning of openness is limited. While we know of our adoption and our birth origins, we do not necessarily disclose our adoptive history within our social relationships.

*"I went through a stage probably about a few years where I really shied away from questions about family" (P1)*

*"It's kind of one of those things that you don't know someone is adopted or not until you kind of know them well enough to kind of find out" (P3)*

*"It's one of those [things] that would put me off even telling people that I was adopted. I would just wait until people asked" (P5)*

The Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 allowed for adoptions to have greater structural openness. However, what the 1985 Act did not necessarily produce was meaningful communicative openness, which may explain why we are not open about our adopted status and what that means. Adoptees can often shy away from or be unwilling to share and explain their adopted status to others, in fear of being recognised through our difference. Adoptees are different because our family was not constructed according to the rules of the dominant narrative of the nuclear family or the dominant narrative of motherhood, where there is, of course, one mother, instead of two. Adoptees lived experiences can only be expressed and understood by others through the narratives available to them, and so, the concept of two mothers becomes something of a novelty. What appears is a gap in understanding where differences marks how adoptees are socially understood, including how adoptees understand themselves. This difference was recognised in early social interactions:

*"In primary school, people knew I was adopted and I remember someone being like 'oh you're adopted like haha', like not even any kind of insult but I realised I'm different" (P1)*

Through these early social interactions, we recognise our differences and through a desire to fit into the dominant narrative of the nuclear family and the single entity of mother, we will often pretend to fit in by not freely sharing that we have two mothers, thereby becoming keepers of the secret.

Open adoptees are, therefore, marginalised by *knowing* (*we are adopted/our birth family*) and not having the social/cultural resources to make sense of how to manage that knowledge in our social relationships. Located as different from the norm, we often struggle with living in-between: here the in-between is the constant requirement to negotiate our differences. Through this negotiation, we have learnt to be quiet and have positioned ourselves as the keepers of the secret of adoption: the secret of having two mothers. The intention of the social movement changing adoption from closed to open was to remove the secrecy that seemed to be intricately woven into closed adoption practices (Else, 1990). However, it seems as if secrecy was not removed from adoption practices, instead, it has manifested itself differently for open adoptees. We do not have a social narrative that enables us to tell others about our adoption and also take up a position as normal. Rather than disrupting the secret of closed adoption, participants talked about protecting themselves from being found out. In the movement from closed adoption to open adoption, the legitimacy of the nuclear family has not shifted, but rather, remains in our sociocultural relationships. We 'fit' in by staying silent.

Our marginalisation of *knowing* has resulted in us becoming silent about our differences to protect ourselves, and thereby, transforming the secrecy seen in adoption. The marginalisation of *knowing* of our birth origins and family comes from open adoptees not remembering a moment of disclosure about their adoption, and so, we have always known we were adopted. Therefore, despite the legislative changes, the meaning of '*knowing*' needs to be understood through how we come to know what we know.

Like Hesselting-Green's (2015) research, a storyline that ran through the participants' narratives, including my own, is that we have always known we were adopted, and none of us can remember a time where we have not known:

*“I’ve always known I was adopted. There’s no point in time where I remember someone telling me “you’re adopted”, and my mind being blown” (P1)*

*“As long as I can remember I’ve known” (P3)*

*“I always knew that I was adopted” (P5)*

There was no moment of disclosure and having their *“mind being blown”* as said by P1, rather their adoption has been an ordinary, everyday life narrative within their family lives:

*“[Adoption] was like a table conversation, we’d talk about it anytime. It wasn’t weird at all. That’s just like part of our everyday life is the fact that adoption is a thing in our family” (P2)*

*“Like it’s just been a reality for me like my whole life. It was kind of just normal growing up I suppose” (P3)*

The ‘knowledge’ of our adoption is written into the fabric of our position in our family lives as an ordinary, everyday life narrative. However, the experience of *knowing* is embedded within the structure of the nuclear family, and does not open up possibilities for ‘communicative openness’ to speak of our struggles within our sociocultural contexts which are also diverse.

## **EVERY ADOPTION IS DIFFERENT**

What emerged through the narratives was the feeling of aloneness generated when trying to articulate our difference. Throughout this storyline, adoption itself is recognised as a struggle within our sociocultural contexts especially when there are so many forms adoption takes. Within participants’ adoption narratives, they talked about a ‘felt’ difference to a generic adoption story:

*“I think every open adoption story is very different, and, yeah like there are struggles with it” (P2)*

*“I mean my situation, I suppose, is quite unique to, I guess all situations are quite unique” (P3)*

*“I’ve noticed what people do a lot is they just put adopted kids in one pile over there but they don’t take into account that there’s different types of adoption, like the international adoption, closed adoption, open adoption. They just dump it all in one pile and it’s not actually like that. They experience it different because of the way that you’re adopted” (P5)*

What emerged from participants stories was that the context of adoption is important, and without a nuanced understanding, adoptees can struggle with issues of their multiple subjectivities as they negotiate connections with their birth relationships, and the ongoing issues that might present themselves depending on the circumstances of their adoption. P5 emphasised the need to distinguish between the ‘types’ of adoption, rather than assuming all adoptions are alike with the same issues faced by every adoptee. The research literature on the experiences of inter-country adoptees for example, has found that the disconnection between the past and the present was complicated through overt or everyday racism despite their legitimacy in their new country (Fronek & Briggs, 2018). The issues closed adoptees faced were the focus of the social movement’s call for change in the practices of adoption. However, now that those changes in adoption practices have occurred, we need to open up spaces for adoptee experiences across all forms of adoption to be heard, especially for open adoptees whose experience is missing from the literature.

## **GRATEFULNESS IS MANDATORY**

Another aspect of often contradictory understanding of adoptees’ positions is negotiating the meaning of their adoptions through a story of being grateful. Feeling grateful emerges in adoption literature (Blake, 2013; Fronek & Briggs, 2018; Hesselting-Green, 2015) as a narrative to make sense of the ‘circumstances of our adoption’ often through a narrative trajectory that positions birth mothers as incapable of good mothering and adoptive parents as rescuing us from unimaginable circumstances. Adoptees embody such a story: grateful for being given the opportunity to live in a good family environment, with two parents. Participants positioned their birth mothers as lacking the resources to competently perform their duties as good mothers, and were therefore grateful for the opportunities their adoption provided:

*“If I’d stayed with her, I probably wouldn’t be in the same circumstances that I’m in now, at all” (P5)*

Feeling grateful also extends to birth mothers. I recognise in my own story of my birth circumstances that my birth mother relinquished her role as a mother in the understanding that I would be better off with both a mum and a dad. In this way, I was grateful to my birth mother for what Hesselting-Green (2015) describes as an act of love. For a long time, the sociocultural stereotypes of sole motherhood led to feelings of gratefulness: I might be adopted but at least I wasn't being raised by a solo mother.

Feeling grateful also emerged through a relationship of reciprocity. Having been rescued from unimaginable circumstances, adoptees recognise the opportunities that their family have given them, and therefore felt it was important to give back in some way.

*“My family that raised me are my roots because they're the people that I should give back to because of everything that they've done for me” (P5)*

Social narratives of adoption being a humanitarian act suggests that if adoptees had not been adopted out then their lives today would not be as prosperous without the care and love from their adoptive family (McKee, 2019). Through the narrative of gratefulness, good adoptees must be grateful for being saved and for the life they were given through their adoption, which McKee (2019) has termed gratitude attitude. Adoptees embody this story and to counter it would risk their position in the family. To refuse a position in the narrative would trouble what it means to be a good adoptee.

The narrative of adoption gratitude is reflected in my own and the participants' stories of gratefulness towards their adoptive parents. We have experienced the narrative of adoption being a humanitarian act by believing that we were saved from a life of deprivation. As we embody affective gratefulness, our stories of loss remain silent.

The public perception of adoption is associated with the gains and benefits that adoptees receive; however, this produces a tension for adoptees who experience the loss that also comes from adoption (Fronek & Briggs, 2018). The effect of others defining the benefits of adoption has resulted in adoptees being compelled to be grateful for the losses we have suffered, and therefore, suppressing adoptees feelings of loss: the loss of our birth parents, the loss of our birth origins and the loss of growing up in a biological-

related context (Fronek & Briggs, 2018). Through the suppression of our feelings of loss, we also lose our ability to voice these feelings of loss (Fronek & Briggs, 2018). If there is any discussion of adoptees being dissatisfied, we are then portrayed as being ungrateful for the blessings we have received from our adoption.

