

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Between Two Worlds: Identity, Belonging, and the Lived Experiences of Intercountry Adoptees in Aotearoa New Zealand

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in Sociology at Massey University, New Zealand.**

Tiffany Burton

June 2025

Abstract

I entered this research with a question: Was I alone in feeling this way? As an intercountry adoptee raised in Aotearoa, New Zealand, I sought to understand whether others shared the same quiet ache—the dislocation, the longing, the feeling of in-betweenness. The life stories collected in this study highlight that such experiences were not singular or exceptional, but part of broader shared trajectories. Stories were shared across countries and generations, revealing personal pain and broader legal, systemic, and historical patterns. What started as a personal search gradually turned to a need to question, understand, and bring visibility to the structures that had long pushed adoptees' experiences to the margins.

Intercountry adoption profoundly shapes an adoptee's identity, belonging, and mental well-being throughout a lifetime. I explore the lived experience of six intercountry adoptees in New Zealand from childhood through adolescence into adulthood, focusing on how they construct and negotiate their identities while facing cultural displacement, systemic barriers, and societal expectations. I draw on qualitative semi-structured life story narrative methodologies and intersecting social constructivist and interpretative epistemologies to amplify the voices of adoptees, uncovering their significant emotional, psychological, and social challenges across the life course.

The findings chapters speak to attachment, cultural dislocation, language loss, racialisation, belonging or lack thereof, and identity formation. These stories reveal the enduring impact of disrupted attachments, systemic neglect, cultural erasure and the resilience and meaning-making that emerge through narrative reclamation.

Rather than aligning with functionalist or critical perspectives, I offer a third stance that offers space for contradiction. It acknowledges the intimacy of adoptive family relationships and the racialised, political, and economic systems that shape adoption globally

and locally. This stance resists binary thinking, inviting more honest, inclusive, and ethically grounded conversations about adoption, identity, and belonging.

Acknowledgements

This work was not built in comfort—it was written through fire. Through moments that burned, through grief and discomfort. It does not emerge from perfect conditions, but from persistence, clarity, and a refusal to give up. While traditional support systems were not always present, I drew strength from purpose, intuition and an unshakable belief that this story mattered. I did not arrive here effortlessly. But I arrived. This work is proof that clarity can form in chaos, and that scholarship can and should be both intellectual and deeply human.

There were moments when it all felt too much—when grief, doubt, and exhaustion crept in. But these moments, I see now, were not detours. They were part of the healing, part of the reshaping. This was one of the most challenging things I have ever done. But also, the most rewarding. Through every unravelling came a thread of return.

Let it be known vulnerability is not the absence of substance or strength. Moments of exhaustion, fear, or grief should not diminish a person's worth—they reveal the depth of what they carry and have survived. This work stands as proof that one can break open and still rise. That resilience is not always loud, and sometimes, it is about simply continuing. To be seen in moments of uncertainty is the recognition of the human condition in its fullest expression. Those who measure others only by their composure or their beginnings, overlook the most courageous truth: the real strength often begins in the places we are taught to believe are failures.

To my supervisors, thank you for your unwavering support and perseverance with me. Your guidance always encouraged me to dig deeper, ask better questions, and stay close to the heart that mattered. Thank you for trusting my voice—even when I was still learning how to use it. This thesis is not only research, but testimonies. Its strength does not lie in the absence of vulnerability, but in the courage to write through it anyway. To my family, thank you for walking beside me through all the highs and lows. This journey belonged to all of us in its own way. Your love held me when words didn't reach.

To the participants, your stories gave breath to the pages. Your generosity, courage and willingness to share your most delicate truths gave this work its soul. Your willingness to share honoured this work beyond measure. Thank you for trusting me with fragments of your lives. This is, in many ways, for you. While this work may not travel far or relevant to all, my deepest hope is that it finds its way to those who need it most, to whose own stories may echo in these pages, and who might come to understand themselves more fully.

Contents

ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
CHAPTER ONE: THE IN-BETWEEN: IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF THIS STUDY	7
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	7
1.2 WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS?	10
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	10
1.4 PERSONAL NARRATIVE – MY INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION STORY	11
1.5 THESIS ORGANISATION	14
1.6 AUTHOR’S NOTE ON VOICE, POSITIONALITY, AND METHOD	15
1.7 CONCLUSION.....	17
CHAPTER TWO – THE EVOLUTION OF ADOPTION LAW AND PRACTICE IN AOTEAROA, NEW ZEALAND	18
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	18
2.2 HISTORICAL AND LEGAL EVOLUTION.....	19
2.3 INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION AND THE EXTENSION OF ASSIMILATIONIST LOGIC.....	21
2.4 MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFORM: SILENCES IN LEGISLATIVE TIME.....	25
2.4.1 1985: <i>Partial Visibility, Structural Silence</i>	26
2.4.2 1999: <i>A Shelved Opportunity</i>	26
2.4.3 2000 – Present: <i>Persistent Inertia</i>	27
2.5 EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION.....	29
2.6 CALL FOR JUSTICE: FROM HARM TO REIMAGINATION.....	32
2.7 TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION AND THE GLOBAL ARCHITECTURE OF INEQUALITY.....	34
2.8 CONCLUSION.....	38
CHAPTER THREE- LITERATURE REVIEW	41
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	41
3.2 SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE AND RESEARCH.....	42
3.3 BONDING AND ATTACHMENT	46
3.4 WHAT IS HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT?.....	48
3.5 THE TRANSITION TO ADOPTIVE FAMILIES.....	50
3.6 UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY FORMATION	53
3.7 FACTORS INFLUENCING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ADOPTEES	54
3.8 THE ROLE OF PRE-ADOPTION EXPERIENCES AND AGE IN IDENTITY FORMATION.....	56
3.9 SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF IDENTITY	57
3.10 BELONGING.....	58
3.11 COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY AND BELONGING OF INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEES	60
3.12 CONCLUSION	64
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY	67
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	67
4.2 EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM	67
4.3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: QUALITATIVE LIFE-STORY NARRATIVES.....	69
4.4 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY: BEING WITHIN THE STORY	70
4.5 REFLEXIVITY: EMOTIONAL AND ETHICAL SELF-AWARENESS	71
4.6 PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION	73
4.7 RELATIONAL INTERVIEW PROCESS AND METHOD.....	75
4.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS: RELATIONAL INTEGRITY AND CULTURAL SAFETY	77
4.8.1 <i>Ethical Clearance and Relational Accountability</i>	77
4.8.2 <i>Confidentiality, Emotional Safety, and Relational Integrity</i>	78
4.8.3 <i>Cultural Safety and Humility</i>	78

4.9 DATA ANALYSIS.....	79
4.10 LIMITATIONS AND CONTEXTUAL BOUNDARIES.....	83
4.11 CONCLUSION.....	83
CHAPTER FIVE: THE FOUNDATIONS OF IDENTITY: THE EARLY YEARS OF INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION.....	85
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	85
5.2 INTRODUCTION TO THE ADOPTEES – ATTACHMENT AND FAMILY DYNAMICS.....	86
<i>Alex</i>	86
<i>Marishka</i>	87
<i>JoJo</i>	89
<i>Maria</i>	91
<i>Santiago</i>	92
<i>Mike</i>	94
5.3 DISPLACEMENT AND CULTURAL AND EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENTS.....	97
5.4 THE INTERSECTION OF LANGUAGE AND AGE IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION.....	103
5.5 CONCLUSION.....	105
CHAPTER SIX: IDENTITY FACTORS IN THE YEARS POST-ADOPTION.....	107
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	107
6.2 NAVIGATING FAMILIAL AND SOCIAL BELONGING IN NEW ZEALAND.....	108
6.3 INFLUENCES AND EXPERIENCES OF IDENTITY.....	113
6.4 THE ROLE OF FAMILY IN RESILIENCE, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT.....	119
6.5 CONCLUSION.....	127
CHAPTER SEVEN: NAVIGATING IDENTITY, RESILIENCE, AND RECONNECTION IN ADULTHOOD.....	129
7.1 INTRODUCTION.....	129
7.2 COMMUNITY AS A SOURCE OF IDENTITY FORMATION.....	130
7.3 PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIFE ACHIEVEMENTS AS ASPECTS OF RESILIENCE.....	134
7.4 THE SEARCH FOR BIRTH PARENTS: A JOURNEY OF IDENTITY AND CLOSURE.....	138
7.5 CONCLUSION.....	143
CHAPTER EIGHT – GATHERING THE WHOLE: TRUTH, BELONGING, AND WHAT REMAINS.....	146
8.1 INTRODUCTION.....	146
8.2 REVISITING IDENTITY.....	146
8.3 AGE, MEMORY, AND RELATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS.....	147
8.4 SYSTEMIC FRAMES AND INDIVIDUAL CONSEQUENCES.....	148
8.5 EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND NARRATIVE POWER.....	148
8.6 A LIFE BEYOND THE PAGE.....	149
8.7 CLOSING.....	150
REFERENCES.....	151
APPENDICES.....	179
APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM.....	179
APPENDIX B: ADVERTISEMENT.....	180
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (PAGE 1).....	181
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (PAGE 2).....	182
APPENDIX E: PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET (PAGE 1).....	183
APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (PAGE 2).....	184
APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (PAGE 3).....	185
APPENDIX H: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (PAGE 3).....	186
APPENDIX I: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (PAGE 4).....	187

Chapter One: The In-Between: Identity, Belonging, and the Foundations of This Study

1.1 Introduction

Adoption is a profound experience that reshapes not only identity and belonging but the entire relational architecture through which a person comes to understand themselves and the world. It does not occur in a singular moment but unfolds across time, shaped by relationships over the lifespan. For many adoptees, it is a space of tension between what was lost and what is becoming (Lifton, 2008). This journey often involves holding conflicting identities, navigating unresolved absence, and working to reconstruct a sense of place in the wake of cultural, familial, and historical erasure (Howell, 2006). Brodzinsky (2011) suggests that adoption profoundly affects self-development, and for intercountry adoptees, the impact is exacerbated by cultural displacement, racialisation, and limited opportunities for connection (Howell, 2006).

Adoption as a lived and evolving reality shapes how one belongs, remembers and comes to know oneself (Lifton, 2008). For intercountry adoptees, this process is complicated by severed cultural ties, disrupted attachments, and the absence of anchoring narratives that might otherwise root them to place, kin, society and/ or language. While intercountry adoption has grown since the 1970s (Lovelock, 2000), there remains a significant absence of precise, current data that reflects adoptees' lived experiences and post-adoption trajectories. Existing information is often fragmented or filtered through bureaucratic systems, offering little insight into adoption's emotional and relational dimensions.

Legal, social, and policy frameworks tend to define adoption through integration. However, they rarely account for the deeply personal, cultural, and psychological journey work involved in forming an identity across borders and histories (Brodzinsky, 2011; Lee,

2003; McGinnis et al., 2009). Increasingly, scholars and adoptees alike maintain that dominant narratives—particularly within intercountry and transracial adoption – have framed adoptees’ experiences through a pathologising lens (Goode, 2019; Hübinette, 2015; Love, 2015). As Fine (1992) observes, frameworks of pathology often reduce complex, situated experiences to dysfunction. Within adoption discourse, this has led to a disproportionate focus on attachment disorder, identity confusion, and adjustment issues – interpretations frequently rooted in Western psychology that are disconnected from the structural realities of racialisation, loss, and displacement (Hübinette, 2004; Park, 2016).

Emotional and identity struggles are often analysed in isolation from the broader systems that shape them. As Park (2016) posits that existing models frequently fail to consider the sociopolitical conditions in which adoptees' experiences occur. Hübinette (2004) critiques the medicalisation of adoptee identity, where emotional responses are framed as clinical problems rather than as deeply situated histories of colonialism, silence, and severance. When adoption is viewed through such a narrow lens, the complex interplay of personal narrative, structural erasure, and cultural rupture is too often ignored.

The approach taken here embraces a different view. Rather than reinforcing these dominant narratives, adoptee identity and emotional experiences cannot be reduced to diagnosis or dysfunction. I draw on Attachment Theory, which offers valuable insights into early trauma, separation, and connection; however, it must be applied with critical care. Attachment is not treated as a pathology but as a relational and cultural process embedded within larger architectures of loss, belonging, and survival.

Identity work is not treated as a milestone but as an unfolding, recursive process. For intercountry adoptees, the boundaries between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are often porous. What happens in early life does not stay there—it often returns in adulthood,

shaping how adoptees make sense of themselves and those around them. This temporal fluidity draws attention to the ongoing relevance of identity, belonging, attachment, culture, language, and nationhood – each shaping how adoptees locate themselves socially and culturally. To ground this analysis, it is imperative first to define the key concepts it draws on:

Identity refers to both personal identity (one’s internal sense of self) and social identity (how one is perceived and categorised). Relationships, memory, and cultural context shape it. In intercountry adoption, identity is formed by the tension between severed origins and new frameworks of belonging.

Belonging moves beyond legal status to describe the emotional and relational experience of being recognised, included and valued. It unfolds across family, community, cultural, and national contexts – each offering and/or withholding affirmation.

Attachment and **Connectedness** are deeply related but not interchangeable. As Bowlby (1969) defined, attachment refers to early emotional bonds, typically between a child and a caregiver. Connectedness is broader, encompassing interpersonal, cultural, ancestral, and spiritual ties that shape belonging and identity.

Culture and Language are intersections critical to understanding how adoptees negotiate identity. In the context of this thesis, I use culture to refer to the ways of being, knowing and belonging. It includes traditions, languages, practices, and beliefs shared among families, communities, and nations. Language serves as a carrier of memory and cultural heritage. Losing it often signifies a profound disconnection from belonging.

In New Zealand adoption literature most research focuses on policy, child welfare, or adoptive families (Else, 1991; Peters, 2020). Triseliotis (1993) offers foundational insights into adoption and identity. However, there remains a striking absence of work that centres

adoptees themselves and even less research that foregrounds intercountry adoptee narratives. This work seeks to respond to that silence, not by speaking for adoptees but by creating space for their stories to reshape how adoption is understood in this space.

1.2 Why This Research Matters?

This research is significant because it seeks to disrupt the dominant idea that adoption is a seamless act of integration. It challenges assumptions of success measured by assimilation alone. Instead, it invites reflection on what it means to belong when one's origins are obscured, and the work of identity must be done, often alone. By bringing first-hand experiences into focus, this thesis offers insight into intercountry adoption's psychological, cultural and systemic dimensions. It does not just ask, "What does it mean to be adopted?" It further asks, "What does it mean to be seen, to belong, to remember, and to reassemble a self from what has been erased?"

The research follows six adoptees born in Russia, China, and Ecuador and raised in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Their stories move through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

1.3 Research Questions

At the heart of this study are a series of research questions that aim to unpack the connections between adoption, identity, connectedness and belonging:

- How do intercountry adoptees in Aotearoa, New Zealand, articulate their adoption experiences, and how do they believe these experiences have shaped their sense of self?
- What roles do cultural and familial contexts play in the identity construction of intercountry adoptees? How do these adoptees navigate the tension between their birth and adoptive cultures?

- How do their experiences impact their sense of belonging within Aotearoa, New Zealand, and their participation in broader societal networks, communal activities, and integration within social and cultural groups?