Adoptees can and do refuse to engage in the politics of gratitude of their adoption, and in doing so, dismantle the narratives of gratitude and adoptive parents as their being saviour, thus asserting agency over their storytelling over their adoption (McKee, 2019). These are known as counterstories that are used to disrupt dominant narratives of adoption gratitude. Counterstories reveal ‘alternative standpoints’ to adoption and reveal the contradictions and violence of adoption (McKee, 2019). Counterstories allow adoptees to change the way they tell their adoption story by taking control of the narrative. Fronek and Briggs (2018) research indicated that adoptees who embody gratefulness through a socially sanctioned narrative often experience feelings of ‘differentness’, not belonging, abandonment and being unwanted in the first place (Fronek & Briggs, 2018). Disrupting the narrative, however, enables a change in the story from gratitude to thankfulness. Rather than being positioned through a narrative of rescue, we can become thankful for the new opportunities that adoption enabled us. In this way, a counter narrative has the potential for us to make sense of the tensions between gain and loss and find a way to ease the burden of our adopted status (Fronek & Briggs, 2018).

What emerged in the participants’ stories was the way in which we take up a generic telling of adoption that conforms to the narrative of adoptions as a gain. Through this story, we come to recognise that our experiences of gratefulness work to suppress our feelings of loss and our ability to be heard.

## **GENERIC STORYTELLING**

With my own story of why I was given up for adoption, I was told my birth mother wanted me to have both a Mum and a Dad so that I would be given opportunities that she would not have been able to give to me on her own so that I could have a better life. So, the narrative becomes about adoption as an act of love but at the same time positions birth mothers as not being capable of providing the care that we (the gift) would receive in a

more capable nuclear family. All our stories were composed of similar elements – a birth mother’s circumstances (her failure) and her morally ‘good’ decision to give us away.

*“She wanted me to have the best start to life and she wanted me to have a Mum and Dad” (P1)*

*“[She] wasn’t ready to be a Mum [and] she wanted to give me all of the opportunities of being raised by a couple that she probably couldn’t [have] provided to me” (P2)*

*“She was nineteen. She was quite worried about the kind of life she’d be able to give me” (P3)*

*P5: She grew up with a lot of financial issues was why she, um, adopted me out to my parents*

*IN: Giving you up so you could have*

*P5: A better life ... She saw that by giving away a life, I gained a life (P5)*

From listening to these stories, there is a pattern of generic storytelling in the explanations that adoptees receive about why they were given up for adoption, with each story seeming to overlap each other despite that each adoption is situated in diverse ways. While the legislation specifies that we should know of the circumstances of our adoption, this patterned story of sameness was remarkable, and is as if both adoptive and birth mothers received the same pamphlet where our experiences of loss are rewritten as an act of love: *I love you but I wanted a better life for you that I couldn’t give to you; I was too young and didn’t want to be a single parent; I wanted you to have a Mum and a Dad so that you would have greater opportunities than what I could provide for you. Love. Care. Better life.*

Adoptive mothers are positioned as the saviour. She becomes the good mother who wants and keeps her child, and her position as a good mother is socially and structurally legitimated (Gotlib, 2016; Jacques & Radtke, 2012). To become the saviour locates our birth mother in ‘bad’ circumstances from which and from whom we need to be saved from (Wegar, 1997).

Birth mothers are positioned as the bad mother for giving up her child (Gotlib, 2016). When a person is positioned as a mother, it comes with particular expectations and obligations, and one of these obligations is the care of your child (Mamabolo, Langa & Kiguwa, 2009). Birth mothers not only disrupt this obligation, they also disrupt the

dominant narrative of motherhood and ‘good’ mothering which is to provide a morally legitimate nuclear family (Gotlib, 2016). In the generic story of our salvation, we become embedded in a narrative where solo mothers (our mothers) are immoral, as least in as much as they are the lacking the qualities of a good mother, who can provide the conditions that meet the expectations of a nuclear family and therefore a better life.

The positions adoptive and birth mothers are placed in through the generic story, as the saviour and the morally inferior incompetent mother, creates a tension for adoptees. Within the narrative of our ‘rescue’, we embody the burden of needing to be rescued by one mother from another mother. As the generic story is repeated over time, in our families and through sociocultural norms, the story of our relinquishment is experienced as a loss but the loss is unspeakable. As the story becomes ingrained in our everyday lives, we also position our birth mothers as inferior. Our salvation requires we are to be grateful for the opportunities we would not have had otherwise. This creates a hierarchy of who is better, with one mother being ratified as good and the other as bad. At the same time as we understand our relinquishment as an act of love by our birth mother, we are expected to be doubly grateful. The positioning of adoptive and birth mothers as good and bad challenges our affective response to our adopted status. Taking up the burden of being grateful for our relinquishment and our salvation is imposed on our understanding of the circumstances of our adoption through the generic story.

For example, P4 tells a story of how she understands the positioning of our mothers and how that story positions us as adoptees. As a child, P4 would stay with her birth mother every weekend but for P4, it was as if she was going from the Brady bunch to the ghetto. Her adoptive family environment was loving and great but she would have to visit her birth mother in an environment that met the criteria for deficit; violence, drugs and alcohol. In this narrative telling, the generic storying of good and bad families, P4 positioned her adoptive mother as a ‘perfect’ mother and placed her on a ‘pedestal’. However, this was not an easy position, as while she was grateful, her own position in her adoptive family felt unachievable – as she understood herself as biologically bad, her position in the generic story of salvation was as not good enough.

The generic story of saviour and the positions of good and bad mothers not only produces a tension in our experiences of two mothers but also impacts our relationships, and how

we understand how we ‘fit’. For example, we don’t fit the narrative of the nuclear family, despite the legitimacy of the Act. We ‘have’ two mothers, sometimes two fathers, and as a result, we exceed the norms of the ‘family’. The generic story does not provide us with a way to articulate the complexity of these multiple relationships, and we experience our difference as not fitting the sociocultural norms. Adoptees resist this position of ‘other’, and instead we protect and support the dominant narrative by keeping the secret of our adoption.

*“I haven’t really talked about it that much like I kind of don’t offer up the information. I really shied away from questions about family because I didn’t want to kind of get into telling everyone like a massive story” (P1)*

*“It’s kind of one of those things that you don’t know someone is adopted or not until you kind of know them well enough to kind of find out” (P3)*

*“I wait till I get to know that person” (P5)*

The burden of being grateful involved keeping the secret to protect the adoptive family narrative, and is taken up to protect ourselves from the scrutiny of our difference.

*“I suppose depending on the situation if I was talking to someone, I’d refer my birth Mum as my Mum, just to kind of not have tons of questions about it” (P3)*

Our position as an adoptee, therefore, comes with specific rights, duties and obligations that enable and constrain the ways we can speak and act (Harré & Slocum, 2003; Harré et al., 2009). The burden of the double relationships is ordinary in our everyday lives. We bear the burden of the secret of having two mothers, and protect ourselves from the scrutiny of our difference. By being grateful for our adoption, we are obliged to take up the generic storyline to feel connected with our adoptive family as well as to protect our status within the adoptive family.

*“My family that raised me are my roots because they’re the people that I should give back to because of everything that they’ve done for me” (P5)*

By being positioned as open adoptees, we are burdened with double the amount of duties and obligations than children in normative families have, as well as being burdened with duties and obligations that no other child is asked to perform and manage. Because of our duty to be grateful within the generic storyline, our right to grieve our losses, to have our struggles heard, to build relationships of meaningful connection are silenced.

A storyline of the double duties and obligations that open adoptees must perform resonates with Hesselings-Green's (2015) understanding of the burden of responsibility for maintaining the relationships they have been given. In her analysis, Hesselings-Green (2015) identified that it was the responsibility of adoptees to normalise their experiences through the generic storyline. At the same time, it was their responsibility to make their 'open' relationships with their birth mothers make sense. In my own experience, I am often overwhelmed by the feeling of the burden of responsibility to care for my birth mother as we navigate our connection, and often come away from our time together emotionally exhausted and drained.