1.4 Personal Narrative – My Intercountry Adoption Story

As an intercountry adoptee, my research is deeply connected to my personal experiences. Raised in a Māori¹ adoptive family, I have Spanish heritage from my father's side. My journey—grappling with the sense of belonging and navigating cultural contradictions—underpins the core ideas of this work. These intersecting identities have not only shaped my adoption experience but have also influenced my understanding of myself and the system that does more than place children. It reconstructs identity, severs ties to ancestry, and alters relational dynamics. I am not an outsider in this exploration but profoundly embedded in it.

My story does not begin with personal memory but through fragmented narratives passed down by others. Born in the United States to an American mother and a Mexican/Spanish father, I was adopted within my first year of life following the death of my biological father from a drug overdose. My birth mother had five children; all but one were adopted out. The reasons for this remain unclear, though I understand the deep roots of generational trauma often buried in silence (Danieli, 1998).

My adoptive parents were connected to my biological grandparents through the Mormon Church. To my knowledge, I moved to New Zealand when I was age two. My adoptive father was completing tertiary studies abroad when they adopted me. They had two biological sons and later adopted a younger daughter. My early life in West Auckland was shaped by the cultural norms of the 1980s – a time when children were expected to be seen and

¹ Māori are the Indigenous people of Aotearoa (New Zealand), with whakapapa (ancestral lineage) rooted in the land, language, and cultural traditions passed down through generations.

not heard. My father was a university lecturer, and my mother, often unwell, was a homemaker. They did their best with the tools they had, but the complexity of raising an intercountry adoptee presented emotional challenges.

Throughout my childhood, I wrestled with behavioural and emotional challenges, often labelled as intense, complicated, or hyperactive. These behaviours, in retrospect, stemmed from a sense of inner conflict, disrupted attachment, or lack thereof, and a persistent uncertainty and lack of identity. Though I always knew I was adopted, the emotional and psychological implications only became apparent later. I was raised to believe that my biological grandparents were distant relatives for much of my early life. They remained in contact with my adoptive family under the guise of being “aunt and uncle.”

From an early age, I recognised noticeable and relational differences between myself and my adoptive family. My physical features – fairer skin and lighter hair – contrasted sharply with those of my adoptive Māori family, including my Māori adoptive sister, who resembled them more closely. I was the only white face in my family. Although I was told I was Spanish, no efforts were made to integrate or affirm this identity in my upbringing. The cultural cues, language, and heritage of my birth identity were absent, contributing to a persistent sense of disconnection and in-betweenness that shaped my internal world long before I had the language to articulate it. These feelings severely impacted my self-concept and emotional well-being well into adulthood. My relationship with my adoptive mother was strained, shaped by her history of trauma, domestic abuse, and undiagnosed mental health struggles. While there were moments of joy, I grew up feeling largely misunderstood and disconnected from my adoptive family. I was constantly reminded that my adoptive family was not ‘my real family,’ yet my ‘real family’ remained a well-hidden secret.

Losing both adoptive parents in my late teens – my mother to heart disease, my father to cancer – left me reeling with unresolved grief and identity confusion, further compounded by the sheer lack of support and direction. With little guidance or support, I fell into a period marked by alcoholism and mental health struggles. At the time, I internalised the medical system’s framing of my pain – I was told, directly and indirectly, that I was inherently broken. My distress was diagnosed as an illness, my emotions as a disorder, and my identity as unstable. It has taken years of reflection to understand that what I was experiencing was not a personal flaw but the physiological and spiritual toll of an overactive nervous system—wired for survival, not safety – and the unrelenting trauma of not belonging. I was not broken; I was unrooted. I was disconnected from culture, origin, or any true mirror of who I was.

In my mid-twenties, I reunited briefly with my biological mother in the United States. Although I longed for a meaningful connection, our reunion was emotionally distant. Later, I returned to the U.S. with my young children, hoping to establish my roots and deepen a bond this time. It was painfully obvious that we were incompatible, and that she was emotionally unavailable. We returned to New Zealand – to familiar ground. That chapter closed with both pain and clarity.

Following my return, I decided to pursue higher education. Leaving behind a decade-long career in dentistry, I enrolled in university as an adult student. Balancing study, motherhood, and healing was challenging, but it marked the beginning of a profound personal transformation. I completed a degree in Social Science, majoring in Psychology and Sociology, and later pursued postgraduate study. The opportunity to author a thesis on intercountry adoption felt deeply aligned. At the time, I had never met another adoptee. Through this research, I began to connect, understand, and heal.

1.5 Thesis Organisation

The thesis is structured across eight chapters, each building upon the last to explore the lived experiences of intercountry adoptees and the social, legal, and cultural systems that shape identity and belonging.

Chapter One introduces the research questions and the rationale that grounds them. It outlines the key theoretical concepts, including identity, belonging, attachment, and connectedness, situating the study within current adoption literature. The chapter is rooted in personal narrative and scholarly positioning, affirming the work's emotional and intellectual stakes. It concludes with an Author's Note that clarifies the research's methodological and ethical commitments.

Chapter Two traces the legal and historical evolution of adoption law in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It examines the enduring influence of the Adoption Act of 1955, and the colonial logic embedded within it. The chapter reveals how secrecy and assimilation were written into policy and how intercountry adoption extended these logics into global, racialised, and humanitarian contexts.

Chapter Three reviews key literature contributions across sociology, psychology, and adoption studies. It engages with debates around attachment, child development, and cultural belonging and critiques of pathologising frameworks that have historically framed adoptee identity through deficit models.

Chapter Four outlines the research design, including qualitative life-story interviews. It details participant recruitment, ethical considerations, and reflexive processes. This study is informed by intersecting social constructivist and interpretative epistemologies that value lived experience as knowledge.

Chapter Five focuses on childhood and early post-adoption years. It explores early disruption, adaptation, and the emotional weight of cultural and linguistic loss. Special attention is given to adoptees who were older at the time of placement, where the shift to the English language was not just linguistic but symbolic of a deeper cultural severance.

Chapter Six examines adolescence and early adulthood as periods of visible identity negotiation. It focuses on racialisation, social exclusion, and the evolving roles of adoptive families in shaping a sense of belonging. The chapter acknowledges that identity development does not proceed linearly—the earlier ruptures often resurface, and time may not resolve these issues but reframe their significance.

Chapter Seven moves into adulthood, where adoptees begin to make meaning from earlier loss through reconnection, professional roles, community-building, and/or parenting. It highlights how adoptees re-author their narratives, finding ways to hold grief, reclaim their voice and pursue relational repair.

Chapter Eight synthesises the significant findings and reflects on adoption's emotional, cultural, and structural layers. It returns to the central research questions and calls for broader reform – legal narrative and relational – that centres adoptee perspectives not as additions but as foundations.

1.6 Author's Note on Voice, Positionality, and Method

In this thesis, I speak as both a researcher and adoptee from a place shaped by memory, cultural dislocation, and the emotional labour of identity reconstruction. While grounded in academic theory, this work is rooted in lived truths. In this context, adoption is not merely a legal destination or a social arrangement but an experience with lasting relational, cultural, and psychological dimensions.

Some parts of this work carry emotional narrative weight. This is intentional. Social constructivist and interpretative inquiry recognise multiple forms of knowledge, including those grounded in the body, story, and pain. While this may move beyond conventional academic detachment, it does so to remain true to the complexity of what is being explored. I invite readers to listen differently and see adoption through the intersection of legal or policy frameworks and the lived realities of those most affected, some of whom offer their stories here. This is offered in the spirit of integrity, care, and narrative justice.

Though heavily anchored in Chapter Two, key terms from lived and scholarly discourse are used. They are not employed to create distance but to build a shared language that honours the depth of the adoptee experience. Several of these are briefly defined here:

- *Epistemic injustice*: the harm that occurs when individuals or groups are not recognised as credible knowers of their own experience (Fricker, 2007).
- *Narrative authority*: the ability to speak one's truth in one's own words and to have that truth received as valid and meaningful.
- *Identity rupture*: the socio-psychic dislocation that results from the erasure of cultural lineage, familial knowledge, and origin stories.
- *Relational justice*: a shift from technical forms of reform toward restoring severed cultural, familial and communal ties.
- *Testimonial smothering* refers to silencing marginalised speakers who anticipate their voices being misread, dismissed, or distorted (Dotson, 2011).
- *Methodological colonialism*: the dominance of Western research practices that extract and reframe lived realities through detached paradigms, often erasing relational and embodied forms of knowing (Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

These terms are used not to obscure but to illuminate. They reflect the layered, often contested terrain of adoption as a personal journey, a system of governance, and a story still unfolding.

1.7 Conclusion

I entered this research with a question: Was I alone in feeling this way? As an intercountry adoptee, I had questions shaped by absence, dislocation, and the in-betweenness of belonging. The silence around my origins felt personal. I turned to research, to stories, and others like me. Narrative inquiry and life stories made it clear that these feelings were not isolated. Still, it is widely shared, and at times rooted in individual misunderstanding, and shaped by legal, historical and ideological systems that continue to influence how adoptees experience identity, loss, and the self.

I began writing as a search for resonance; however, it became a call to critique. This work is both an academic project and an act of reclamation, of voice, of place and identity. It seeks not to condemn adoption but to reveal the frameworks that shape it – systems marked by secrecy, assimilation, and dominant cultural norms. The work invites the reader to sit with complexity, where love and rupture, care and silence, agency and erasure exist in tension, and often in contradiction.

Chapter Two – The Evolution of Adoption Law and Practice in Aotearoa, New Zealand

2.1 Introduction

This chapter traces how adoption law has evolved alongside national identity, demonstrating that legal frameworks are never neutral—they operate within and reinforce specific social and historical contexts. Adoption law in Aotearoa, New Zealand, did not emerge in isolation. Its development is tightly bound to colonial governance, racialised ideas of kinship, and the elevation of nuclear family models rooted in Western ideals. From the outset, adoption legislation has functioned as both a legal instrument and a mechanism for cultural assimilation.

As outlined in the Author’s Note (Section 1.6), I write from scholarly research and lived experience as an intercountry adoptee. This chapter is not a detached legal history; it maps laws with direct personal consequences. I intend to explore the shifts in adoption policy while identifying the structural silences that have shaped how adoption is understood and practised in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Adopted from the United States, I discovered that my birth name and identity documents were legally altered, which delayed my access to personal records. I encountered challenges in accessing citizen information for both the New Zealand and American contexts. These experiences are not unique – they are part of a legal structure that has long normalised the erasure of identity, kinship, and cultural belonging.

Scholars such as Hübinette (2015), Haenga-Collins (2017), Kim (2010), and Blake et al. (2023) propose that domestic and international adoption frameworks have operated as tools of assimilation and silencing. Kim (2010) describes intercountry adoption as a geopolitical process that reconfigures displacement into a story of belonging while masking

the structural forces that produce it. Though often framed through humanitarian rhetoric, adoption practices have severed kinship ties and obscured cultural histories.

This chapter begins by tracing the evolution of domestic adoption law in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Then it examines how these legal frameworks were exported into global adoption systems, which sustain patterns of erasure and displacement. It further considers missed opportunities for reform, exposing the more profound epistemic injustices that continue to marginalise adoptee voices. Ultimately, it situates Aotearoa, New Zealand's adoption practices within broader transnational contexts of inequality, illustrating how legal, cultural, and geopolitical elements and boundaries shape both individual and collective experiences of identity and belonging. Each section fosters a justice-centred re-evaluation of adoption, emphasising relational belonging over legal constructs.

2.2 Historical and Legal Evolution

New Zealand established its legal adoption framework with the Adoption of Children Act 1881, becoming the first nation in the British Empire to implement formal adoption legislation (Dalley, 1998; Else, 1991). Introduced as a private member's bill by former Premier George Waterhouse, the Act was passed during Premier John Hall's administration and provided adoptive parents with legal rights, status, and privileges equal to those of biological parents (Griffith, 1997). Adoption remained relatively open at this early stage, as birth parents could still access knowledge of adoptive families and vice versa. Nevertheless, the Act established a basis for state-approved regulation of kinship, reflecting colonial beliefs that regarded land and individuals as commodities that could be exchanged (Dalley, 1998).

Despite being praised as forward-thinking, the 1881 Act established a legal system influenced by Pākehā² values, overlooking Māori and their established Whāngai³ customs that prioritised whakapapa⁴, reciprocity, and communal care (Haenga-Collins, 2017). The Act privileged a narrow model of the nuclear family and individual inheritance, marginalising broader kinship systems. It also reinforced moral assumptions about family, portraying adoption as a form of rescue, particularly for children of unmarried mothers, mirroring Christian ideals that would become even more entrenched in the decades that followed (Else, 1991; Griffith, 1997).

The 1955 Adoption Act ushered in policies that cemented the “clean break” model. This model introduced sealed birth records, issuing of new and altered birth certificates, and severance of ties to birth families (Blake et al., 2023; McGregor, 2017). Although framed publicly as “child-centred” and “protective,” the Act worked to legitimise the adoptive family as the only rightful place for belonging. Birth families—particularly unmarried or Māori mothers—were often rendered invisible or portrayed negatively, reinforcing narratives of deficiency (Else, 1991; Haenga-Collins, 2017).

From the 1950s to the 1980s, closed adoption became common. Thousands of children were adopted under pressure, coercion, or limited choice, with adoption framed as a fix for the “problem” of unmarried motherhood (Else, 1991; Haenga-Collins, 2017). Religious and state welfare institutions framed adoption as a morally corrective act that upheld the patriarchal values of purity, shame, and social conformity (Haenga-Collins, 2017).

² Pākehā refers to New Zealanders of European descent; the term is commonly used in Aotearoa, New Zealand to distinguish non-Māori, particularly in cultural and historical contexts.

³ Whāngai is a customary Māori practice of child-rearing in which a child is raised by someone other than their birth parents, often within the extended family. Unlike legal adoption under state law, Whāngai arrangements are relational rather than contractual, prioritising kinship ties, whakapapa (genealogy), and collective responsibility. These practices are grounded in tikanga (customary law) and continue to reflect Māori values of care, belonging, and cultural continuity (Newman, 2020).

⁴ Whakapapa refers to genealogical connections and ancestral lineage, linking individuals to their whanau (family), whenua (land), and wider cosmos; it is foundational to Māori identity and ways of knowing.

Birth mothers were told that surrendering their child was the most loving or responsible option, while adoptees were raised with little to no access to their origins (Else, 1991). The practices of this time left enduring negative psychological and legal impacts on both adoptees and their birth families (Blake et al., 2023; Haenga-Collins, 2017).

Rather than reforming the earlier logic of possession and erasure, subsequent applications of the 1955 Act reproduced and entrenched these practices further. It institutionalised them, replacing the original identity and reinforcing the belief that the child's identity could be legally overwritten (Blake et al., 2023; Else, 1991). This legal fiction served the broader purpose of nation-building, reinforcing ideals of social conformity, moral redemption, and assimilation (Blake et al., 2023). Within this model, identity was reframed as something that could be legally reassigned, stripped of familial continuity and disconnection from the broader cultural and relational context in which it was formed (Blake et al., 2023; McGregor, 2017).

Furthermore, the Act did not make open adoption or post-adoption support provisions (Field, 2024). Even as society and culture have evolved, the Act's persistence reflects an ongoing attachment to a model of kinship that erases difference. With this in mind, the following section explores how these frameworks were exported beyond national borders, extending the same logic of assimilation and silence into intercountry adoption.