P2 told a story about the responsibility she has always had to bear in order to foster her birth mother relationship:

*"My birth Mum... she's so on her own like wavelength. A lot of the time that I got to spend time with her had to be instigated by me, so I always had to like nail her down and be like 'when am I coming to see you'. She's not good at planning like at all like don't even think about trying plan something four weeks out. For her, it's way better if you just call in on the day if you're in the neighbourhood rather than trying to actually schedule something, which I don't think is particularly easy when you have like your own life. I'm always the one trying organise something and she's trying meet me halfway and schedule but she's not very good at it, so plans fall apart all the time. So, yeah, it is a challenge with her."*

P4 also took up the position as responsible for her relationships between two mothers. During her childhood, she was required to spend weekends with her birth mother and siblings. However, when she asked her 'mum' to come and pick her up early, her birth mother clearly reminded her of her obligation when she said, 'it breaks my heart that you do not want to stay and spend time with me'. And while she did not want to continue with such regular contact, she felt responsible for her birth mother's emotional wellbeing, and did not resist, and took up a position as a dutiful daughter.

The generic story is experienced by adoptees as a burden and a responsibility to negotiate their relationships, and yet when and how these stories are told mattered to their understanding of the circumstances of their adoption.

## **COMMUNICATIVE OPENNESS AND AGE-APPROPRIATE EXPLANATIONS**

How then, in the generic storytelling, is it possible for adoptees to make sense of the circumstances of their adoption? One storyline conveyed the notion that the participants felt like they received sufficient enough explanations growing up that made a lot of sense to them at the time:

*“She just told me that [my birth Mum] wanted me to have the best start to life and she wanted me to have a Mum and a Dad. And then I was just like ‘ok’, and then I’ve never asked again. So, I think that made a lot of sense to me why [my birth Mum] gave me to you. It just made so much sense in my little brain that I didn’t really have any follow up questions. I don’t know how I made my mind up about everything else but Mum would always give me an honest answer that was appropriate” (P1)*

*“We had children’s books about adoption. It like explains the whole concept really, really well so it was never a strange thing to me. I felt like I had like a sufficient enough explanation from my adoptive parents about why I was adopted” (P2)*

Where it seemed there was an explanation that involved open communication, it did not necessarily become meaningful for adoptees until they could understand the generic narrative. Adoptees understanding of their adoptive mother’s act of love, or being able to find a way to make sensible the notion of good and bad became important to how we understood the circumstances of our adoption as a process.

*“She adopted me out to my parents [to have] a better life. I understand that. It took me a while to understand that that’s what she was trying to achieve” (P5)*

*“I wasn’t really sure like why I was adopted: if it was because of me [or] if I wasn’t like good enough or something” (P3)*

Reflecting on her own process, P4 had never met another adoptee who was capable of making sense of the information that they were relinquished but rather explained the

process of 'knowing' depended on it being normalised in the family narrative; "*a trick*" that coerces the successful communication of the generic story.

It seems that if you do not continuously have adoption-related conversations to normalise the response to the child's questions and/or concerns in a safe space, then it is likely that there are more confusions and challenges that the adopted child will face. However, the tensions we experience through our complex relationships are not resolved within our sociocultural location:

*"I often struggled with this kind of like push and pull of feeling. Like I knew who I was but then ended up in situations where I felt like that was a lie and I didn't know who I was and it would often happen when I would see my birth dad" (P2)*

*"At the end of all that I was like kind of wishing that I just didn't know I was adopted" (P3)*

*"I mean I always knew that I was adopted because my birth family would come and visit and I didn't know who it was and it took me a couple of years to realise what it was cause I didn't understand: 'what do you mean this is my birth mother? I don't understand what you are talking about'. I didn't understand why somebody would give up their child" (P5)*

The generic narrative does not provide a safe space for adoptees to express their negative or ambivalent feelings, including feeling rejected or loss. P4 spoke about her experience of being silent because she feared that if she hurt her adoptive parents' feelings by asking questions, they would reject her and send her back to her 'bad' mother.

These participant stories highlight the importance of having open adoption-related conversations with the adopted child as they grow up to try to avoid, manage or overcome any adoption-related challenges that may arise. Jones and Hackett (2015) found that communicative openness with the adopted child about their adoption can lead to the development of a positive identity and can have higher levels of satisfaction with their adoption.

However, without changes to the sociocultural and structural norms that hold the generic narrative in place, is the intention of open communication possible? As a solution to the

problem of ‘closed adoption’, it appears connection and belonging has not reached its potential.

## **WHERE DO I BELONG?**

Closed adoption research has thoroughly covered the issue of belonging and lack of connectedness that closed adoptees experienced and suggested that open adoption would alleviate adoptees’ feelings of grief and distress over their loss of belonging and connectedness to their birth origins (Chapman et al., 1987; Feast & Howe, 1997; Partridge, 1991). However, in my experience, I have searched for a sense of belonging and have often struggled with finding my place within my adoptive and birth families. There are times where I feel like I belong and know my place in the relationships I have, and then it all comes tumbling down, and I once again feel lost, alone and different to everybody.

*I remember the pain, the feeling of being heartbroken when my birth mother told me she was not my mum, in my teenage years. I began to question, again, who I was. Who was my mum? With the loss of my adoptive mum, if Karmenne was not my mum and Brenda (my step-mum) was not my mum, did I have a mum? I understand now that the position of ‘not mum’ is an effect of the legally binding adoption agreement, however, I was curious about how this might affect other adoptees’ relationships.*

The participants also told similar stories of searching for a sense of belonging and of not knowing where they ‘fit’ within their two families. For open adoptees, we have “*to learn to exist in two different families [with] two very different parent[ing] styles and personalities and you’re trying to piece together where you sit, where you stand in that and you fit into neither*” (P5), which participants spoke of being really hard and often heart-breaking.

A story that emerged was that there is a ‘knowing’, a belonging that is a felt connection to their birth families. However, within the context of the generic narrative, this ‘feeling’ becomes another site of tension. Understood through our biological relationships, we share familiarity (features, quirks, interests) and yet we also feel like outsiders as we formed our familiarity (morals, values, memories, experiences) within our adopted relationships, as P1 and P2 describe:

*“I remember being like ‘oh I look quite similar to my birth dad and, um, sort of all of his family. I feel like a part of it when I go there because I’m like I look like you guys”* but she still feels like she isn’t a part of her family because she isn’t able to share the meaning of the ‘inside jokes’ or experiences. *“I do feel a little bit removed because I’m not, like I’m adopted out. I was just like not involved, and it’s like oh like I still am different”* (P1)

P2 spoke of frequently feeling like she *“was a part of the family”* but also that she *“feel[s] like I’m not, I’m not involved”* at all (P2)

The position of feeling different complicates relationships of connection, and extends the feeling of difference in adoptive families. Again, these feelings of conflict are because we grew up and lived with our adoptive family, and so, we have shared memories and experiences together, however, we still feel like we don’t fit in because we will always be different to them. We are different through the conditions of our birth, different appearances, quirks, and so on. And I too, remember always noticing my difference at social events, where the social context of my adoptive family mirrored the ‘look’ of our social group, and exacerbated my difference.

P4 spoke about how she felt like she did not belong in her adoptive family because she looked different and has different characteristics to her adopted family. P4’s feelings of differentness were also exacerbated by the two very different home environments she had with her adoptive and birth family growing up (Brady bunch and ghetto). The contradiction left her feeling unable to meet the expectations of either family, and therefore, she did not fit anywhere.

P5, however, did not experience physical difference from her adoptive family because she was both ethnically and culturally similar. Therefore, it was a “weird” experience for her learning that she *“was adopted because all my siblings, they just look like a mix of my parents so we’re all different tones of brown. We all just look like different parts of Mum and Dad”*

The sense of belonging attributed to physical likeness was a dominant storyline across all the participants and was a culturally available narrative for belonging. However, with understanding adoption as a process, some participants were able to rewrite their narratives and find a place where belonging became possible.

For P4, it took having a child to experience belonging, and coming to a meaningful understanding of 'fitting'. Growing up, P5 spoke of not knowing where she belonged in both her birth and adoptive families but now she "*know[s] where I belong now like my family that has raised me will always be my family but I know where I stand with my birth family. I don't feel like I have to be any different from how I am with the family that raised me and my birth family*"

Participants' narratives highlight that attaining a sense of belonging is not a linear process. Participants spoke of times where they felt like they belong, only to lose it, while they also told stories of feeling like they didn't belong anywhere until one day they did. Through these stories, I have realised that this search for a sense of belonging and connectedness for open adoptees is a journey that comes with time, self-reflection and sometimes even momentous events.

Research on closed adoptions has suggested that without biological kinship, closed adoptees feel intense aloneness and a lack of fit or belonging (Feast & Howe, 1997). However, participants' narratives suggest that knowing one's birth families and birth origins and having relationships with their birth families does not necessarily resolve the issue of belonging but instead, it takes on a different form. Where open adoption does bring family of origin into view, it does not resolve the issue of the reality of how we experience the different positions of mother/not mother.

### **EXCUSE ME BUT WHAT IS REAL?**

As an adoptee, one of the most common questions to be asked after telling somebody we are adopted is '*who are your real parents?*' or '*do you know your real Mum/Dad?*'. These are very challenging questions for adoptees, and often force us to disclose our positions from an 'unreal' place. It is often experienced as frustrating, and offensive, because if it is not real, then what is it?

*"I really, I hate that word so much, real..." (P2)*

*"People always ask me the most annoying question you should never ask an adoptee 'who are your real parents?' because it is the most offensive question you could ask an adoptee because you're*

*disregarding the parents that have raised that child their entire life. I've always hated that question"* (P5)

The reality of our everyday lives is that we feel our relationships with our adoptive parents are socially delegitimated through biological reductionism.

P2 spoke of a conversation she had with a co-worker where the co-worker drew on a biological imperative to suggest that you could not love an adopted child as much as your own biological child with the implication that her adoptive *"parents don't love me as much because I'm not biologically related to them"* (P2).

Because the dominant nuclear family narrative positions biological relationships as the real conditions for parents, there is little social understanding of how real an adoptive relationship is. Where the emphasis on the real is biological, our sense of reality is constantly being brought into question.

*"People seem to, I don't know, they don't, they don't get the dynamic. People who aren't familiar with open adoption, they're like 'oh yeah your real parents, your birth parents because that's real'"* (P1)

Again, it is through our difference that we are expected to justify our relationships within our complex relationships. So, taking up a position within the generic narrative, adoptees challenged the meaning of real.

*"Whenever someone would ask 'who are my real parents', I'd say my real parents are the parents that raised me but I do have birth parents"* (P5)

P4 spoke of making it 100% clear to others that her adoptive siblings, step siblings and half siblings are not her adoptive, step or half siblings but are just her siblings and that her adoptive parents are just her parents.

And so, adoptees bear another burden that no other person is asked to carry. We also carry the burden of responsibility to explain the social legitimacy of our parental relationships without the use biologically determined categorisations. What such categorisations do is reinforce the struggles we experience through our difference.

How we tell ourselves into our social relationships often requires particular performances of 'real'. What emerged in the participants' stories were stories of how we resist categories of difference and tell a story that fits the social exchange. There is some fluidity in how we position our familial ties.

*"I suppose depending on the situation if I was talking to someone, I'd refer my birth Mum as my Mum just to kind of not have tons of questions about it. Anyone I know kind of well enough to explain the whole situation, I'll kind of be like well this is my birth Mum or whatever, you know" (P3)*

Another strategy of resistance to the categories of the real was to stay silent as a protest. P2 spoke of times where she felt as if she didn't have the time or energy to tackle questions of 'real', and so she would not. P4 spoke of times where she would introduce her (adoptive) Mum and Dad without justification, and leave the discomfort of the obviousness of her different ethnicity unresolved to the people who asked. What this suggests is that there is also a sociocultural relationship that contests our experiences of how we 'fit' (for real) in our own experiences.

## **CATEGORISATIONS OF MUMS**

Addressing categorisations of the 'real' appear in our own experiences, for example, in my story, my relationships with my adoptive and birth mothers are different to how I imagine the normative mother-child relationship to be. While I have two mothers, my birth mother is not my 'mum'. The category of mum is normalised through the duties and obligations of a mother. The participants explained that they position their adoptive mothers as their Mum because she was the mother who raised us, cared for and supported us, and most importantly, loved us. She is our Mum because of the strong social relationship we have formed with her.

*"Mum is definitely my adoptive Mum, like Mum was the person who brought me up and raised me and everything" (P1)*

*"My real Mum is my adoptive Mum because she, like she is my Mum regardless of whether or not we're biologically related like I have picked up so many things from her because I grew up with her and I'm like 'oh we're so the same, we're so the same'" (P2)*

*“I see my adoptive Mum and Dad, I call them Mum and Dad and if anyone asks, I say they are my Mum and Dad” (P3)*

*“Whenever somebody asks who my parents are, I always talk about the parents that raised me because those will always be my parents” (P5)*

It seems that how participants feel about their birth mother relationship links with how they position their adoptive mother and categorise their relationship. Participants found it difficult to describe the way they view their birth mothers, often struggling to come up with a term that accurately articulates how they felt. Hesseling-Green (2015) suggests that the struggle to describe the familiarity and closeness of the birth mother relationship may be because no such term for this relationship exists.

This struggle to come up with a term to describe how they position their birth mother revealed a category for *‘the woman that gave birth to me’*:

*“I’ve never called her a mother either. I’ve called her by her first name just out of respect for my parents who’ve raised me my entire life. I didn’t want to dim my parent’s light by calling her a title she isn’t entitled to. I view her as the woman that gave birth to me” (P5)*

P4 said that she has never known her birth mother as anything other than her birth mother and that there is no other relationship category to put her into. P4 said she views her birth mother as the fifteen-year-old girl that gave birth to her.

Another narrative that emerged to describe the way adoptees position their birth mother through a category of being a *‘friend’*:

*“I don’t see her as like ‘Mum’. She is kind of like, to me, a close friend, like a really close adult friend” (P1)*

*“I have a good relationship with my birth Mum but it’s like, it’s a quite a particular relationship and she, is...I would say like more like a, I don’t know how to describe it. I’m more like really good friends with her” (P2)*

Lastly, a third position that emerged to describe how participants view their birth mother was an inclusive, although different, category of being like *another Mum*:

*“In my head, she’s still, she’s my Mum but it’s just like a different Mum. My adoptive Mum said to me a few times now that I’m older, she was like, I want to say like not that I’m not her son but to her, I was always my birth mother’s son but then also her son so like I don’t know. I suppose it’s similar to how I see them, both as my Mums but just different. I guess I am her son but also someone else’s son”*  
(P3)

With open adoption, adoptees are constantly negotiating the complexities of their mother relationships. The mother relationships that adoptees have with their adoptive and birth mother are difficult to describe and explain to others because they lie outside of the normative motherhood framework of what a ‘mother’ is and how they come to be. The way the participants ‘categorised’ their relationships with their adoptive and birth mother highlights that despite the biological connection you may have with somebody, it does not necessarily mean you will form meaningful connections with families of origin, especially where our sociocultural narratives exclude difference. As suggested by Hesselings-Green (2015), there is a distinct difference between the performance of the maternal role that an adoptive and birth mother has in an adoptee’s life. There remains a lack of understanding of the complex ways that the act of mothering is experienced by those of us who have two mothers.

Even though participants positioned their adoptive mother as their Mum, this social relationship is challenged by the relationship they have with their birth mother. From participants narratives, it emerged that we experience some confusion about our adopted status and how to understand who our birth mother is.