2.3 Intercountry Adoption and the Extension of Assimilationist Logic

This assimilationist logic embedded in Aotearoa, New Zealand's domestic adoption laws, particularly regarding identity substitution and cultural erasure, was exported into the domain of intercountry adoption. Intercountry adoption, which began in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s, was not a new model; it extended existing domestic policies into the international arena (Lovelock, 2000).

The Adoption Act of 1955 was developed for national contexts and was applied to intercountry adoption without meaningful contextual adaptation. Instead of addressing the unique cultural and relational complexities of cross-border adoptions, the state reproduced a domestic legal model designed to sever and replace identity (Dalley, 1998; Else, 1991). This lack of adaptation revealed a profound absence of legal and ethical preparedness to uphold cultural continuity or relational belonging in the international context (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020; Hübinette, 2015).

The same assumptions that influenced domestic adoption – favouring Pākehā family structures and the nuclear model – were extended globally. Adoption became a tool not just for care but for soft power, projecting narrow cultural values under the guise of humanitarian aid (Fitzmaurice, 2022; Kim, 2010). These systems often eroded original cultural specificity under the mantle of protection (Kim, 2010; Yngvesson, 2003). In many cases, adoptive processes did not simply overlook heritage; they actively reorganised it to align with dominant cultural narratives, leaving adoptees to recover a sense of origin with limited institutional recognition or support (Trenka et al., 2021).

Hübinette (2015) claims, this erasure extends beyond paperwork. It disrupts the connection to land, culture and belonging. Volkman (2005) opposes the belief that adoptive love alone can mend these ruptures, by exposing how grief is silenced and loss depoliticised. Dalley (1998) and Haenga-Collins (2017) discuss how the uncritical application of domestic frameworks to intercountry contexts intensified cultural fragmentation, leaving continuity peripheral at best.

In this system, adoptees must reconstruct identity, piecing together a sense of self from fragments. Despite growing awareness of these harms, legislative change remains deferred. Reviews by the New Zealand Law Commission (2000) and the Ministry of Justice

(2021) concluded that the Adoption Act of 1955 fails to meet international human rights obligations, especially Articles 7 and 8 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which affirms every child’s right to identity, name and family connection (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). These findings reinforce that the Adoption Act of 1955 continues to prioritise legal closure and adoptive parents’ rights over the relational and cultural realities of adoption.

The origins of the 1955 Act stem from post-war efforts to manage poverty and illegitimacy through moral control and social engineering. These conditions reveal how adoption operated as a system of erasure. By replacing original identities with legal fiction – a state-sanctioned construct that overwrites birth identity – the Act formalised the severance of genealogical and cultural ties, embedding disconnection into the very architecture of adoption law (Dalley, 1998; Else, 1991; Field, 2024).

This legal erasure was compounded by racialisation. In Māori worldviews, whakapapa is not simply genealogical imprints; it is a living, relational whakapapa ethic that binds individuals, whānau, whenua⁵ (land), and ancestors (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020). Adoption practices that sever these ties do not just disrupt identity – they violate core tikanga⁶ values that define relational responsibility and intergenerational continuity (Haenga-Collins, 2017; Smith, 2012).

Māori children were disproportionately placed in adoption and state care, with little regard for whakapapa or cultural identity (Fitzmaurice, 2022; Haenga-Collins, 2017). In the intercountry adoption context, these same logics were reframed as humanitarian

⁵ Whenua is a Māori word meaning both land and placenta, symbolising the life-giving connection between people, their ancestors, and the land; it embodies a deep relational bond to place and identity.

⁶ Tikanga is a Māori term referring to customary values, principles, and practices that guide appropriate and respectful behaviour within tea o Māori (the Māori world). It encompasses ethics, relational protocols, and inherited cultural knowledge, often contextual and grounded in whakapapa (genealogy), place and collective well-being.

interventions, masking the severance of cultural ties and the reproduction of racial hierarchies (Haenga-Collins, 2017; Hübinette, 2015).

Despite decades of critique from scholars, adoptees, and international advocates, the 1955 Act persists. Its persistence signals more than outdated policy, revealing a legal and institutional resistance to relational complexity and intergenerational accountability. While other areas of family law have evolved toward trauma-informed and human rights-based approaches, adoption continues to treat identity as a bureaucratic formality rather than a lived, relationship-based understanding (Dalley, 1998; Else, 1991).

Even legislative efforts aimed at softening its impact – such as the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985, was progressive for their time. However, they remain constrained by the same legislative logic that prioritises record-keeping over relational repair. International concern reflects this stagnation. In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child formally criticised New Zealand’s adoption law, urging alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee, 2016). These calls underscore that the current framework does not simply fall short – it constitutes a breach of ethical and legal responsibility on a global scale.

Adoptee voices have become increasingly central in challenging the historical silence surrounding adoption (Blake et al., 2023). Through scholarship, advocacy, and testimony, adoptees have reframed adoption not as a story of rescue but as rupture, complexity, and reclamation. The widely circulated narrative of the “grateful adoptee” has been dismantled by those who speak openly about grief, anger, and the search for coherence (Kim, 2010; Yngvesson, 2003). These stories do not mark individual failure; they expose a system designed to erase, replace, and silence.

Research access to origin stories has been associated with deep identity confusion, unresolved grief, as explored by Passmore, Feeney and Foulstone (2007). These effects are not purely psychological; they are structured by a legal regime that privileges assimilation over relational truth. As March (1995) observes that secrecy disrupts identity coherence and denies adoptees the right to narrate their lives. These laws were never neutral. They were designed to manage social deviance and reinforce dominant norms. For adoptees, the system did not simply remove names from records; it removed relational maps, disrupted language, and erased the presence of adoptees from national narratives. This erasure is not just historical. It is still happening.

2.4 Missed Opportunities for Reform: Silences in Legislative Time

In this section, I examine key political and legislative moments when meaningful reform of Aotearoa, New Zealand's adoption system could have taken place – and the deeper resistance that allowed the 1955 Act to remain in place despite longstanding evidence of its incompatibility with human rights standards (Blake et al., 2023; Haenga-Collins, 2017; Ministry of Justice, 2021).

Though critiques have been sustained and reform pathways articulated, successive governments have repeatedly deferred change. This inertia reflects more than a bureaucratic inefficiency; it suggests discomfort confronting the colonial, gendered, and moralistic logics that still shape adoption policy (Else, 1991; Haenga-Collins, 2017; Palmer, 1991). Rather than confronting the closed-record adoption structure, the state has often doubled down, framing adoption as a closed chapter rather than a sustained site of relational and structural violence (Blake et al., 2023; Field, 2024).

2.4.1 1985: Partial Visibility, Structural Silence

The Adult Adoption Information Act of 1985 marked a symbolic movement in reform. It granted adoptees aged twenty and over the right to access their original birth certificates (Aburn, 2014). While this legislative shift recognised the emotional and psychological significance of origin information, it did little to address the systems that had long denied it. The foundational framework of the Adoption 1955 Act remained intact: identity substitution continued, and the law made no provision for open adoption, cultural continuity, or relational repair (Blake et al., 2023; Field, 2024).

Although adoption has become increasingly common in contemporary practice, this shift has occurred through policy and informal agreement rather than comprehensive legal reform. See, for example, Adoption Option Trust, which supports open adoption pathways in Aotearoa, New Zealand, or Field (2024) for a discussion of contemporary trends.

The 1985 Act also limited the scope of redress. While adoptees aged twenty and over granted the legal right to access their original birth certificates, access to broader records often required a Court Order and parent consent (McGregor, 2017). As a result, the legislation – though progressive – framed access to identity not as a holistic right of belonging, but as conditional and administratively mediated process, an incomplete response to decades of sealed records and systemic silence.

2.4.2 1999: A Shelved Opportunity

A more substantial reform moment arose in 1999 when the New Zealand Law Commission released its review of the 1955 Act. The report called for a culturally responsive, child-centred legal framework that aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (New Zealand Law Commission, 2000). The recommendations were well-received by many scholars and advocacy groups who called for relational, rights-based

reform, including Haenga-Collins (2017) and Adoption Action (2021) whose submissions echoed the Commission's proposals (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Despite this, the report was shelved without implementation.

The Commission's recommendations recognised that adoption is not a finite legal act, but a lifelong process shaped by identity formation, emotional development, and cultural belonging. The proposed framework acknowledged the harm done by secrecy and legal substitution and instead promoted openness, relational continuity, and cultural integrity principles. Had these recommendations been implemented, they could have disrupted the erasure-based foundations of adoption law in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

This moment was not simply missed – it was refused. It represented a rare convergence of expert insight, legal opportunity, and ethical clarity. Else (1991) and Haenga-Collins (2017) suggests the decision reflected more than the legislative backlog. It exposed a more profound reluctance to challenge the monocultural ideologies embedded in law – ideologies that continue to silence adoptee voices and maintain Pākehā, settler-normative, versions of family. Reform was possible, even within reach, but it was avoided, and with that avoidance came the continuation of a system grounded in denial.

2.4.3 2000 – Present: Persistent Inertia

Since 2000, adoptee-led advocacy, academic research, and public testimony have grown significantly (Haenga-Collins, 2017; Kim, 2010). Despite this, reform efforts continue to be postponed – another expression of the same inertia that privileges administrative ease over relational truth. Compared to reforms in other areas – including LGBTQIA+ rights, family violence law, and Oranga Tamariki (Human Rights Commission, 2020; New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2024, July 3; Te Puna Aonui, 2021), adoption remains governed by a 70-year-old statute.

Scholars have demonstrated that practices of secrecy and identity substitution were not neutral bureaucratic decisions; they are powerful tools of social engineering that profoundly shape lives. Else (1991) documents how adoption policy has historically aligned with moral regulation, especially targeting women, framing unmarried motherhood as a social failure to be corrected through the erasure of maternal identity. Palmer (1991) critiques this legal framework, noting how closed adoption models functioned to erase whakapapa, replacing genealogical truth with state-sanctioned narratives of legitimacy. Haenga-Collins (2017) draws attention to the disproportionate impact on Māori, for whom adoption severed not only individual ties but collective belonging, sidelining Tikanga and reinforcing monocultural ideals of care and kinship under the guise of protection.

More recently, Blake et al. (2023) note that the continued marginalisation of adoptee perspectives is not merely bureaucratic inertia but a more profound epistemic resistance – a refusal to reimagine identity and care beyond assimilationist frameworks of settler-colonial ideology. This echoes Shotwell’s (2016, p. 38) discussion of how institutions sustain “epistemologies of ignorance” as a form of colonial forgetting – a political effort to preserve power through action and refusal: refusal to know or take responsibility.

The state’s ongoing refusal to recognise adoptees as full rights-bearing subjects is visible in the legal privileging of adoptive parents’ interests and administrative ease over the lived realities of those adopted. This logic is especially acute for Māori and intercountry adoptees, whose genealogical and cultural belonging is routinely displaced to fit within settler-state narratives as “acceptable” family formations (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Kim (2003), Patton (2000) and Briggs (2003) point out that such legislative inertia is not ideologically neutral; it signals whose identities are seen as repairable and expendable.

Haenga-Collins (2017) and the Ministry of Justice (2021) make clear that this failure violates New Zealand's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It contradicts its stated principles of biculturalism, justice and inclusion. These missed opportunities for reform reveal a legal system that is out of step with contemporary ethics and continues treating adoptee invisibility as structurally permissible. Until reform is confronted, adoption in Aotearoa, New Zealand will remain a site of intergenerational harm, where displacement is rebranded as care, and silence mistaken for consent.

2.5 Epistemic Injustice and the Politics of Exclusion

While section 2.4 traced political and legislative failures to reform adoption law, I turn to the deeper epistemic structures that have marginalised adoptee voices and sustained systemic injustice. Central to this inquiry is the question of who is permitted to speak, to be believed, and to shape the narrative that informs reform. The persistent exclusion of adoptee perspectives, which reveals a deeper form of harm, what Fricker (2007) terms epistemic injustice: the systematic devaluing of certain people as knowledge holders.

In the context of adoption, this injustice is institutional practice. Existing policies often treat adoptees as passive recipients of decisions about them rather than active agents in shaping their own narratives. Their contributions are frequently reduced to anecdotal experience, while legal and political discourse continues to be dominated by adoptive parents, policymakers, and social workers (Nelson, 2020). This imbalance reflected entrenched power hierarchies that resist sharing interpretive authority.

Despite a growing body of scholarly literature, public testimony, and community advocacy, adoptee insights are often dismissed as overly emotional or lacking objectivity (Fricker, 2007; Goode, 2019; Kim, 2010; Trenka et al., 2021). This framing delegitimises lived knowledge and obscures the structural nature of adoption harm. What is at stake is not

just recognition; it is the right to narrative authority, the power to define their reality, name harm, and inform systemic change. Even within government consultations, adoptee submissions are often distilled into policy-neutral summaries, diminishing their emotional texture and critical depth (Dotson, 2011; Fricker, 2007). This flattening is not simply stylistic; it reflects a broader practice of epistemic injustice, where experiential knowledge is treated as supplementary rather than central.

Although there is increasing public knowledge of identity severance and cultural loss, this recognition has not translated into material change. Adoptee voices are often referenced but not resourced; heard but not held with consequence. Legal and political frameworks continue to treat adoption's emotional and relational dimensions as sidelined (Blake et al., 2023; Haenga-Collins, 2017). This creates the illusion of inclusion while maintaining the dominance of institutional perspectives.

This exclusion is also maintained through what Dotson (2011, p. 244) calls “testimonial smothering,” a phenomenon where marginalised individuals are compelled to withhold or alter testimony due to the perceived risk of misunderstanding or dismissal. For instance, adoptees have described withholding parts of their story in consultations, out of fear that their grief would be dismissed as ‘resentment’ or ‘disruption’ (Adoption Action Inc, 2021; Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2021, September). Many adoptees, particularly intercountry adoptees and Indigenous adoptees, have reported that speaking their truths results in defensiveness, minimisation, or outright silence (Haenga-Collins, 2017; Yngvesson, 2003). The expectation that adoptees remain “grateful” complicates this further; expressions of grief or critique are frequently pathologised or reframed as disloyalty (Kim, 2010; Patton, 2000). These dynamics silence truth and generate epistemic displacement, stripping one’s right to define reality.

Within dominant legal and social discourse, adoptees are often denied full recognition as rights-bearers or authoritative narrators of their own experience – a form of what Fricker (2007) terms epistemic injustice. Their absence from reform processes is not incidental; it reflects a refusal to share narrative power. As Haenga-Collins (2017) indicates, adoption remains structured by monocultural norms that uphold settler-colonial and nuclear family ideals, leaving little room for alternative kinship models and relational accountability.

Fundamental transformation requires more than policy change – it demands reconfiguring who can shape meaning. Until adoptee voices are recognised not as emotional side notes but as epistemic authorities, reform will remain superficial. Lived experience must be heard and seen as central to understanding the long-term impacts of adoption. Beyond the exclusion of testimony, the injustice is sustained through what scholars describe as “methodological colonialism” – the privileging of Western, detached, and extractive models of knowledge production (Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2014). These frameworks often dismiss Indigenous ways of knowing as insufficiently ‘evidence-based,’ reinforcing the marginalisation of adoptee testimony.

Smith (2012) and Tuck and Yang (2014) argue, such methods do not just misinterpret – they actively reproduce the silences they claim to study. In adoption research and law reform, this bias informs what counts as valid knowledge, and in doing so, it favours institutional data over relational truth. Ultimately, the silencing of adoptee knowledge is not only a political act, but it is ontological. It defines whose truths can be known, whose pain can be named, and whose futures can be imagined. This injustice reinforces a system where adoptees must fight not just for rights, but for the legitimacy of their voice. The endurance of adoption silence is therefore not only political but ontological; it dictates who can define truth, name harm, and envision repair.

2.6 Call for Justice: From Harm to Reimagination

Having traced the mechanisms of epistemic injustice that have silenced adoptee knowledge, I now shift toward imagining justice-oriented reform frameworks that centre adoptee lived experience as foundational rather than supplementary. If epistemic injustice silences adoptee knowledge, justice-oriented reform must begin by restoring narrative authority to those most affected.

Here, I shift from critique to possibility. It asks: What would adoption look like if adoptee voices were recognised and centred? How can systems of power be reimaged through lived truth, relational justice, and collective repair? The argument made here is that adoptee perspectives are not supplementary but foundational to any meaningful reform of laws, policy and practice. As previously noted, adoption law in Aotearoa, New Zealand has been shaped by social work and legal and institutional discourses that treat adoption as a finalised event. Yet, for adoptees, adoption unfolds over a lifetime, touching identity, belonging, and relational reconnection at every stage (Else, 1991).

Beyond testifying to harm, adoptees provide necessary insights into how systems might be reimaged. Their lived experiences illuminate areas where the law fails to account for complexity, fluidity, cultural continuity, and intergenerational disconnection. Rather than pathologising their responses, adoptee knowledge must be recognised as a resource for relational and trauma-informed frameworks. These are not abstract concepts but lived between languages, families, and communities. Honouring the adoptee's voice addresses past injustices and reshapes what adoption can become.

Around the world, adoptee-led organisations have been at the forefront of pushing for change. International groups such as Adoptees for Justice (United States), the Global Overseas Adoptee Link (South Korea), InterCountry Adoptee Voices- ICAV (Australia and

international) and Adoption Action (New Zealand) are key examples. These organisations advocate for open records, reflexive legislation, citizen equity, and inclusion in policy reform (Adoptees for Justice, 2023; Adoption Action, n.d.; GOAL, 2023; InterCountry Adoptee Voices, 2023). Their work demonstrates how adoptees reshape the adoption narrative – from rescue to rights, silence to advocacy.

Reform must begin with recognising adoptees as epistemic authorities – individuals whose insights emerge from lived contradiction, cultural rupture, and emotional labour. A justice-oriented model of reform would centre four interrelated principles. First, relational repair would involve acknowledging and addressing the severance of original kinship ties. Secondly, cultural continuity would ensure adoptees retain access to language, customs, and genealogy. Third, transparent identity rights would require providing full, lifelong access to original records and truth-telling about adoption. Finally, long-term post-adoption support must include cultural competence, mental health services, and opportunities for reconnection. These principles extend past technical reform, providing an opportunity to anchor adoption law in dignity, relational accountability, and cultural values.

As an intercountry adoptee and researcher, I argue that healing begins with reckoning. The current legal framework has yet to fully acknowledge the sacredness of what is being severed through adoption. Reform must move beyond child protection rhetoric towards dignity, identity reclamation, and cultural continuity frameworks. The stories shared throughout this thesis, including my own, are not just personal. They are a call to remember, reform, and reimagine adoption as an ongoing relationship that demands ethical care rather than bureaucratic closure.

This work stands in solidarity with a broader movement for national and global adoptee justice. Recognising systemic injustice and mapping pathways forward contributes to

growing critical scholarship, lived experience, and advocacy, calling for reform and cultural reckoning. Scholars such as Hübinette (2015), Trenka et al. (2021), and Haenga-Collins (2017) remind us that adoptees are not only subjects of legislation—they are keepers of knowledge, a lifetime of memory. Their voices challenge silence, resist assimilation, and insist on repair.

As the chapter approaches global frameworks, it becomes clear that New Zealand reflects a wider transitional pattern. The marginalisation of adoptees is not unique—it mirrors global structures of displacement, erasure, and exclusion. Intercountry adoption must be understood as care and a contested ground where citizenship, culture, and identity are continuously negotiated.

2.7 Transnational Adoption and the Global Architecture of Inequality

While earlier sections traced how Aotearoa, New Zealand's domestic adoption models were projected globally, I widen the analysis to examine intercountry adoption as part of a broader global structure of inequality, transcending national policies to implicate racialised and postcolonial systems.

After World War II and the Korean War, intercountry adoption gained widespread support and was presented by Western countries as a humanitarian effort to address child displacement (Briggs, 2012; Hübinette, 2015). Eng and Han (2000) argue that the framing of adoption as a rescue obscures its embeddedness in racialised, economic, and political systems. Rather than tackling loss or inequality, adoption could reinforce them, disconnecting individuals from their culture and heritage.

Starting in the 1960s and quickly increasing through the 1970s and 1980s, Aotearoa, New Zealand, began to welcome children from nations like South Korea through intercountry adoption (Lovelock, 2000). There were earlier instances of international child resettlement,

such as the arrival of Polish refugee children during and after World War II. However, systemic intercountry adoption in Aotearoa, New Zealand emerged later, primarily through non-governmental (NGOS) and religious organisations, usually with limited oversight (Ministry of Justice, 2021). By the 1970s and 1980s, countries like the United States, Sweden, and Canada had become central receiving states for intercountry adoption (Hübinette, 2015; Kim, 2010; Trenka et al., 2021).

To address increasing international concerns, New Zealand officially embraced the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption in 1998 (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1998). However, Smolin (2005) and Rotabi and Gibbons (2012) dispute its effectiveness. They claim that the Convention tends to centre the interests of receiving states and offers few protections for birth families or adoptees.

Lovelock (2000) describes Aotearoa, New Zealand as a modest participant in the global adoption economy but still complicit in systems shaped by geopolitical and economic asymmetry. In the Global North, host nations portray themselves as saviours, whereas origin countries are depicted as unstable, impoverished, and unable to provide care (Lovelock, 2000; Volkman, 2005). This narrative obscures the underlying factors driving child displacement, such as war, poverty, gender-based violence, and neocolonialism exploitation.

Adoptees frequently encounter this dynamic personally, reflecting the deep contradictions of belonging. Identity tensions occur for adoptees who are pressured to blend into a new sociopolitical environment while they also bear the cultural dislocation from their lost ties to their past. Kim (2010), Patton (2000), and Trenka et al. (2021) assert that intercountry adoption imposes a demand for silent belonging – one that denies space for grief, cultural return, or critique. New Zealand’s legal system reflects this tension. As noted

in the Ministry of Justice's (2021) discussion document, 'A New Adoption System for Aotearoa, New Zealand,' there is no central registry or consistent mechanism for tracking the long-term well-being of adoptees. Therefore, there is little accountability for post-adoption support, cultural connection and continuity.

The Hague Convention aimed to establish greater uniformity and safeguard intercountry adoption, especially to combat child trafficking; however, it also introduced various structural blind spots. Rotabi and Gibbons (2012) and Triseliotis (1993) expand on the discussion document, noting that although procedural mechanisms have been improved, crucial aspects such as informed consent, accuracy in documentation, and accountability following adoption are still inconsistent and frequently not enforced.

The Ministry of Justice (2021) also acknowledge this gap, noting that the legal framework remains insufficient in ensuring adoptees' rights to identity, continuity of care, or cultural connection. Instead of fostering relational and cultural connections, the system has typically reflected Global North ideologies, portraying children from the Global South as requiring "rescue" by assimilating into mainly white Western families (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020). Language, kinship, and cultural ties are easily sidelined in this narrative. Moreover, these global frameworks reveal that intercountry adoption is not a humanitarian anomaly but part of a broader architecture of transnational inequality.

Lovelock (2000) and Haenga-Collins (2017) note the rescuer: rescued framing relies on colonial perceptions that portray the originating countries as lacking and unstable, while depicting the destination countries as benevolent. Factors like poverty, gender inequality, war, and the legacy of imperialism frequently go unaddressed, despite their significant impact on the conditions that define how children become "adoptable."

For adoptees, the consequences of this system are deeply personal. Identity tensions emerge not in theory, but in the tangible experiences of being disconnected from one's birthplace, language, ancestry, and self-understanding. Kim (2010), Patton (2000), and Trenka et al. (2021) strengthen the idea that cross-border adoption creates an expectation of significant gratitude but provides minimal assistance for return, reconnection, or repair. In Aotearoa, New Zealand, these challenges are compounded by the ongoing absence of legal reform, resulting in many intercountry adoptees lacking sufficient protections and acknowledgment (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

Another issue sits quietly in the background: legal belonging. Some intercountry adoptions occur under nation-to-nation agreements – such as those with Chile, Hong Kong, India, Lithuania, the Philippines and Thailand—where citizenship may be conferred upon adoption (Oranga Tamariki-Ministry for Children, 2023, August 18). However, many adoptees still face significant barriers to securing legal recognition. In practice, access to citizenship remains conditional, delayed, or complex, particularly for adoptees outside of these agreements or those adopted through informal and older processes. This creates a tiered system of belonging where adoptees are welcome but not fully protected, claimed but not equally recognised (Ministry of Justice, 2021, pp. 36–37).

More generally, international adoption extends beyond creating families. It represents a worldwide framework of power. Briggs (2012) and Hübinette (2015) describe this as a form of postcolonial child relocation—less a response to care needs than a supply chain shaped by global inequality. Legal loopholes, weak enforcement, and the exploitation of poverty are not anomalies; they are foundational components of an adoption infrastructure where demand routinely overrides ethical safeguards (Briggs, 2009; Graff, 2008, November/December).

Ethical frameworks must reckon with, rather than ignore, the power imbalances embedded in intercountry adoption. According to Smolin (2005) intercountry adoption should never be a default solution to child welfare crises. It must be considered only after all in-country care options have been fully explored and exhausted. Smolin's position reflects an evolving international consensus: children have the right to remain in their cultures, communities, and familial networks where possible.

Rotabi and Gibbons (2012) echo this concern, describing intercountry adoption as a form of soft power – a humanitarian gesture that masks more profound political and economic inequalities. Briggs (2012, p. 221) names this dynamic as the 'global orphan industrial complex,' a term that exposes the machinery behind adoption systems: one that repackages global inequality in the language of care and relocates children from the periphery to the centre, often without meaningful accountability. This is the paradox at the heart of intercountry adoption.

2.8 Conclusion

Adoption is often presented as a personal and/or social act of care. In practice, it operates within a far-reaching political framework shaped by colonialism, racial hierarchies, and the state's definition of kinship and legitimacy. The endurance of the 1955 Adoption Act, despite its longstanding criticisms, points to something more profound than slow reform. It reflects a broader resistance to acknowledging how adoption has been used to uphold monocultural ideals, displacement, the erasure of whakapapa, and the reinforcement of dominant socially constructed and 'acceptable' orders of kinship, family and citizenship. When policy treats identity as something that can be legally reassigned, it reveals whose stories are protected and whose are being made invisible. From the silence of domestic policies to international

systems that commodify children under humanitarian narratives, adoption has consistently prioritised assimilation over identity and secrecy over truth.

This chapter seeks to disrupt dominant frameworks by foregrounding adoptee knowledge and insists on justice-centred reform. Criticising the system without listening to those living within is incomplete. Adoptee perspectives are not supplementary; they are essential to reimagining adoption beyond erasure toward relational truth, accountability, and repair.

While Aotearoa, New Zealand does not profit financially from intercountry adoption in a direct sense, it nonetheless benefits from the global conditions that produce it. These benefits include fulfilling domestic desires for family formation, reinforcing a humanitarian national identity, and avoiding deeper structural accountability for both global inequalities and colonial legacies. The ethics of rescue and care cannot be separated from the geopolitics of extraction. These realities are not abstract. They live in the bodies and stories of intercountry adoptees – in their identity negotiations, their ruptured connection, and their search for meaning across cultural divides. As this chapter has shown, justice in adoption must begin with those who live its consequences most intimately. Adoptee voices cannot remain marginal or tokenised. They must be recognised as epistemic authorities: narrators of experience, holders of insight, and rightful contributors to how adoption is understood, practised, and fundamentally reimagined.

The next chapter reviews the literature that informs understanding of the adoptee experience, tracing how identity, belonging, attachment, and cultural integration have been theorised across sociology, psychology, and adoption studies. Doing so centres on the complexity of lived experience, where identity is shaped over time through memory, relationships, and loss. Much of the academic literature has focused on adjustment or

pathology, often overlooking the cultural and relational dimensions of adoptee lives. This chapter mapped the structural systems underpinning intercountry adoption; what follows is a closer look into how those systems have been interpreted – and often misinterpreted within academic literature. The literature review engages with what has been said, what remains missing, and how this work hopes to widen the conversation.

Chapter Three- Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the literature shaping adoption discourse, interrogating whose voices have been privileged or silenced, and to what end. It draws on sociology, psychology, and cultural studies to map dominant frameworks' insights and limitations while foregrounding adoptees' critical epistemologies.

Here I map the contested terrain of intercountry adoption, moving beyond binary frameworks of functionalist benefit and harm. This review emphasises the perspectives and knowledge of adoptees, exploring the historical production of knowledge surrounding adoption, its stakeholders, and the implications involved. What is presented here is a multifaceted perspective on identity, belonging, and care by incorporating sociological, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Instead of mirroring binary arguments, it adopts a third position. This stance acknowledges the complex relationships involved in adoption and does not ignore its systemic, racial, and colonial contexts. In this way, adoptees are seen not merely as passive recipients of care but as active meaning-makers.

Sociological research provides a framework for understanding adoption as a social phenomenon, while psychological theories of attachment and development examine the emotional and relational dimensions of the adoptee experience. Socio-ecological and systemic approaches offer contextualised lenses of well-being, particularly regarding age at adoption and pre-adoption care, and the wider social environments adoptees are situated within. Identity and belonging take centre stage, especially as adoptees navigate multiple cultural and familial influences. Comparative perspectives further illustrate how identity construction varies across national, racial, and cultural contexts.

3.2 Sociological Literature and Research

Katarina Wegar, a Finnish-born adoptee and sociologist, notes a significant gap in the sociological examination and interest in adoption studies in her book *Adoption, Identity and Adoption Debate* (1997), situating it within a broader social framework. She contends that those involved in adoption controversies in the United States often overlook the impact of enduring social beliefs, precisely the notion that adopted children are fundamentally different from, and less than, children raised by their biological families.

Most research in the field has been conducted from other disciplinary perspectives, such as psychiatry, psychology, and social work. This literature predominantly examines the adoption triad, with the majority of research centred on the experiences of adoptive parents, followed by adoptees, and finally, birth families (Baden et al., 2013). These disciplines often examine adoptees primarily from an individualistic perspective. They neglect the broader social factors and processes, such as cultural assimilation, systemic power imbalances between sending and receiving countries, and the role of socioeconomic disparities in shaping practices and policies (Baden et al., 2013; Nakray, 2023).

Wegar (1997) posits that sociology has contributed little to public discourse on adoption, particularly in theorising adoption as a structural institution and addressing its stigma. This lack of engagement is problematic because adoption constructs non-traditional family forms that, within dominant Western discourse, are often relegated to a “second best” status – an idea explored throughout the thesis (Wegar, 1997).