*“I ended up like getting into a bit of weird space about it. Um, just kind of confused about the whole situation and I got really like I suppose angry about it”* (P3)

*“My birth family would come and visit and I didn’t know who it was and it took me a couple of years to realise what it was cause I didn’t understand. I just wasn’t sure about what my relationship to her was. To me, it didn’t make sense”* (P5)

However, P5 explained how she manages having two mothers in her life now: *“It’s like you got two places in your heart, one reserved for your birth mother and one reserved for the mother that’s raised you”* (P5). Because we tend to categorise how we understand mothers in our sociocultural contexts, we also produced accounts of our relationships with our adoptive mothers.

## **ADOPTIVE MOTHER**

As mentioned above, these mother relationships that adoptees have with their adoptive and birth mothers are complicated. With that in mind, it is unsurprising that adoptees can sometimes have ‘tenuous/rocky’ relationships with their adoptive mothers. From participants’ narratives, the storylines of having *‘slightly tenuous’*, *‘up and down’* and *‘on and off’* relationships with their adoptive mothers were brought together to make sense of the challenges we have encountered with our adoptive mothers.

### *ADOPTIVE MOTHER CONTROL*

Adoptive mother control is a storyline that emerged from participants’ stories of the challenges they have faced. This emerged specifically in relation to how we understood the control and the authority (legislative) that adoptive mothers had over our birth relationships. As any parent, adoptive mothers have significant control over the relationships their child forms, especially birth relationships. In my experience and by listening to other adoptees’ experiences, adoptive mothers are usually the parent to facilitate the contact between the child and birth families, and to foster those relationships through letter writing, phone calls and face-to-face visits. Adoptive mothers have the power to stop or block any contact adoptees may have with their birth family and for one participant, this happened. After many wires had been crossed, P2 lost the opportunity to build a relationship with her maternal, birth grandfather and that the *“choice was just not in my hands and I think that’s why I was so angry because it’s like I just grew up and the choice had been made for me”* (P2), by her adoptive mother. However, just as adoptive mothers can take away the opportunities for adoptees to build relationships with their birth family, they can also force those relationships onto adoptees. One participant spoke about calling her adoptive mother to come and get her from her birth mother’s house because she no longer wanted to be there. Her adoptive mother never asked what was wrong or why she did not want to be there, only that she should try again the next weekend. Despite her

feeling unsafe there, her requests to stop contact were ignored. For P4, it was as if her adoptive parents were rejecting her, which contributed to the breakdown in her relationship with her birth mother and for a period of time, with her adoptive mother as well.

These two stories clearly illustrate the authority of the adoptive parent, and renders the interests of the child invisible.

*As I immersed myself in these stories, I had a conversation with Karmenne about my memories of her involvement in my life until my mother passed away. I had never understood that losing my mum also meant that I lost the presence of my birth mother relationship. It was never talked about. Listening to Karmenne's story, I can now painfully recognise the authority of the Act acting on our relationship.*

One participant's story, however, was hopeful of the potential for openness in the relationship between families, where his birth mother was able to negotiate having the care of her child when it was necessary. In this negotiation, it became possible for the adoptee to form a deeper connection with his birth mother.

*"There was other family that I could have gone and stayed with but she was kind of like 'nah I want to like do this', and my parents, my adoptive parents were just like 'yeah that sounds like a good idea'. I think that was something my adoptive parents probably couldn't give me at that time." (P3)*

#### **ADOPTIVE MOTHER INSECURITIES**

A challenge that emerged from the participants' stories was making sense of their adoptive mother 'insecurities' about their birth families. The positioning of mothers as "failing to accomplish what she was meant to in this life" (P5) and through a sociocultural stereotype that questions the 'reality' of their adopted child, can lead to fear of relationships with families of origin (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). For P5, this produced a real challenge for her that significantly affected the relationship she has with her adoptive mother. As a storyline in the family narrative, P5 was left wondering how to help her mother feel reassured but it also made her question "Why would you adopt children if this was gonna be your mental outcome?". Here we can make sense of the sociocultural impact of the desire to know the 'real' produces a complex relationship between adoptees

and birth mothers is experienced as fear and loss. Research has indicated that adoptive mothers often struggle emotionally with open adoption as it challenges their position in the social hierarchy. Again, this is an important challenge to discuss because of the many narratives it weaves together, such as the motherhood mandate with women having failed in their biological duty to reproduce as well as a narrative of redemption where adoptive mothers can take up a position as a mother in a narrative of rescue.

Another story that emerged as we made sense of having two mothers was how adoptees take up a position as protector of their adoptive mothers by minimising what they tell about contact with their birth mothers. They understood themselves to be responsible for protecting them from hurt and suffering. One participant said she would change the story when speaking to her adoptive mother about being in contact with her birth mother: *“Oh yeah my birth mother is talking to me... not I’m talking to my birth mother” (P5)* so it seemed as if she hadn’t been initiating the contact in order to spare her adoptive mother’s feelings. Another participant did want to tell her adoptive mother about her birth mother’s suggestion to call her Mum as she felt *“like [her adoptive mother] would get funny about things like that.” (P1)*

As adoptees negotiate the meaning of the generic narrative in our everyday lives and to maintain our gratitude, ongoing secret keeping protects our relationships with our adoptive mothers. However, at the same time, it also means we are required to walk a tight rope, to feel safely connected to two complex relationships.

## **BIRTH MOTHER**

Having two mothers is complicated, especially when there are dominant social narratives of what makes a mother and how a mother should be. Our adoptive mothers carry out the mother responsibilities in our everyday lives, and we become immersed in our family relationships. Birth mothers can never fulfil those tasks or form those relationships because we do not live with them. Adoptees struggle to articulate where our birth mothers ‘fit’ in our generic narrative. However, we can and do find places for connection in the space of separation and distance. P1 suggested the potential for a new kind of mother relationship that could be open because it was more separated from daily life: *“It’s really nice to be able to talk about things that I can’t, like, things that I can’t, that I wouldn’t want to talk about to my Mum about but I can talk to her just because she’s that little bit removed”.* (P1)

Within each participant's narrative, there was a myriad of complex storylines that stayed 'true' to feeling of gratefulness but that also offered ways of connecting to our (not) mum. Birth mothers were positioned as being a 'close adult friend' and as a "Mum but it's just like a different Mum" and through these positionings, they felt they were able to have 'really fantastic' and 'strong' relationships with their birth mothers.

P1 spoke about how "solid" her relationship with her birth mother is and told stories of the girls' nights she regularly has with her adoptive mother and birth mother together.

While P3 spoke about how after having the opportunity to get to know his birth mother and understand the circumstances of his adoption, he developed "quite a strong relationship" with his birth mother and is "quite satisfied with how it is", and doesn't "feel like it needs to be any better".

However, not all participants were satisfied with their birth mother relationships, and would like it to be more open.

P2 has a "particular relationship with my birth Mum. It's not a very like serious like emotional relationship, it's all quite like superficial. I think it would be really nice if I could have like a more in-depth kind of relationship with [my birth mother]"

P4 spoke about it being too hard to have a relationship with her birth mother and often thinks about how heartbroken she is that she doesn't have a relationship with her that can work.

P5 does not "feel so much of a connection with my [birth] mother" and that she has "always wanted more; [to] be more involved in her life [and to be more] involved with her" but knows "it isn't something I should expect of her".

As P5 stated in a matter of fact manner: "It's a very messy relationship".

The storyline of disconnection and physical distance between adoptees and our birth mothers was identified as a challenge that participants faced.

*In my own relationship with Karmenne, which I experience as difficult to navigate, and often feel overburdened with responsibility for, is related to the shape of our relationship. And I wonder whether if we had lived in closer proximity perhaps our connections would have been stronger. But it is more than that, it is about not knowing how to be in relation to her. I have an expectation of what a mum should be, and who I meet is an adult woman with a long history of trauma that is too much for me to bear witness to, despite my deep love for her. I struggle at times with whether this relationship is good for me, and feel guilty at times because I want to maintain my relationship with my maternal birth half-siblings. Another obligation, and I wonder who should bear the burden of responsibility for her emotional wellbeing, I am trying to figure it out.*

P1 spoke of being “quite geographically challenged cause I’m like out West, very out West and then [my birth mother] is like very out South”, however, she still sees her birth mother quite regularly, “probably about every two months I see [her]”.