In the decades since, a small but significant body of sociological scholarship has responded to Wegar’s challenge. Fisher (2003) explicitly calls for a sociology of adoption, noting its absence from core disciplinary conversations. Willing et al. (2012) further review the field, highlighting a narrow focus on the adoptive triad and limited theorisation beyond

individual experience. My own work builds on this redress, extending sociological engagement by centring adoptee voices and analysing as a transnational, racialised, and policy-bound structure. Sociological research plays a vital role in tackling the stigma associated with adoption, as well as comprehending how cultural and societal factors affect international adoption and shaping national and international policies (Nakray, 2023).

The intercountry adoption literature presents two contrasting sociological approaches: the functionalist perspective, which views intercountry adoption as an altruistic and beneficial endeavour, and the social capital perspective, which critically examines the broader sociopolitical implications. As discussed by Simon and Alstein (2000), the functionalist perspective emphasises the positive social functions of adoption, portraying it as a means to provide children in need with loving homes, stability, and more significant life opportunities. This perspective assumes that adoption benefits all parties involved, particularly the child, by offering long-term social and emotional security.

In contrast, the social capital perspective challenges this idealised view, sometimes called a conflict-oriented approach. As noted in the previous chapter, intercountry adoption is deeply embedded in power dynamics, global inequalities, and sociopolitical structures (Lovelock, 2000) in which adoption policies are seen to serve the interests of wealthier receiving countries rather than prioritising the child's needs. Briggs (2012) argues how adoption can commodify children and contribute to the erosion of cultural identity, particularly in cases where children are displaced from their birth communities due to economic or political pressures.

This complexity is often flattened by dominant narratives, which continue to frame adoptive parents as altruistic actors and birth families as lacking and incapable. In particular, within middle-class societies in receiving countries, birth families and communities are

frequently portrayed as desperate for solutions for children they cannot care for, therefore justifying intercountry adoption as a benevolent option (Dubinsky, 2010). Such a narrative reinforces the functionalist perspective, which regards adoption as a socially beneficial intervention that not only secures a better life for the child but also integrates them into a stable family structure.

However, the critical perspective offers a more sceptical interpretation, questioning whether adoption truly serves the best interest of the child and the birth family or if it primarily benefits the adoptive parents and receiving societies (Smolin, 2004). From this perspective, intercountry adoption is viewed as an exploitative system that benefits the countries receiving the privileges. Critics observe that adoption diverts resources and policy attention away from strengthening local welfare systems, which could better support vulnerable families and address the root cause of child poverty, family separation, and systemic neglect (Smolin, 2004).

Furthermore, concerns over coercion, manipulation, and even predatory practices, including child trafficking and the sale of children, raise significant ethical concerns about the legitimacy and regulation of intercountry adoption (Dubinsky, 2010; Rotabi & Smith, 2016). These issues highlight the complex and contested nature of intercountry adoption. Rather than being viewed as an unmitigated social good, intercountry adoption is increasingly understood as a political, economic, and cultural phenomenon shaped by global inequalities, ethical concerns, and systemic power imbalances (Briggs, 2012; Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012; Smolin, 2004)

My research does not align exclusively with functionalist or exclusively critical perspectives but instead articulates a third position – one that recognises adoption as a complex and often contradictory experience. While acknowledging that adoption has

provided care and belonging for many, it calls attention not only to the structural forces – racialised, economic, and political, that shape adoption’s global and local realities, but also the subjective, reflexive and often emotional experiences and critiques expressed by adoptees themselves. Rather than a binary stance, this approach seeks to hold space for both the relational realities with adoptive families and the systemic conditions that often remain obscured. It calls for a more profound reckoning, not to assign blame, but to invite more honest, inclusive, and ethically grounded conversations around adoption, identity and belonging.

The academic discourse on intercountry adoption is multifaceted, spanning various disciplines, including social work, law, anthropology, psychology, and gender studies. Sociological contributions to this body of work have been sparse, with few scholars focusing on sociological theories and analysis of intercountry adoption. Anthropologists such as Howell (2006) have explored intercountry adoption's cultural and kinship dimensions, emphasising how adoptees are integrated into family structures. Howell’s work highlights how intercountry adoption reshapes family dynamics through the social construction of kinship. Despite these critical contributions, a gap remains in the comprehensive sociological theorising on intercountry adoption. While scholars such as Rotabi and Gibbons (2012) critique the lack of structural analysis, Selman’s (2012) documentation of global adoption trends underscores the importance of interpreting these shifts through a more robust sociopolitical lens.

In contrast, other disciplines, particularly psychology, have extensively explored adoption-related concerns. Within psychology, one influential theoretical approach is attachment theory, which examines the emotional bonds between adopted children and their caregivers and is critical to understanding the relational dynamics in adoptive families. This

focus on attachment has provided key insights into adoption's emotional and psychological dimensions, filling part of the gap left by the lack of sociological engagement.

3.3 Bonding and Attachment

The idea that childhood foreshadows adulthood has intrigued thinkers for centuries, with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory notably emphasising the importance of early relationships in shaping adult personality (Kirsch & Buchholz, 2020). Freud suggested that the infant-mother bond is a functional prototype for future love relationships (Freud, 1940, 1923/1961). This strand of psychodynamic thought highlights the critical nature of early childhood experiences in shaping long-term development, particularly emotional regulation, self-esteem, and one's capacity to form secure and meaningful relationships throughout life.

While psychological research has richly examined attachment and emotional development in adoptees (Bowlby, 1969; Sroufe, 2005), fewer studies explore how these early disruptions intersect with cultural displacement and identity formation (as echoed in the voices of those I interviewed) (Baden et al., 2012; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). The gap highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches that address adoption's social, emotional, and cultural dimensions.

John Bowlby, often regarded as the founder of Attachment Theory, expanded on these ideas by systematically studying the effects of early bonds on an individual's emotional and social development over time. In his seminal work, 'Attachment and Loss' (1969) proposed that the quality of the attachment between an infant and their primary caregiver has profound and lasting implications for the child's future relationships, emotional regulation, and overall psychological well-being.

While Bowlby's attachment theory fundamentally reshaped child psychology and care practices, it was also reshaped by the cultural and scientific context in which it emerged.

Emerging in post-war Britain, Bowlby's work was profoundly influenced by cultural anxieties around institutional care, maternal deprivation, and the perceived breakdown of the nuclear family (Vicedo, 2011). His emphasis on the mother-infant bond as the foundation for emotional development was innovative and contextually rooted in Western caregiving and family structure ideals.

Extensive research across psychology suggests that early experiences influence later development, cognition, behaviour, social skills, emotional responses and personality (Phillips, 2000; Sroufe, 2005). Many adoptees experience adverse early environments, including neglect, abuse, institutional care, or perinatal complications (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; Verhulst et al., 1990; Zeanah & Gleason, 2009). These early adversities increase the risk of developing attachment-related disorders, such as Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), where a child struggles to form bonds with caregivers or people in general (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; Zeanah & Gleason, 2009).

Longitudinal studies emphasise the lasting impact of these early attachment experiences. Secure attachment in infancy has been linked to greater emotional regulation, social competence, and adaptive functioning throughout childhood and adolescence (Bowlby, 1969; Sroufe, 2005). Attachment theory suggests that development is influenced by ongoing interactions, highlighting the importance of past experiences and current relationship dynamics in shaping psychological outcomes and well-being.

Attachment and bonding are distinct but closely related processes critical in early childhood development. Attachment refers to the infant's innate drive to seek proximity to a caregiver for safety, emotional regulation, and physical care. It is an adaptive survival mechanism. Bonding, by contrast, describes the emotional connection that develops from the caregiver toward the infant, often shaped by early holding, responsiveness, and nurturance.

According to Bowlby (1969), separation from a primary attachment figure can trigger intense emotional responses, including protest, despair, and withdrawal, particularly in preverbal infants who are unable to articulate or cognitively process their loss. These initial disruptions might be internalised at a bodily or subconscious level, affecting trust, regulation, and relational security patterns.

These understandings of attachment must be read in tandem with socio-ecological or socially situated and contingent models of development, which foreground the social structures and systemic contexts into which adoptees are placed. Attachment is explored here not as pathology but as a socially and culturally situated, relational process embedded within histories of loss, psychological displacement, and institutional silence. The tendency to pathologise adoptees' response to trauma risks obscuring the structural conditions – colonialism, poverty, racialisation – that often precede and shape adoption itself (Haenga-Collins, 2017).

Although my thesis draws on attachment theory to understand early relational trauma, it does so critically. Bowlby's insight into emotional bonding remains influential, yet scholars such as Rothbaum et al. (2000) and Vicedo (2011) have challenged its universalising assumptions. These critiques are essential in the context of intercountry and Indigenous adoption, where monocultural psychological models often fail to account for cultural dislocation, kinship logic, and structural loss. Attachment is engaged not as pathology but as a culturally situated and relational process.

3.4 What is Healthy Child Development?

Discussing what constitutes a healthy child is particularly relevant when considering early childhood attachment. Sociological writers such as Urie Bronfenbrenner developed the "Ecological Systems Theory," which outlines how multiple, layered social environments are

fundamental to effective child development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), child development occurs within nested systems that interact and influence one another. These include the microsystem (direct environments, such as family, peer, and school), the mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), the exosystem (indirect influences, such as parental workplaces or community resources), and the macrosystem (broader cultural values, norms, and societal ideologies). Later, he introduced the chronosystem, capturing the impact of time and life transitions on development. A healthy child, therefore, is one whose development is nurtured through positive interactions within these interconnected systems.

Although Emile Durkheim's work does not explicitly focus on individual psychological development, it offers insight into the importance of social integration and societal support for mental well-being (Durkheim, 1897/1951). Durkheim argues that a well-functioning society fosters a shared connection to place and purpose, which is essential for overall mental and emotional well-being. Durkheim's theories on social cohesion and collective consciousness suggest that individuals who are well-integrated into their communities and feel supported by societal structures are more likely to experience psychological stability and emotional resilience.

Durkheim's sociological theories emphasise that mental and emotional well-being are not merely the products of individual psychology but are profoundly shaped by social environments. He argues that social cohesion is vital in fostering psychological stability and emotional resilience. One of his key contributions is the concept of anomie. This normlessness arises when social structures and shared values disintegrate due to rapid social change, which is particularly evident in industrial capitalist societies. In such environments, increased individuation, occupational specialisation, and the breakdown of collective norms can lead to feelings of isolation, purposelessness, and emotional distress. Durkheim claims that when individuals lack strong social bonds and associated senses of belonging, they

become more vulnerable to psychological instability, which he illustrates in his seminal study on suicide (Durkheim, 1897/1951).

The World Health Organisation (1995) posits that health is not only characterised by the absence of disease but rather a healthy interplay of physical, emotional, and social well-being, intricately connected to the quality of care and support they receive from social and physical environments. For intercountry adoptees, achieving this holistic state of health requires addressing the unique challenges they face due to their often-turbulent early life experiences, such as trauma, neglect, or institutional care.

3.5 The Transition to Adoptive Families

Does the absence of a biological connection impact on the functioning of adopting families, on parent-child bonding, and on ongoing psychosocial adjustments? The complex factors involved in the construction of adoptive families necessitate the consideration of several variables, including parents' emotional readiness to adopt, openness in adoption arrangements, the child's pre-adoption care history, and collaborative dynamics within the adoptive kinship network (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). Given that adoption often stems from loss, the absence of a biological connection may require a greater emphasis on nurturing secure, attuned relationships to promote psychosocial adjustment and parent-child bonding (Brodzinsky & Palacios, 2005).

Furthermore, the transition of intercountry adoptees to their new environment involves significant adjustments as they traverse new familial, cultural, and linguistic settings. Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes (2005) describe the initial adjustment period as the "honeymoon phase," recognised as a joyous time for families, with mutual excitement among adoptive parents and children. However, this phase is often followed by a period of testing

and adjustment, during which the child begins to process their new reality fully and the loss associated with their previous environment.

The challenges adoptees face during this period may be influenced by their age at the time of adoption. Younger children may adapt more quickly due to their developmental stage and the flexibility of early attachment processes (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2005; Howe & Fearnley, 1999). In contrast, older children may experience more pronounced difficulties, as they often have established bonds with birth families and caregivers, and the trauma of being rehomed can result in profound grief, loss of trust, and disrupted identity development. For these children, adoption is not just a transition – it is a significant rupture. This loss of known caregivers, environments, and language can be experienced as a form of emotional disconnection from origin, often leaving adoptees caught between two worlds without a clear feeling of connection and place (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2005).

These children may also struggle more with cultural and linguistic integration, particularly when placed in environments that differ significantly from their original contexts (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2005; Yngvesson, 2003). Regardless of age, adoptees often experience significant challenges, including difficulties maintaining psychological well-being while navigating and integrating into their new familial, social and cultural aspects.

(Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2005).

Research indicates that the earlier a child is adopted, the less likely they are to experience severe early trauma, as early placement in a stable and nurturing environment can buffer against the harms of institutional care or neglect (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005). However, early placement does not guarantee emotional ease across the lifespan. Many adoptees, regardless of the age of adoption, encounter significant identity conflicts, particularly in adolescence or adulthood, as they seek to understand their place in the world

(McGinnis et al., 2009). These later-life struggles often involve navigating tensions between cultural heritage and adoptive identity (Baden et al., 2012), leading to complex emotional processes such as grief, dislocation, and the search for belonging (Friedlander, 1999).

Yoon (2000, 2004) conducted a study involving 241 Korean-born adolescent adoptees between 12 and 19 years old to examine the impact of parental support on adoptees' overall psychological adjustment. The findings confirm that positive relationships with parents and support of adoptees origin and ethnic identity development and racial socialisation significantly enhance the psychological well-being of adoptees.

The research demonstrated that parental warmth, characterised by emotional support and affection, along with open communication about adoption and identity, had a direct, positive influence on ethnic identity. Deliberate efforts to engage in ethnic and cultural socialisation practices such as celebrating cultural traditions and discussing ethnic heritage further strengthen adoptees' confidence in their cultural background and their connection to place with their adoptive and ethnic communities. The study confirms that strong, supportive parent-child relationships are associated with greater psychological well-being and collective self-esteem. Conversely, the participants with a negative ethnic identity were found to be vulnerable to lower self-esteem, increased psychological distress, and difficulties in social integration (Yoon, 2000, 2004).

Openness and honesty within the adoptive family also contribute to an adoptee's emotional and psychological health (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). Studies show that when adoptive parents are transparent about the child's origins and maintain open lines of communication, they foster trust and support identity development (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). Kirk (1964, 1981) introduced the concept of "rejection of difference," arguing that when adoptive parents treat adoption as identical to biological

parents, it can impede the development of trust and secure attachment. Building on this, Livingston-Smith and Howard (1999) note that failure to acknowledge adoption-specific challenges can disrupt the formation of empathy and effective family bonds. It can lead to difficulties because it minimises the unique challenges adopted children may face, such as grappling with their birth identity, feelings of abandonment, or questions about their heritage. When parents dismiss or deny these differences, it can invalidate the child's lived experience and lead to emotional disconnection in the parent-child relationship (Livingston-Smith & Howard, 1999).

3.6 Understanding Identity Formation

Identity is a multifaceted dynamic encompassing both personal identity or one's self-concept and social identity that is shaped by group belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is not static but develops through ongoing social interactions, where individuals construct meaning and negotiate their place in society (Mead, 1934). Identity theory further emphasises how larger social structures influence self-concept (Burke & Stets, 2009). Rather than being fixed or pre-determined, identity is shaped by the continuous interplay between internal and external forces. Hall (1990, 1996) argues that identity is not a singular or fixed entity but a dynamic, evolving process encompassing multiple and sometimes conflicting aspects.

Over the past two decades, identity has become a central research focus in the social sciences, attracting scholars across disciplines, including anthropology, geography, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology (Jenkins, 2014). It is increasingly understood as a lifelong process reshaped across different life stages, from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, as individuals navigate shifting roles, relationships, and cultural contexts.

As this study is situated within Aotearoa, New Zealand, it is important to acknowledge the cultural and epistemological context in which adoption operates – particularly the tension between Eurocentric models of family and Indigenous Māori frameworks. The dominant model of adoption in Aotearoa, New Zealand reflects a Euro-Western logic of the nuclear, closed family, often grounded in legal permanence and identity substitution. Within Te Ao Māori⁷, identity is inseparable from whakapapa and whenua.

This worldview complicates Western notions of the adoptive family as a closed nuclear unit. Haenga-Collins (2017) argues that adoption legislation in Aotearoa, New Zealand severs intergenerational ties, replacing whakapapa-based belonging with legal finality. These frameworks highlight the need for culturally situated perspectives within sociological adoption discourse, particularly in New Zealand, where Māori philosophies of identity, care, and kinship offer alternative epistemologies that challenge dominant Euro-Western paradigms.

3.7 Factors Influencing Identity Construction in Adoptees

The process of identity construction in adoptees is influenced by a range of factors, including the age of adoption, pre-adoption experiences, the support provided by adoptive families, and the broader social and cultural context (Brodzinsky et al., 1998). Research underscores the importance of cultural socialisation practices, such as learning the birth language, celebrating cultural traditions, and participating in community activities related to their heritage, for fostering a positive sense of identity among adoptees (Lee, 2003).

Importantly, identity is not a fixed endpoint but an evolving process; adoptees often revisit and renegotiate aspects of their identity throughout the life course, particularly during

⁷ Te Ao Māori refers to Māori worldview, encompassing interconnected ways of understanding identity, land, ancestry, spirituality, and relational responsibility within the living world.

periods of transitions such as adolescence, parenthood, or contact with birth family (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Samuels, 2009). This ongoing process often requires adoptees to make meaning from fragmented histories, shifting family roles and evolving cultural connections, highlighting identity as a dynamic act of narration as much as inheritance.

Cultural socialisation refers to how individuals learn about and connect with their cultural heritage, including traditions, language, history, and community life (Hughes et al., 2006). For intercountry adoptees, such practices are particularly significant in helping navigate the complexities of dual or multiple identities (Lee, 2003; Yoon, 2004). Positive cultural socialisation –such as attending cultural festivals, learning about the history of one’s birth country, and connecting with peers of similar ethnicity can foster a resilient and integrated sense of self (Samuels, 2009; Yoon, 2004). These activities can help adoptees feel legitimacy in their cultural background and reduce dissonance that can result from growing up in a culturally dissimilar adoptive environment.

Conversely, adoptees who are denied access to their cultural roots or raised in environments where assimilation into a dominant culture is prioritised may experience a sense of disconnection, feelings of estrangement, and identity dissonance (Baden et al., 2012). These effects can be especially pronounced for transracial adoptees, whose physical appearance may visibly distinguish them from their adoptive families and communities (Lee, 2003). In such cases, the lack of cultural mirroring can exacerbate feelings of “otherness” and limit the development of a stable, coherent identity. As Samuels (2009) notes, the absence of cultural socialisation can delay the development of “racial “and ethnic identity, which emerges during adolescence or early adulthood through psychological distress, identity questioning, and feelings of disconnection.

In addition to active cultural socialisation, adoptees' identity formation is shaped by the availability or absence of personal and collective memories. For many, narrative gaps, fragmented recollections, or silences surrounding origin can complicate the integration of a coherent self-story (Grotevant, 1997; Wrobel & Dillon, 2012). In the absence of narrative continuity, adoptees may rely on imagination, emotional resonance, or cultural symbolic elements to create a sense of origin. This process highlights how identity is not only rooted in memory but also actively constructed through the creative labour of meaning-making (Wrobel & Dillon, 2012).

3.8 The Role of Pre-Adoption Experiences and Age in Identity Formation

Pre-adoption experiences can have a profound impact on the identity formation of intercountry adoptees. Many adoptees experience early trauma, neglect, or multiple caregiving arrangements, which can interrupt attachment processes and create long-term emotional vulnerabilities.

From a psychoanalytic and developmental lens, researchers have long recognised the impact of early disruption on emotional and psychological development. Freud (1923/1961) argued that early separations or traumatic disruptions in caregiving could produce unconscious anxieties that shape later relationships and self-concept. Tatlıoğlu (2022) extends this view, suggesting that unprocessed early trauma may embed itself within the unconscious, subtly shaping emotional life and relational patterns.

Contemporary theorists have built on this foundation to examine how early disruptions in caregiving can affect emotional regulation and mentalisation, the capacity to understand oneself and others (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Luyten et al., 2020). While invaluable, these insights risk narrowing the adoptee experience to pathology if read in isolation. Adoptees who have experienced such early disruptions may navigate complex

emotional terrain, feelings of alienation, identity confusion, and cultural dislocation, particularly when grappling with mismatched birth and adoptive contexts (Friedlander, 1999; Jia & Lei, 2011).

The age of adoption significantly influences identity formation (Baden, 2002). Younger adoptees, whose racial and cultural self-concept develops primarily with their adoptive environment, often integrate more smoothly into their new contexts. However, as other studies show, even early placement does not preclude later experiences of cultural dissonance or identity fragmentation (Friedlander, 1999)

A University of Wollongong study examined children placed for adoption before age five, identifying key factors affecting identity development and well-being (de Rosnay et al., 2016). Findings suggest that early adoption fosters a stronger bond with the adoptive family and culture, reducing cultural and identity conflicts. By contrast, older adoptees face more significant challenges in adjusting to their adoptive environment, as they have already formed connections to their birth culture and identity (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005). This study discusses how the difficulty of navigating the tension between birth and adoptive identities can lead to emotional and psychological struggles. This was reflected in higher rates of behaviour problems among older adoptees.

3.9 Sociological perspective of identity

Stryker (1980) posits a reciprocal relationship between the self and society, where identity is simultaneously influenced by and also influences social behaviour. This aligns with structural symbolic interactionism, which examines how role expectations and institutional frameworks shape identity formation. These frameworks echo the structural critiques discussed in Chapter Two, where identity formation was shown to be shaped by legislative erasure, adoption

secrecy, and postcolonial narratives of kinship. They highlight how adoptee identity is personally, politically, socially and culturally constructed.

Blumer (1969), through symbolic interactionism, argued that identity is actively created through interaction. He argues that meaning arises through engagement and is continually negotiated, not passively inherited or imposed. Together, these perspectives suggest that adoptees must be understood as both structurally situated and experientially lived – affected by law, ‘race’, and policy and also by the everyday negotiations adoptees make as they navigate belonging, difference, and self-understanding (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980).

Building on an interactionist foundation, identity theory foregrounds the generative intersectionality of external social structures and internal psychological processes in constant unfolding’s of identity construct. It explores how social expectations, such as cultural norms, group affiliation, or institutional roles, intertwine with inner responses like resistance, adaptation, or acceptance (Burke & Stets, 2009). From a structural interactionist perspective, individuals negotiate their identity by conforming to or resisting assigned roles depending on how well these align with their self-concept. This negotiation influences self-perception and integration into broader society (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker, 1980).

3.10 Belonging

In this context, belonging is a multidimensional experience extending beyond family inclusion. While many adoptees may feel emotionally connected and accepted by their adoptive families, this connection does not always extend into wider cultural or social settings (Kim, 2010). For transracial and intercountry adoptees, in particular, belonging becomes a lifelong negotiation mediated by visible differences, cultural silences, and shifting social norms (Patton, 2000).

Adoptees may experience emotional dissonance, feeling secure within their immediate family but marginalised in broader society, especially when their ethnic or cultural identity differs from that of their adoptive family (Brodzinsky et al., 1993; Lee, 2003; Nuttgens, 2013). This dissonance can manifest in feelings of isolation, displacement, or being “othered” in spaces that do not reflect or affirm their appearance, language, or ancestral ties. In contrast, spaces centring on shared heritage or lived experiences, such as cultural communities or adoptee networks, can offer powerful solidarity and relational anchoring (Friedlander, 1999).

For some adoptees, a desire to reconnect with their birth culture may emerge later in life, even without prior exposure. This pursuit of cultural connection is often meaningful yet fraught and shaped by language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, or feelings of not being “authentic enough” to belong (Brodzinsky et al., 1993; Nuttgens, 2013). These tensions often leave adoptees suspended in an in-between state, where belonging is fluid, provisional, and continuously negotiated across familial, cultural and geopolitical borders (Trenka et al., 2021; Yngvesson, 2003).

The complexity of belonging also extends into symbolic recognition and structural validation. For intercountry and transracial adoptees, belonging is not only about emotional connection—it is about visibility. Policy frameworks, media representations, and cultural narratives often render adoptees invisible or reduce them to flat archetypes, such as the “grateful child” or the “successful rescue” (Hübinette, 2015). These reductive tropes flatten the adoptee experience, leaving little space for grief, contradiction, or critique.

Belonging, therefore, cannot be fully realised without narrative agency –the ability to tell one’s story in one’s voice. When adoptee perspectives are excluded from policymaking, media, or education, it signals whose stories are legitimised and who is silenced. When adoptees are recognised as epistemic authorities, they can shape discourse and critique

structures and experiences, belonging to emotional safety and civic and cultural legitimacy (Haenga-Collins, 2017).

Belonging is not only a psychological state but a political act of recognition and exclusion. As Yuval-Davis (2006) argues, belonging is governed by citizenship, race, and national boundaries, which are often crossed involuntarily. Ahmed (2013, pp. 1–14) discusses how racialised bodies are constructed as inherently “strange,” resulting in displacement and persistent unbelonging even within nation.

3.11 Comparative Perspectives on Identity and Belonging of Intercountry Adoptees

Comparative studies reveal that intercountry adoptees' experiences vary based on factors such as their country of origin, the ethnic composition of adoptive families, and the openness of the adoption process. Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010) argue these differences are illustrated by the fact that adoptees from countries such as South Korea, China, and Russia often face identity challenges influenced by their birth countries' cultural and policy contexts.

South Korean adoptees often struggle with their identity and sense of belonging, influenced by Korea's emphasis on ethnic lineage, predominantly patrilineal but also shaped by broader familial and societal ties (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Chinese adoptees, many of whom were adopted under the One-Child Policy, grapple with issues of gender and cultural detachment and the circumstances of their adoption, influenced by China's patrilineal societal structure (Johnson, 2004). Russian adoptees, due to early institutionalisation in orphanages and similar care facilities, frequently experience attachment difficulties and trauma, impacting their adjustment and identity development (Welsh et al., 2007). These challenges may also reflect the socio-political environments in which they were born.

Building on this understanding, Stoddart et al.(2021) explore the experiences of Taiwanese-Australian intercountry adoptees, emphasising the importance of belonging and

identity formation in this context. They argue that adoptees often experience a profound sense of dislocation when navigating between Taiwanese and Australian cultures. This leads to emotional and psychological difficulties, but it also highlights opportunities and positive aspects of their experiences. The study also highlights the opportunities for growth, identity integration, and the vital role of supportive adoptive families and communities.

Ferrari et al. (2019) expanded on this by focusing on the role of social and family factors in shaping the cultural identity of intercountry adoptees, such as parental involvement in cultural socialisation practices, openness and the adoption process, and the quality of familial communication. These insights highlight how family dynamics, including supportive or dismissive attitudes toward the adoptee's birth culture, can mitigate or exacerbate challenges in cultural identity formation. Furthermore, this study sheds light on how intentional cultural socialisation and supportive environments can reduce feelings of psychological displacement and help adoptees better navigate their complex identity development.

Ferrari et al. (2019) also argue that families who actively incorporate elements of the adoptee's birth culture into their daily lives can help mitigate feelings of cultural loss and disconnection. While Ferrari et al. (2019) present a more optimistic view of the potential for cultural integration through intentional socialisation practices, other studies emphasise the challenges adoptees face in navigating racial dynamics within their adoptive families. For example, qualitative research by Friedlander (1999) involving eight families who adopted children from South Korea and Latin America revealed that derogatory racial comments directed toward their children were a shared experience. The findings reflect the challenges that these families face in dealing with 'racial' dynamics that arise in 'transracial' adoption. Additionally, Galvin (2003) emphasises the difficulties young and transracial adoptees encounter when discussing 'race' with their families. It was reported that 'race' was a

prominent aspect of the everyday lives of adoptees, as they were constantly reminded of their physical differences from the adoptive families.

The ongoing experience and intensity of feeling “different” is highlighted by research from Greene et al. (2006), who found that perceived discrimination is linked to behavioural and emotional distress and lower self-esteem in minority adolescents. Although this study does not focus specifically on transracial adoptees, its findings provide important insight into the psychological impacts of discrimination on young people from minority backgrounds. These insights can be meaningfully applied to the experiences of transracial adoptees, who often encounter similar struggles with identity and belonging.

As children grow, their awareness of discrimination and its implications often intensifies, particularly during late childhood and adolescence, a critical period for identity (Feigelman, 2000; Soon Huh & Reid, 2000). Drawing on the framework established by Hughes et al. (2006), two forms of socialisation are often distinguished: ethnic socialisation, which involves transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and traditions to foster pride and belonging, and racial socialisation, which prepares children to recognise and respond to racism through open discussion and exposure to racial diversity.

These processes are particularly salient for transracial adoptees, whose identity development occurs at the intersection of racial difference and cultural loss. In the adoption context, researchers like Brodzinsky (2011) and Hu et al. (2015) argue that both types of socialisation can help families acknowledge differences, validate adoptees’ lived experiences, and support more coherent identity integration.

Juffer & van IJzendoorn (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 62 studies encompassing over 18000 intercountry adopted children and found that the majority exhibited positive developmental outcomes, such as cognitive development, academic

achievement, and secure attachment, often comparable to non-adopted peers. These findings have been widely cited and have contributed to a prevailing narrative that intercountry adoption generally results in successful integration and adjustment for the children involved.

However, despite their size and scope, these studies have limitations that should be considered when interpreting their results. While these studies assess quantifiable metrics such as cognitive development and academic success, they often fail to capture the qualitative dimensions of the adoptee experience, such as cultural identity formation and emotional resilience (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). Moreover, the selection of study participants is typically constrained by geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors, resulting in these studies failing to represent the diverse experiences of intercountry adoptees. As a result, the conclusions drawn from such research may not adequately reflect the experiences of all adoptees, particularly those who faced significant trauma or who come from underrepresented social cohorts and/or regions.

Critics argue that the existing research on intercountry adoption tends to present an overly optimistic narrative, primarily by studies emphasising successful adaptation while underreporting cases of adoptees experiencing long-term psychological distress. For example, Hjern et al. (2002) emphasise that the focus on positive adjustment outcomes often overshadows the more nuanced challenges faced by adoptees, such as identity development and the ongoing effects of early trauma. These issues are particularly pronounced in cases where the adoption involves significant cultural and linguistic differences, which can create barriers to adjustment that are not easily captured in quantitative studies. Hjern et al. (2002) indicate that while many adoptees do well, a subset of this population remains at higher risk for mental health issues. This reality is often overlooked in broader discussions of outcomes.