For P3, the physical distance is even greater and that does make it “a bit harder” and “definitely have to put in a bit of an effort” but they “do kind of communicate like enough like that I don’t feel like it needs to be any better”.

And while in these narratives the distancing enables us the space to have enough of a connection for now, we also experienced the distance as a problem in reconciling our feelings of loss.

*“[Distance] really does have like a serious impact on the kinds of relationships that you can build with people, even if you are biologically related to them” (P2)*

While P5 spoke of having “worked on [our relationship] for the past couple of years, I mean it’s hard because she lives so far away from me. And that’s where the challenge is, we can’t actually see each other. It’s like a, it’s kind of, it’s just like a long-distance relationship. I just want to be more involved in her life. I want to be involved with her”

From listening to the participants narratives, I noticed a challenge that further impacted on our ability to foster meaningful birth mother relationships. Embedded in stories of distance was a reluctance of birth mothers to take responsibility for the relationship.

*“If I was talking to my birth Mum, she’d make a lot of promises to me that she couldn’t keep so I would just get really frustrated cause she would say ‘oh yeah I’ll come up in the next couple of months or so and we can catch up’, and it never really happened. I wouldn’t say that she’s selfish but she’s got her own things going on and I can tell that she’s more consumed in that” (P5)*

*“It’s hard because I’m like ‘oh you know we live in the same city’ and I don’t know, it’s a kind of interesting thing but then it’s hard as well because she has kids of her own [and] a lot of the time that I got to spend time with her had to be instigated by me so I always had to like nail her down and be like ‘when am I coming to see you’ . It’s always been hard to have that time with her” (P2)*

Another challenge that emerged from participants’ narratives was their birth mothers wanting more from their relationship.

For example, as an adult, P1 was asked by her birth mother to call her ‘mum’ because she *“was feeling like she was missing out a little bit”*. But for P1 it felt like *“she was trying to, get in on something that she wasn’t technically a part of, or in my head that she wasn’t a part of”*. This request was understood as a demand for her to show her loyalty to her birth mother, and that she was responsible for the solution without any understanding of what it meant for her.

For P4, her birth mother’s need for wanting more from their relationship was deeply embedded in her childhood memories. Her birth mother positioned her adoption as the reason for her ‘terrible’ life, and she spent much of her childhood feeling guilty for her adoption.

As the participants talked about the challenges they/we faced in our relationships with our birth mothers, the sociocultural narrative of one mother, is disrupted, and adoptees become burdened with the emotional work of allocating ‘rightful’ positions to the roles of their adoptive and birth mothers that ‘fit’ the meaning of what a mother should be.

However, when speaking about these challenges, the positioning of open adoption as a solution to the problems of not knowing experienced in the lives of closed adoptees did not go unnoticed, where, *“the benefits truly outweigh the negatives, and it’s focusing on the benefits of adoption that help you get through things” (P5)*.

What became clear in listening to the stories of open adoptees was that the legislation is unable to transform the conditions of our everyday lives that are embedded in normative sociocultural assumptions that legitimate the motherhood mandate.

Relationships with birth mothers bring into view an added complexity to our experience, and that is bearing witness to birth mother pain. Unlike in closed adoption, open adoption enables adoptees to witness first-hand the impacts adoption has had on our birth mothers. Understanding our birth mothers' pain becomes part of our embodied story in our process of making sense of why we were given up for adoption, and within a sociocultural context where the motherhood mandate makes giving up a child unimaginable. Understanding the sociocultural exclusion of birth mothers from normative motherhood enables adoptees to recognise the pain their birth mothers must have felt.

*"I think to be a biological mother would be really hard like I don't think I could do it. Hats off to my birth mum and like your birth mum and, all the birth mums out there who've like given their kids away because, I think it's a very hard decision that would stay with you for the rest of your life" (P1)*

*"She struggled with it a lot over the years as well and she hasn't had any more children" (P3)*

*"It would have been hard for her to give up something that she thought was special to her" (P5)*

P4 also talked about understanding how heartbroken her mother must have felt watching someone else raise her child, watching her succeed in life and how that must be devastating to think 'I could have done that' or 'what if'?

In my own story, carrying the burden of responsibility for Karmenne's pain can become overwhelming. Birth mother pain textures our everyday lives, and complicates our relationships. As we make sense of the circumstances of our adoption, we are positioned in contradictory ways; connected through a history of painful and sacrificed motherhood that sometimes led to disconnection.

## RENEGOTIATING OPENNESS

Over the course of an open adoptee's life, the openness of our adoption is constantly being renegotiated through stories of loss. Experiences of loss emerged across all of our stories in diverse ways. Adoptees recognise in the present that birth mother pain textured their relationships, they had not been able to make sense of the loss that they had experienced.

*"There was um a period of time when I was about six or seven where I didn't see as much of [my birth mum] as I used to" (P1)*

*"As a child she would come over constantly and then it faded out around ten. She kind of just stopped contacting me" (P5)*

Participants recognise now, these periods of absence were because their birth mothers were going through a rough time and were *"questioning everything that she had done" (P1)* but it does not reconcile our own feeling of loss. One participant said, *"that's the hard thing is when it stops, it feels like you're losing somebody" (P5)*. P5 experienced the loss as *"emotional damage" because "she would come and go too often and when I would just attach to her, she would leave [and] I wasn't prepared for that"*. P5 experienced this loss through *"neglect of the relationship"* and it permeates the quality of her relationship with her birth mother now. For a young child, it is difficult to understand the complexities of the relationships that contextualise the experience of adoption. Young adoptees may question if they are good enough; or wonder if they have been forgotten about; or have lost the potential for connection and belonging.

Understanding adoption as a process, participants struggled with their relationships with their birth mothers as they processed the meaning of their adoption. There were often times when they renegotiated the boundaries of contact and connection and took responsibility for managing the effects of their embodied loss.

For a few years during his late adolescence, P3 *"didn't really communicate with her"* and *"ended up like getting into a bit of weird space about [his adoption, and was] just kind of confused about the whole situation and I got really like, I suppose angry about it"*, however, P3 reconnected with his birth mother a few years later and now has more of a communicative relationship with his birth mother.

At age fifteen, P4 abruptly cut off all contact with her birth mother. Currently, she has what she calls a Facebook relationship with her birth mother where they keep tabs on each other and knows that is the only type of relationship she will ever have with her birth mother. She sees no reason to call or visit her. Despite the renegotiation of openness being her decision, she often thinks about how heartbroken she is that she does not have a relationship with her birth mother that can work.

What emerged in these stories is how our feelings of loss complicate our ongoing relationships. It is not only the relationships we have with our adoptive and birth mothers that have the potential to be renegotiated in an ongoing process of making sense of our positioning as other. Through the opportunity of this research, a movement was triggered among participants and myself to renegotiate our openness about our adoption with others: to speak more freely about our adopted status and what it means to us, and to share our adoption stories a little more openly. In particular, one participant became politicised on Facebook, post-interview. Growing up, she had been a part of Open Adoption Network (OPAN) support groups but as she got older, she became disconnected with the organisation and did not know whether they were still operating or not. In an effort to recreate the support she felt she had as a child, she created a Facebook group for open adoption triad members in New Zealand as a way to connect with others like ourselves who have been intimately affected by open adoption, to share our stories and to be a support system of sorts to each other.

An opportunity was realised through the technological error that meant a second interview with P2 was necessary. In the space between the first and second interviews, P2 had time to reflect on how she was surprised at how fresh some of her feelings still were when talking about her relationship with her birth mother and recognised how deeply embodied her feeling of sadness really was.

She said that she was taken by surprise because it is has *“just been a reality for me like my whole life”* and was *“something I’ve known for years”*, and thought that perhaps she had felt those feelings so strongly in the moment because she had *“never had that conversation in words I think with someone who probably understands more than anybody else”* (P2). By being able to speak together again, P2 had become more comfortable and open with me and the

shared event enabled us a way of understanding the sociocultural and embodied effects of dominant narratives, such as the knowing of the generic story, are also affective. We are able to renegotiate the meaning of our adoption through a shared understanding of our loss.