Acknowledging the successes, however, does not negate the inherent challenges of conducting truly representative studies on intercountry adoption. As van Ijzendoorn and Juffer (2006) note, the worth of conducting longitudinal studies across diverse populations is financially and logistically challenging, which can skew the available data. This limitation is compounded by the fact that most research on this topic is conducted in Western countries, where the social services, cultural norms, and support systems available to adoptees may differ significantly from those in their countries of origin. Consequently, the conclusions drawn from these studies may not apply to adoptees from non-Western backgrounds, who may face different challenges and opportunities.

While large-scale studies have provided valuable insights into the adjustment of intercountry-adopted children, it is clearly essential to approach these findings critically. The current literature does not fully account for the diversity of the adoptee population, or the unique challenges faced by those who do not fit the dominant narrative of successful adjustment. Future research should ideally encompass a broader range of adoptee experiences, particularly from underrepresented regions and backgrounds, to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of intercountry adoption.

3.12 Conclusion

The interplay between identity and belonging for intercountry adoptees is often compounded by the multifaceted challenges they traverse within both adoptive and birth cultures.

Throughout this review, it becomes clear that identity for adoptees is not only a personal, unfolding process of (re)construction, but is deeply entwined with broader cultural, structural, familial, and national narratives and practices. Unlike non-adoptees, whose identities develop in more continuous and culturally cohesive environments, adoptees often experience a fragmented sense of belonging. This fragmentation arises from the need to reconcile birth and

adoptive identities, which can sometimes be in conflict or, at the very least, challenging to integrate seamlessly. This ongoing negotiation can result in identity confusion, alienation, and a sense of not fully belonging in social and cultural contexts.

The literature reveals a duality in the experience of intercountry adoptees. While some adoptees successfully integrate aspects of both their birth and adoptive cultures, leading to a more cohesive identity, others struggle with disconnection and identity crises. Factors such as the adoptee's age of adoption, pre-adoption experiences, 'racial' differences with adopted families and the level of cultural socialisation provided by adoptive families significantly shape the adoptee's ability to navigate these challenges. Studies consistently show that adoptees who can engage with their birth culture through language learning, cultural traditions, and involvement in ethnic communities experience better identity development. In contrast, those who experience forced assimilation or a rejection of their cultural heritage often face more significant psychological and emotional challenges.

The sociological perspective on adoption adds essential depth to understanding identity and belonging, reframing intercountry adoption not only as a personal and familial journey but as a profoundly political, cultural and globally situated process. While the functionalist perspective emphasises the benefits of adoption and critically highlights its embedded inequalities, this chapter advances a third space that refuses the binary. Centring adoptee voices and lived epistemologies calls for a more ethically grounded and relational approach to knowledge-making. Rather than viewing adoption as either salvation or harm, this perspective acknowledges its contradictions and complexities, insisting on a framework that recognises trauma, loss, love, and resilience as co-existing. In doing so, the chapter repositions adoptees as not just subjects of research but as theorists of their own experiences.

The findings from the literature suggest that while intercountry adoption can offer adoptees opportunities for stability and positive development, the process is far from straightforward. It is essential to acknowledge both the successes and the inherent challenges, including issues of identity, belonging, and the lingering effects of trauma. Future research must continue to address the complexities by including diverse adoptee experiences, particularly those from underrepresented regions and backgrounds. By doing so, scholars and policymakers can work towards creating more supportive frameworks that allow adoptees to thrive in both their adoptive and birth cultures. In this manner, it fosters holistic well-being and enhances a more unified sense of self.

This review has sought not only to document existing knowledge but to reveal its absences. Intercountry adoption remains under-theorised in ways that centre adoptee voice, decolonial kinship, and cultural continuity. While research has illuminated many structural and psychological aspects of intercountry adoption, what remains less visible are the layered, embodied experiences of adoptees themselves. These are not simply stories of loss or resilience but living archives, holding cultural, relational, and emotional meaning that often evade institutional language. If adoption is to be understood fully, it must be heard through the voices of those who have lived it.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to explore the lived experiences of intercountry adoptees in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It is grounded in social constructivist and interpretative epistemologies and guided by a qualitative, narrative life-story approach. These choices reflect the study's core belief that identity is not fixed or objective but formed relationally, shaped through experience, language, memory, and the social conditions that shape them.

This research is grounded in a social constructivist/ interpretative worldview that understands knowledge as reflexively co-created, shaped by relationships, context, and lived experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This framework creates space for contradiction, memory, silence, and relational complexity, especially in adoptee narratives marked by cultural erasure or institutional power. Constructivism supports multiplicity and rejects fixed truths, allowing meaning to emerge through dialogue, not certainty (Riessman, 2008; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

4.2 Epistemological Framework: Social Constructivism

This research is grounded in a social constructivist worldview that understands knowledge as co-created, shaped by relationships, context, and lived experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This framework creates space for contradiction, memory, silence, and relational complexity, especially in adoptee narratives marked by cultural erasure or institutional power. Constructivism supports multiplicity and rejects fixed truths, allowing meaning to emerge through dialogue, not certainty (Riessman, 2008; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

For adoptees, identity construction builds upon these relational foundations that unfold with particular complexity. Identity is shaped by personal memory, family narratives,

social expectations, and encounters with institutional power (Haenga-Collins, 2017). These layers often do not align neatly; they intersect in fragmented and often non-linear ways, especially when early life is marked by loss or cultural rupture. A constructivist approach accommodates these tensions, viewing ambiguity not as a shortcoming but as a crucial aspect of the emotional and cultural negotiations that adoptees face.

The epistemological stance taken in this research challenges dominant developmental models that often universalise identity formation. Clinical or linear frameworks tend to frame adoptee identity through predefined stages, neglecting the lived experiences shaped by cultural loss, racialisation, and displacement (Haenga-Collins, 2017). Brodzinsky (2011) and Park (2016) argue that identity confusion or emotional distress in adoptees is frequently framed through diagnostic or individualised language, overlooking the structural causes of rupture, including secrecy, severance, and racialisation. A constructivist lens offers a way to reframe these challenges as socially constructed rather than internally deficient.

Social constructivism and interpretivism also informs the relational stance taken in interviews. Participants were not treated as subjects to be studied but as co-creators of meaning (Riessman, 2008). This methodological alignment honours their emotional and narrative authority. Interviews were open and dialogical, allowing for mutual influence and reflection. My positionality as an intercountry adoptee was acknowledged and shaped trust, openness, and emotional depth in these conversations (Finlay, 2002). Situated within and alongside the research added layers of resonance and responsibility. This approach allowed me to remain attentive to how meaning was made together across the silences and openings of shared conversation in real time.

The approach adopted here supports a methodology that centres lived experience and aligns with life-story narrative research, where experience and emotion are treated not as

biases but as central to understanding (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By holding emotions, silence, and contradiction as valid forms of knowledge, social constructivism provides a framework capable of carrying the relational intricacy of adoptee identity and meaning making across the lifespan.

4.3 Methodological Approach: Qualitative Life-Story Narratives

This study employs a life-story narrative methodology grounded in the belief that identity is shaped through lived experiences, memory, and meaning-making (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participants were engaged as co-constructors of meaning – a stance that shaped the interview process and narrative interpretations underpinning how stories were gathered, held and interpreted. Their stories are complex, and often embedded within broader social, cultural and historical structures (Riessman, 2008).

Life-story methods are appropriate for adoption research, where personal histories are frequently marked by silence, disruption, or institutional oversight. Rather than beginning with a hypothesis, I approached this study inductively, allowing meaning to emerge through dialogue, reflection, and emotional resonance (Thomas, 2006). When using inductive reasoning, researchers start with a broad area of interest, gather data through interviews or observations, and then analyse the data to identify patterns, themes and concepts (Patton, 2015). Inductive reasoning supports meaning-making from the ground up rather than imposing predefined assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Patton, 2015). This was important when engaging with identity, culture, and loss that occur in emotionally layered narratives.

Interviews were collaborative and semi-structured, with a flexible guide to allow coherence across conversations while making room for individual expression (Barriball & While, 1994). I developed a guiding interview schedule to support coherence across interviews while remaining responsive to personal experiences (See Appendices). While I

redirected conversations toward core themes, I stayed responsive to participants' needs and responses. The emotional tone of each interview was as crucial as the content, and the life-story approach allowed themes of loss, kinship, cultural fragmentation, and identity exploration to emerge in contextually rich and emotionally layered ways (Josselson, 1995).

The semi-structured format preserved a relational rhythm. It allowed for depth and nuance while providing consistency across interviews. This way, stories were shared and co-created, with attention to tone, silence, metaphor and sequence (Riessman, 2008). Participants spoke freely –some beginning with a memory, others with a timeline, and others in a circular manner reflecting ways that mirrored their ongoing processes of meaning-making (Riessman, 2008).

In sum, life-story narrative research provided a flexible and emotionally attuned method for engaging with adoptee identities. It did not seek to resolve contradiction or impose thematic coherence but rather to honour the complexity of lives shaped by cultural severance, identity negotiation, and the search for meaning across time.

4.4 Researcher Positionality: Being Within the Story

My own story is threaded through every part of this research. As an intercountry adoptee raised in Aotearoa, New Zealand, I bring academic training and lived memory – the dissonance, the in-betweenness, and the ache of unanswered questions. This position shaped my interest in the topic and how I approached every conversation, silence, and narrative shared with me. Rather than approaching this work with detachment, I came with what Finlay (2002, p. 210) calls 'critical self-awareness': a continual reflection on how power, emotional, and personal histories influence the research encounter.

During one interview, a participant paused and asked me, “Do you ever feel like you are still split between worlds?” I did not respond immediately, but the question has stayed

with me. It reminded me that the boundary between researcher and participant is often porous, especially in insider research. Throughout this research, I have carried a dual awareness: honouring the stories entrusted to me while also being transformed by them.

I did not set out to be a distant observer. The insights that emerged come from a place of shared recognition, where the stories of others often echoed my own. I moved between roles – researcher, witness, and fellow traveller (Pillow, 2003). This proximity created its ethical responsibilities. I worked to remain accountable, to avoid over-identification, and to keep the space open for experiences that differed from mine. My presence is visible here not to centre myself but to acknowledge the lens through which this work was undertaken. It is a way of being honest about the relational nature of this project and to make transparent the emotions, histories, and questions I carried into it.

In narrative research, subjectivity is not a flaw to be hidden but a reality to be engaged with critically and transparently (Finlay, 2002; Riessman, 2008). Rather than striving for detachment, I stayed present to moments of resonance – when a participant’s story or silence touched something within me. These pauses were not moments of withdrawal, but the deeper, more attentive listening.

Being an adoptee in this research process has shaped my questions, the tone, and the ethical orientation of the work. I hope this research reflects academic rigour and relational trust between myself and the participants and between the reader and the stories that follow.

4.5 Reflexivity: Emotional and Ethical Self-Awareness

Reflexivity is the foundation of this study, as a methodological tool and as the practice of ongoing ethical awareness. While my positionality locates me within this research as an adoptee-researcher, reflexivity demanded continuous, conscious engagement with my emotional responses, assumptions, and evolving understandings throughout the research

process (Finlay, 2002). It was not a brief research overview, but a necessary practice of care that asked me to remain accountable to the stories shared while honouring their emotional depth. This positioning allowed for proximity and crucial clarity: a closeness that enabled richer understanding and an awareness that protected work integrity.

This closeness created both openings and tensions. I could recognise the emotional cadence of participants' stories and understand inevitable silences without translation. However, I also had to remain aware of the risk of over-identifying the participants' narratives or projecting my experiences onto theirs. It helped me stay grounded in their words while holding space for emotional truths that surfaced in me. It allowed me to ask: do I hear their voice or my echo?

From the outset, I practised reflexivity by journaling and taking notes after each interview. These reflections were not included in the formal data but were a mirror for tracking assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive leanings. When I felt particularly moved or unsettled, I paused to consider what that feeling revealed about the research process and my place within it (Finlay, 2002).

Throughout the research, supervisors played a large role in strengthening reflexivity. They encouraged me to maintain a thoughtful distance from the material without stepping away from the emotional texture of the stories. Their support created space for nuance, reminding me that personal resonance can exist alongside careful, critical analysis. At times, I felt certain of themes or interpretations, and they gently invited me to pause, stay curious, and allow the narrative's full shape to unfold before concluding. This approach helped ensure the analysis remained attentive, layered, and ethically grounded.

Reflexivity extended into the analysis and writing phases, where I paid close attention to each transcript's emotional and narrative layers. When drawn to particular stories or

themes, I had to be sure this was the participant’s truth, not mine. This recursive immersion and reflective distance process enabled me to engage with the material intimately and responsibly. In this research, reflexivity was an act of care: care for participants, the integrity of their stories, and the ethical complexity of insider research. It helped me hold space for ambiguity, contradiction, and vulnerability – core elements of adoption narratives that resist closure and demand compassion.

4.6 Participant Recruitment and Selection

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Name	Place of Birth	Gender	Age at Adoption	Age at Interviewing
Marishka	Russia	Female	4.5 years	31 years
Mike	China	Male	6 years	40 years
Alex	Russia	Male	2 years	31 years
Santiago	Ecuador	Male	A few weeks old	38 years
Maria	Ecuador	Female	Infancy	40 years
JoJo	China	Female	5 years	In her 30s

Note. All participant names are pseudonyms. Ages and details were provided during the interview process.

Here, I outline how participants were selected and engaged in the study, noting that the research aims, and adoption's sensitive, identity-related nature influenced recruitment. The intention was not to generalise across all adoptees but to explore the lived experiences of a cohort of participants whose stories reflected the layered realities of intercountry adoption (Patton, 2015).

Six adult intercountry adoptees participated in the study. All were adopted into Aotearoa, New Zealand, from China, Russia, and Ecuador at varying ages. Participants were 30 to 41 years old and had spent most of their lives in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 21 years of age, assuming that participants would have navigated significant life transitions, such as education, employment, relationships or origin seeking. On this basis, such experiences often prompt deeper reflection on identity and

belonging. All participants had varying questions about identity, cultural and societal belonging, and desires to connect with their origins. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis. Participant demographics are summarised in Table 1.

Recruitment was sought through support groups, and permission was obtained from administrators to post-study details. All content was ensured to meet ethical standards (Liamputtong, 2006). I also contacted intercountry adoption organisations, including non-profits and advocacy groups, sharing a study advertisement (see Appendix B). This sheet outlined the research goals, interview process, participant rights, and confidentiality measures (Fouka & Mantzorou, 2011; Walford, 2005).

Recruitment pathways varied: one participant was found through a Facebook support group, who then referred a friend. This snowball sampling technique is particularly effective for hard-to-reach populations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). One responded to a shared Facebook post, two were recruited through an adoptee support advocate located via online search, and the final participant is an adoptee who actively facilitates large-scale community support and was a well-known media contributor. He is also an author in the adoption space, recognised for helping adoptees reconnect with their roots through advocacy and storytelling initiatives.

Participants were informed that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any point. Each participant received and signed a consent form before their interview (see Appendix A). The study prioritised emotional safety, clarity and respect. Participant perspectives ranged from grief and loss to healing and reconnection, which is expanded upon in section 4.9.

A small sample size was not originally intended. Initially, I anticipated a larger cohort to provide broader insight. However, the depth and intensity of the interviews affirmed the value of a smaller, more focused sample. Life-story narrative research emphasises depth over

breadth, prioritising rich contextualised accounts of personal experience rather than generalisable data sets (Riessman, 2008).