Through the process of this research, I too renegotiated openness within my relationships with others. I have become increasingly open about my position as an adoptee with my family and friends, and I am actively rejecting my position as secret keeper. When I first began this research journey, I recognised I was secretive about my difference, fearful of the burden to explain, and of being marginalised. Not only was I secretive with others about my adoption but also to myself. I had never taken the time to ask myself how it felt to be an open adoptee, what it meant to be an open adoptee and how it has impacted who I am. I now realise that it is an honour that I can share my adoption story to help others who are unfamiliar with adoption to become familiar and to most importantly, understand what it is and means to be an open adoptee. It is a privilege and an honour to be able to provide a safe space for us to engage with and understand each other. And through this process, our collective storytelling represents an important voice in the call for adoption reform.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Often, the production of knowledge comes from discontent and the dissatisfaction with what is 'known' (Henderson, 2013). When I noticed the absence of Aotearoa New Zealand adoption literature that attends to the narratives of adoptees adopted through the 'open system', I felt a responsibility to create a space for open adoptees to voice our lived experiences.

I wanted to begin 'filling' the Aotearoa New Zealand adoption literature gap so that our voices were no longer missing, and instead are contributing to the ongoing calls for changes to the Adoption Act 1955. To bring our voice to the socio-political landscape, the aims of this research were to have a greater understanding of the experience of open adoption and to make sense of the complexities that are embedded in the ordinary, everyday lives of open adoptees.

Rather than categorise and measure our experiences, I sought to bring understanding to what the everyday ordinariness of navigating the boundary of normal and difference is like for open adoptees, as well as our experiences of having two mothers. This research provides a snapshot into adoptees' ordinary everyday lives as the negotiation of the complexities of their adoptive and birth mother relationships and their experiences of adoption change over time. It is a process.

By placing feminist standpoint and narrative inquiry as the guiding principle for the development of this research, I was able to empower the voices of open adoptees by acknowledging and valuing their narrative subjectivities, to bring attention to and question the power relationships that limit the potential of open adoption, and to make sense of the complexities within participants' experiences embedded, as we are, in dominant historical and socio-political meanings that coerce a narrative of meaning making, such as the motherhood mandate and its felt effects. Therefore, I was able to open a space where we could together make sense of the complexities of our relationships that did not require us to 'explain' our often painful stories, but rather, to tell how we make sense of our own experiences. Through the analysis process, I weaved and blended common storylines and subject positions together to produce an amalgamated story, in the hope of bringing volume to the complexities of adoptive and birth mother

relationships and to challenge the conditions that position mothers as good or bad, that also contextualises our lives. The final story produced was co-constructed through participants' process of telling and making sense of their/our lived experiences, and with the decisions I made based upon my own assumptions, and my location as the researcher representing my/our stories. I acknowledge the privilege I have been given, to represent these stories.

The legislative changes that had potential for adoptees to engage in meaningful relationships with their birth families and the generic story that conforms to the narrative of adoption as a gain (a solution), emerged through understanding ourselves through a story of loss. We begin to recognise a pattern of generic storytelling of the circumstances of our birth where our loss is rewritten as an act of love. These losses were woven into stories of being secret keepers, mandatory gratefulness, understanding our mothers through a narrative of our rescue from one mother (bad) by another mother (good), the difficulties in belonging and challenges to our 'realness' and the ongoing processes of negotiating our relationships that are our burden to carry. Loss.

The storyline of secret keepers emerged as participants talked about being communicatively closed off to talking about their adoption within their social relationships outside of their families because it set them apart as being 'different'. Their narratives accentuated the fear of being recognised through our difference and the struggle with coming to the resolution with living in-between: here the in-between is the constant requirement to negotiate our differences. We live without a social narrative that enables us to explain different-ness and of having two mothers in a way that others will understand. And so, through these narratives, we position ourselves as the keeper of the secret of our adoption. But we exceed the story.

Throughout participants' stories of making sense of the circumstances of their adoption, participants positioned themselves as grateful: grateful to have been adopted and grateful to their adoptive parents. These stories are performed through an understanding of our salvation and we confirm our adoption as a gain. We are rescued from one mother by another mother. Through embodied generic storytelling we are coerced into being grateful for our relinquishment and our salvation. Love. Care. Better life. There is no

place in this narrative for us to express our losses, and instead, it is our responsibility to acknowledge our ‘gains’.

The genericity of the storytelling positions us and our mothers in a certain way: we are positioned as grateful for being adopted and for our adoptive parents; our adoptive mother is positioned as the saviour; and our birth mother is positioned as the inferior, incompetent mother. What emerged from participants’ stories was that the positions our adoptive and birth mothers are placed in creates a hierarchy of who is better, with one mother being ratified as good and the other as bad, and thereby, creating a conflicted loyalties for adoptees, and consequently, affecting our adoptive and birth mother relationships. Generic storytelling does not provide a safe space for adoptees to express their embodied feelings of loss and pain, rather it places adoptees under a burden of responsibilities and double duties and obligations.

What has emerged from participants’ and my own narratives is that we struggle to find our sense of belonging without being able to understand our loss, and how to take up a position among our adoptive and birth families. Two narratives emerged: (1) participants felt like they belonged with their birth family but that they also did not belong at the same time; (2) participants felt like they belonged with their adoptive family but that they also did not belong at the same time. What was found is that adoptees must learn to exist in two different families, and to try figure out where they fit within each, and often finding they fit into neither one day and do the next. Participants’ narratives suggest that knowing one’s birth families and origins does not necessarily resolve issues of belonging, rather it takes on a different form that is unique to open adoptees. Burden.

A storyline that challenged our ‘realness’ emerged among all the participants, including myself, facing the questions of ‘*who are your real parents?*’ or ‘*do you know your real Mum/Dad?*’ at some point. We shared stories of frustration, annoyance and hurt when faced with questions of ‘real’ (birth) family, understanding it as disregarding the important role our adoptive parents have in our lives and are delegitimising the social legitimacy of our relationship with our adoptive parents. Through their feelings of frustration and annoyance, a storyline of resistance emerged with participants either refusing to explain or refusing to talk about their adoption in their social relationships. Silence.

What emerged from participants' stories, including my own, was the clear distinction between their/our relationships with their mum and their birth mother. We all positioned our adoptive mother as our mum because she was the one who raised us and carried out the duties and obligations of the mother position for us. Care. Participants struggled to come up with a term that accurately described the familiarity and closeness of their birth mother relationship, and it has been suggested that no term for this relationship exists. Participants' either described their birth mother as 'the woman who gave birth to me', 'a friend', or as 'another mother'. Navigating our adoptive and birth mother relationships is complicated. The potential of open adoption is disrupted through the authority of adoptive parents to control connections and how our adoptive mothers understand their own redemption through the narrative of rescue. However, open adoptees carry the burden of responsibility for protecting their adoptive mothers from being hurt as we take up the position of being grateful. So as we negotiate the meaning of the generic narrative, we also keep secrets about our relationships with our birth mothers.

It is a particular struggle to find ways to take up our responsibility for our grateful position and at the same time as connecting with our birth mothers. There was a storyline of disconnection and physical distance that emerged as an experience of loss, and through the sociocultural narrative of one mother, adoptees become burdened with the emotional work of allocating the 'rightful' positions for birth and adoptive mothers that fit the meaning of what a mother should be. However, bearing witness to birth mother pain becomes part of our embodied story and added to the burden of responsibility that we carry. Pain textures our everyday lives. Experiences of loss texture our experiences, both past and present, however, we also understood, together, that adoption is a process of constant renegotiation. It is complicated.

Currently, adoptees are not the focus of the Aotearoa New Zealand Adoption Act 1955. But we should be. Aotearoa New Zealand's adoption legislation needs to be changed, so that adoptees rights, interests and needs are put at the forefront. Currently, there is very little understanding about open adoptees ordinary, everyday experiences within the open system. This research is an amalgamated story told from a safe space for open adoptees to voice their experiences of openness in their adoption so that we can contribute to the call for Aotearoa New Zealand's adoption legislation reform. By listening to our voices,

alongside the social movement generated by those affected by closed adoption that led to open adoption as a solution, it adds another layer of understanding the effects of the current legislation. The Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 allowed for greater structural openness in the adoption process, and the participants in this research clearly had knowledge of their birth origins. The meaningfulness of those relationships however, is context specific. What emerged in the analysis to be of most interest was that meaningful communicative openness was not necessarily enabled by the Act. And, as seen in participants' narratives, there were many instances in participants' lives where communicative openness was missing. The potential for open adoption rested on the assumption that it would eliminate secrecy, enable relationships to form with birth families, and minimise grief and pain. However, in this research, it appears that both secrecy and belonging are not necessarily transformed within the open system, and that loss is deeply embodied, in our relationships and in our affect.

It is important that these stories are continued to be listened to and become part of a larger conversation, not just in academic research, but in the socio-political landscape, whereby the voice of the solution can contribute to legislation reform. Listening to these voices could transform the contemporary social, legal and political consequences of adoption towards a more just and safer future for adoptees.

The knowledge that this research has produced is needed to challenge the other knowledge we think we have about open adoption, the 'solution'. This research contributes to our understanding of open adoptees experiences within the open system and to the ongoing calls for adoption legislation reform but also to opening up safe spaces for open adoptees to voice their experiences and to be heard. Importantly too, these stories call for the transformation of the motherhood mandate that positions mothers as good or bad.

We get it. We understand.

## LIMITATIONS

Like all studies, this research has its limitations. By using narrative inquiry, I am aware the decisions I made, based on my assumptions, knowledge framework and socio-political context, when I engaged and interpreted the participants narratives to construct the meanings in the amalgamated story I have produced. When interpreting participants narratives, I assumed they were the ‘knowers’ of their experience, and I endeavoured to represent their narratives through attention to the storylines that met the aims of the research.

It is known that adoptees are a hard-to-reach population, and this was certainly the case in this research. The inclusion criteria for this research included participants to have been formally adopted under the Aotearoa New Zealand Adoption Act 1955 and to have or have had a relationship with their birth mother at some point, which performed a particular exclusion to open adoptees currently living in Aotearoa New Zealand but had been adopted elsewhere. However, despite these constraints, five interviews did enable for meaningful narratives and storylines to be generated. One participant’s adoption was ‘transracial’ and it was important for her to participate in this research, as while she takes up a position with a Māori identity, she was also embedded in the sociocultural conditions that contextualised all of our stories. Her story of walking between two cultural worlds was another way through which her story marked her difference. As she moves through her process, she is hopeful that she will find a meaningful way to negotiate that connection.

This research is the beginning of an important conversation, and is an invitation to engage in further conversations with open adoptees, to bring their voice to the calls for legislation reform. In this way, future research might continue with opening up more safe spaces so that the potential of open adoption might be realised in our everyday lives, and where our losses are made sensible.

## APPENDIX A



COLLEGE OF  
HUMANITIES AND  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

### Information Sheet

#### Open Adoption Narrative: Snapshot into Adoptees' Adoptive and Birth Mother Relationships

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Olivia Potter, from the School of Psychology at Massey University as part of a Master of Arts thesis. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been formally adopted under the Aotearoa New Zealand Adoption Act 1955 and have or have had a relationship with your birth mother at some point.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to allow adoptees from open adoptions to speak about their experiences of their adoptive and birth mother relationships in a non-judgmental space. Research on adoption practices and their effects has received little attention within New Zealand literature. Furthermore, most adoption literature has predominately focused on the experiences of the mothers in the adoption triad and has ignored adoptees' perspectives and experiences, silencing the voices of adoptees. With the little literature that has focused on adoptees' experiences, it has been located within the closed adoption legislation. This study aims to open up the channels for adoptees to be heard, to explore and examine adoptees' relationships with their adoptive and birth mothers, and to identify key themes that emerge from these stories. It is hoped that by sharing these experiences, open adoptees' voices and stories will no longer be silenced but instead will be listened to and heard, and that their missing voices will be added to the call for New Zealand legislation reform.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

You will be asked to participate in an informal, conversational interview, which will last approximately one hour. I, the researcher, may ask some open-ended questions but the main focus is on your experiences and story. What I am interested in hearing about is the openness of your adoption, and your current contact with your adoptive and birth mothers; your feelings about your birth mother; how you manage your birth mother relationship, and the experience of having two mothers; how you think adoption is perceived within New Zealand society; and any advice for future adoptive and birth parents.

This interview will be audio recorded either by tape recorder if the interview is conducted face-to-face, or via audio recording if the interview is conducted via Skype.

The researcher will then transcribe your interview and bring it back to you as the participant to ensure that what has been transcribed is accurate. You will have the opportunity to make any changes to your statements if you feel necessary. This review of the transcript should take about an hour.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Even though, adoption is an ordinary part of your everyday life, talking about your adoption, and adoptive and birth relationships may be an uncomfortable experience for you. For this reason, it is important that your participation is entirely voluntary. It is possible that this interview may bring up emotional responses, and these may be unexpected. You have the right to decline answering any particular question, and to ask to turn off the recording at any time during the interview. You are welcome to bring a support person, if you wish to.

School of Psychology - Te Kura Hinengaro Tangata  
Private Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand  
T +64 6 356 9099 extn 85071 F +64 6 355 7966 <http://psychology.massey.ac.nz>

If you require follow-up support about the adoption process, post-interview, I will support you in contacting adoption specialist services. You are welcomed and encouraged to discuss any concerns or questions with the researcher prior to signing the consent form and can contact the researcher about any concerns or questions following the interview.

- **PRIVACY**

Any information obtained within this study and that can be identified with you will remain private and will only be disclosed with your permission. Privacy will be maintained by means of storing interview data separately from signed consent forms, securing consent forms in a locked cabinet only accessible by the research supervisor and destroying the audio recording of the interview once you have signed off on your transcription. Consent forms will be securely destroyed after 5 years. All identifying information will be removed from the transcripts and any excerpts from the transcriptions included in the research will be incorporated in a way to avoid identification with any participant. All names will be changed, and participants will be provided with a pseudonym.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

If you decide to participate, you have the right to

- decline to answer any particular questions,
- ask for the audio recording to be turned off at any time during the interview,
- withdraw from the study at any given point prior to the sign off of transcript,
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation,
- provide information on the understanding that your name, personal contact details and any identifiable information will not be used,
- be given access to a summary of the research findings upon completion.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCHERS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Olivia Potter (Researcher)  
School of Psychology  
Massey University  
Palmerston North  
Phone: [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]

Dr Leigh Coombes (Research Supervisor)  
School of Psychology  
Massey University  
Palmerston North  
Phone: (06) 356 9099 ext. 85075  
Email: [L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz](mailto:L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz)

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 19/23. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83657, email [humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz)*

## APPENDIX B



COLLEGE OF  
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### *Open Adoption Narrative: Snapshot into Adoptees' Adoptive and Birth Mother Relationships*

#### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded. (if applicable include this statement)
2. I agree/do not agree to edit my transcript.
3. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

#### Declaration by Participant:

I \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C



COLLEGE OF  
HUMANITIES AND  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

### *Open Adoption Narrative: Snapshot into Adoptees' Adoptive and Birth Mother Relationships*

#### AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name - printed \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### Tentative Interview Schedule

#### Open Adoption Narrative: Snapshot into Adoptees' Adoptive and Birth Mother Relationships

Where would you like to begin with your adoption story?

**i. Adoption Openness**

1. When were you adopted, and how long have you known that you are adopted?
2. What's been open about your adoption, in terms of your communication process?
  - o Structural?
  - o Communication of adoption-related issues?
3. How has that openness changed over time?
4. What kinds of contact do you have with your birth mother now?

**ii. Nature of Adoptive and Birth Mother Relationships**

1. How do you manage your relationship with your adoptive and birth mother?
2. What does your relationship with your adoptive and birth mother mean to you?
3. What, if any, challenges have you encountered in your relationship with your adoptive mother? What, if any, challenges have you encountered with having a relationship with your birth mother?
4. What, if any, challenges did you encounter in having two mothers?

**iii. The Implications of Open Adoption**

1. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of open adoption?
2. How do you think adoption is perceived, socially and culturally?
3. What, if any, advice do you have for future adoptive parents and birth mothers/parents?

Is there anything else we have not talked about that you would like to share?

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