4.7 Relational Interview Process and Method

In this section I discuss how the interviews were designed, conducted, and approached in ways that prioritised emotional sensitivity and participant agency. Consistent with the study's narrative methodology and constructivist foundations, interviews were treated not as data collection tools but as generative relational encounters where meaning could emerge through conversation (Josselson, 1995).

Before each interview, participants were given an information sheet (see Appendix C) outlining the study's aims, information, procedure, potential risks, and available support. The sheet also included contact details and links for adoption support groups, specialised professionals in adoptee grief, and relevant support helplines. Additionally, the information sheet clarified expectations regarding their participation, empowering them to make an informed and voluntary decision about involvement in the research.

Interviews were conducted personally or via secure video call, depending on each participant's location and preferences. Conversations ranged from 35 to 180 minutes, reflecting participants' different rhythms and emotional depths to speak freely. This flexible nature of the structure ensured that emotional pacing was respected and that stories could unfold naturally.

The interview schedule allowed me to maintain core themes consistent across interviews, including identity, belonging, cultural memory, origin knowledge, and adoption experience. However, the guide served as a gentle reference rather than a script. Participants were encouraged to shape the flow of conversation. Some began with specific memories or

timelines, while others spoke in fragments, looping between past and present. This flexibility allowed deeper emotional and narrative meaning to emerge.

The interviews were designed to centre participants' emotional agency. Open-ended questions invited storytelling, reflection, and metaphor. Some participants revisited painful memories; others emphasised growth, connection, or resilience. I remained attuned to silence, shifts in tone, and emotional hesitations, recognising that meaning was often carried as much in what was not said as in what was spoken (Finlay, 2002). Each interview was audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Two participants requested copies of their transcripts, and although neither requested changes, the option allowed them to reflect on their contributions and potentially clarify or expand upon their statements.

While I brought a clear set of research aims, I approached each interview as a co-constructed space. My role as an intercountry adoptee influenced these encounters, not as a neutral observer but as someone who could relate to certain emotional textures without further explanation. This positionality supported relational trust but required careful attention to the balance between empathy and analytical clarity (Finlay, 2002). Field notes after each interview helped me remain reflexive, offering space to process emotional responses and minor potential biases that could influence interpretation.

Ultimately, these interviews were not just research tools but spaces of shared meaning-making. In line with this study's constructivist, interpretivist and narrative foundations, the interviews honoured complexity, contradiction, and emotional honesty. They provided insight into personal experiences and how identity, belonging, and cultural loss are negotiated and made meaningful over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Denzin, 2001).

4.8 Ethical Considerations: Relational Integrity and Cultural Safety

This study was conducted under ethical principles grounded in relational integrity, participation autonomy, and emotional-cultural safety.

4.8.1 Ethical Clearance and Relational Accountability

Before the study began, I sought approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. This process ensured that the research design adhered to ethical standards for working with participants whose experiences involved sensitive themes such as adoption, loss, identity, and belonging. Approval was subsequently granted under **Application OM2 23/51**; this clearance marked more than a procedural step – it affirmed the study’s foundation in care, transparency and accountability (Fouka & Mantzourou, 2011).

From the outset, ethics were treated not as a one-off requirement but as an ongoing commitment embedded in every interaction. Whether during recruitment, interviews, or analysis, I often returned to the question: How am I honouring each participant's dignity, vulnerability, and autonomy? Ethical practice was, therefore, interwoven with relational responsibility.

This commitment also meant attending to power in the research process. As a researcher and adoptee, I was simultaneously positioned as an insider and facilitator. While this opened doors to trust, it also brought ethical tensions. I was mindful that participants might feel obligated to disclose more than they were ready to share because of perceived kinship or similarity. To mitigate this, I emphasised throughout that participation was voluntary, that silence was valid, and that withdrawing was always an option without consequence. These reminders were procedural, and acts of care meant to uphold participants’ emotional and narrative agency.

Furthermore, ethical responsibility was considered beyond the interviews themselves. I asked how the eventual representation of these stories might honour the fullness of participants' experiences, especially those shaped by grief, silence and ongoing cultural loss. This was a question of anonymity and justice: how do I avoid distilling these layered lives into tidy analytic categories? How do I keep relational and emotional context intact as the work and ethical choices made throughout the study remain part of my responsibility in sharing these stories?

4.8.2 Confidentiality, Emotional Safety, and Relational Integrity

Given the deeply personal nature of adoptee narratives, special care was taken to ensure confidentiality and emotional safety. Maintaining participant confidentiality was equally central to the study's ethical framework. As mentioned, pseudonyms were used throughout, and identifying details were removed or modified, unless specified otherwise. This extended to all personal information stored securely throughout the project. As noted, two participants requested to review their transcripts, and while neither made changes, their ability to do so aligned with the study's commitment to narrative ethics (Riessman, 2008). Confidentiality was about data protection and emotional and relational safety. Demi and Warren (1995) argue that strict confidentiality protocols foster trust, encouraging participants to speak openly and honestly. These practices are not ancillary to qualitative research; they are core to the ethical responsibility of representing lived experiences with care and accountability.

4.8.3 Cultural Safety and Humility

Beyond emotional protection, cultural safety requires an additional layer: the safeguarding of participants' cultural narratives, practices, and ancestral belonging, recognising that adoption research carries the risk of further cultural displacement if not handled with deep humility. Given the diverse cultural backgrounds of participants, cultural sensitivity was a core ethical

concern. I did not approach this framework with cultural expertise but rather from a form of cultural humility – recognising that I am always in the process of learning, listening, and unlearning (Finlay, 2002). Each participant brought their worldview shaped by their birth culture, adoptive culture, and life experience. My role was to remain open and responsive, not interpretive or corrective (Smith, 2012).

Rather than applying a universalist lens to adoption, I allowed the cultural differences to remain visible when they complicated the analysis. This included awareness of language, assumptions, and the emotional significance of cultural references that might not have been recognised within a Eurocentric academic framework (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Chilisa, 2012; Riessman, 2008). My own experience as an international adoptee helped me remain attuned to cultural tensions, but I did not assume shared experience; I remained conscious of the specificity and sovereignty of each participant’s story (Finlay, 2002).

4.9 Data Analysis

The section outlines how the interview data was analysed, drawing from thematic and narrative approaches. The goal was not to produce generalisable truths but to explore how adoptees construct meaning from their lived experiences. In alignment with the studies' theoretical foundation and narrative method, the analysis focused on identifying patterns of meaning, emotional tone, and the social structures embedded within personal stories (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Riessman, 2008).

I completed thematic analysis to analyse the data systematically, which follows a multi-step process. Calling on Braun and Clarke’s (2012) flexible framework for identifying themes within qualitative data while remaining attentive to the unique features of narrative flow, such as sequence, rhythm, and voice, emphasised by narrative scholars like Riessman (2008). According to Braun & Clarke (2012, p. 57), “Thematic analysis is a method for

systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set.” Moreover, thematic analysis facilitates the interpretation of shared meanings rather than describing individual data points, which helps identify collective experiences within specific contexts. Guest et al. (2018) highlight the utility of qualitative analysis in exploring unique and shared experiences across participants, which is crucial for understanding the intersectionality of personal, societal and cultural dynamics.

The analytic process began with transcription and immersion. I listened to each interview multiple times before and after transcription, paying close attention to tone, silences, and shifts in emotional reflections after each one (Finlay, 2002). The memos I kept from the interview helped track emerging themes, embody responses, and raise analytic questions that surfaced early in the process. The iterative movement between data reflection enabled me to remain grounded in the participants’ stories while remaining responsive to the complexity of the meaning they conveyed.

I then moved into the coding phases. I highlighted significant statements and noted recurring ideas, phrases, or metaphors across the transcripts. At this stage, codes are broad and descriptive, covering concepts such as “loss of language,” “disconnection,” “fragmentation,” “resilience,” “family dynamics,” “trauma,” “searching,” “being othered,” and “narrative gaps.” I used visual aids, such as Post-it notes, to manually group and regroup ideas, physically laying out clusters to identify connections across participants. This allowed me to remain close to the data while honouring the rhythms and nuance of each participant’s voice. Braun and Clarke (2012) state that thematic patterns emerge inductively from the data rather than being imposed by pre-existing frameworks or assumptions.

As themes began to crystallise, I moved into a second layer of analysis – attending more deeply to the form and structure of participants’ narratives. I asked, ‘How does each

person tell their story?’ What is emphasised or left unsaid? Where do contradictions or emotional ruptures appear? Drawing on Riessman (2008), this phase focused on what was said and how it was said—the sequencing, silences, and narrative tensions that shaped each account. Gaps, hesitations, and emotional shifts were seen not as absence but as meaningful insights (Josselson, 1995). This layered process enabled me to engage with participants’ stories, interpreting them as personal truths and cultural texts shaped by broader structures.

Focus was given to:

- **Points of transition:** when participants moved between past and present or between internal and external identity.
- **Moments of naming:** when participants named feelings or events previously unspoken.
- **Absences:** what was hard to articulate, left unsaid, or represented through metaphor.

I then defined and named each theme, encapsulating the core ideas they represented and summarising the key insights they offered (Braun & Clarke, 2012) concerning the research questions. As noted below, the iterative process allowed me to distil the data into meaningful and central themes and the insights they provided:

- **Cultural Displacement and Identity:** Adoptees often felt caught between two cultures and struggle to build a clear sense of identity.
- **Adoption Trauma and Emotional Impact:** Many faced feelings of loss and confusion due to early separation from birth families.
- **Family Relationships and Attachment:** How adoptees bond with their adoptive families affects how secure and connected they feel.
- **Belonging and Connection:** How adoptees often long to feel a sense of belonging, seeking ties with both adoptive and birth cultures and within broader society.

- **Resilience and Coping:** Despite challenges, adoptees often found ways to cope, grow and adapt.
- **Racism and Misconceptions:** Many faced racism or false assumptions, which were detrimental to their self-esteem and their sense of belonging.

Each theme is supported by narrative excerpts and contextual framing, with careful attention to preserving the integrity of participants' voices.

As I progressed through the analysis, I considered how best to represent the participants' stories. I was not looking for the most polished or complete accounts, but those that helped illuminate key tensions, shifts, and moments of meaning. Some stories offered clarity; others carried pauses, uncertainty, or contradiction—all of which felt important. With guidance from my supervisors, I decided to frame the findings around a temporal view of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

While adolescence emerged as a distinct stage in the analysis, it also presented particular challenges. Participants often reflected on this time through the lens of adulthood, which meant that experiences from childhood resurfaced, and stories from adulthood sometimes blurred the boundaries between life stages. Identity tensions, cultural dislocation and questions of belonging were rarely confined to a single period.

Instead, they move across time, sometimes returning with new meaning as participants revisit early memories from a more reflective standpoint. In presenting this stage, I aimed to honour the immediacy of the adolescent experience and the layered ways it was remembered. This was the most effective means of explaining the fluid development of identity and belonging over time. When choosing which excerpts to include, I tried to stay close to the tone and feel of each conversation, constantly aware of the trust that had been extended to me in sharing these experiences.

4.10 Limitations and Contextual Boundaries

Like most research, this research had its limitations. The scope is shaped by the specific context of Aotearoa, New Zealand and my position as an intercountry adoptee. While this insider perspective allowed for depth and trust in interviews, it also required careful navigation to ensure that participant experiences remained centred. The study draws on a few voices, each offering rich but situated perspectives that cannot speak for all adoptees. Some could have chosen to withhold parts of their stories – a reminder of the emotional weight that adoption often carries.

This research is also constrained by limited access to archival records and the ongoing lack of legal transparency surrounding intercountry adoption in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Not applicable to all participants; however, adoption files remain sealed or incomplete, and inconsistencies in how records have been kept over time restrict what can be fully known, documented, or traced. These structural barriers impact scholarly inquiry and continue shaping the lived experiences of adoptees seeking answers. Rather than seeing these as weaknesses, I viewed them as part of the story, reflecting the silences and constraints adoptees themselves must work within.

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the methodological framework guiding this study on intercountry adoptee identity and belonging in Aotearoa, New Zealand. By grounding the research in social constructivism and interpretivism and employing a life-story narrative approach, the study foregrounds lived experiences, memory, and meaning-making as central to knowledge production. Each methodological choice – from participant recruitment to interview style, reflexive stance, and narrative analysis – reflects a commitment to ethical care, cultural humility, and emotional attunement.

Importantly, this methodology honours the complexity of adoptee stories. It allows contradiction, silence, rupture, and reclamation to exist without resolution. Instead of distilling identity into categories or codes, this approach invites participants to co-construct meaning on their terms, with their voices. The next chapter examines the early life experiences of intercountry adoptees, including pre-adoption contexts – tracing the tender beginnings of belonging, loss and identity.

Chapter Five: The Foundations of Identity: The Early Years of Intercountry Adoption

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the early childhood experiences of intercountry adoptees participating in this study. It focuses on how these influential years are the foundation of their developing identities, sense of belonging, and cultural integration. Guided by attachment theory, ecological systems theory, and cultural hybridity, I examine how adoptees' initial environments—from pre-adoption settings to the transition into adoptive families—shape their developing sense of self.

The chapter is organised into three themes to explore intercountry adoptees' early experiences. The first theme examines how early relationships with adoptive families shaped emotional security, belonging, and identity development, drawing from attachment and ecological systems theories. I consider how pre-adoption experiences, adoption age, and early care quality influenced adoptees' capacity to form trust. It also reflects how early placements – whether orphanages, kinship care, or institutions – affected later adaptation. By presenting each narrative individually, this section honours the uniqueness of each journey while tracing shared emotional undercurrents around trust, displacement, and the search for belonging.

The second theme addresses cultural dislocation and identity conflicts as adoptees adjust to new environments. The final theme centres on participants who developed linguistic proficiency before adoption, examining how losing their native language affects their sense of self and connection to their cultural heritage. Through the personal narratives of the adoptees, the chapter illustrates the resilience and challenges they face as they navigate these complexities. Analysing these stories offers a nuanced perspective on how early experiences can lay the groundwork for adoptees' lifelong journeys of self-discovery.

5.2 Introduction to the Adoptees – Attachment and Family Dynamics

This section introduces the first key theme: Attachment and Family Dynamics through each intercountry adoptees personal story and narrative. I explore how early relational experiences with adoptive family's shape adoptees' emotional security, trust, and foundational sense of identity. Each narrative reveals how their bonds—or lack thereof—contributed to the adoptees' adaptation, coping strategies, and evolving self-concept. By presenting these stories individually, the section underscores shared attachment patterns while recognising each journey's uniqueness.

Alex

Alex's journey with intercountry adoption began at the age of two when he was adopted from an orphanage in Arkhangelsk, a northern region of Russia. Because he was so young during his adoption, Alex has no memories of his early years in the Russian orphanage. However, his curiosity eventually led him to return there years later to explore his origins. Reflecting on his early life, Alex shared, "At two years old, you do not know anything about adoption; you just assume everything is normal. However, you start picking up on things as you grow older."

Alex did not reflect much on his childhood in New Zealand because he never felt it differed from any other childhood and considered it normal. He noted, "As you know, I came from the other side of the world. I felt like everything was comfortable and normal in school. However, that is how I have felt ever since I was a child." Not remembering his time in Russia, Alex always felt a powerful sense of belonging within his adoptive family, who supported him with openness throughout his upbringing. "They were always very supportive of everything I do," he stated, expressing gratitude for their unwavering encouragement.

When Alex revisited his orphanage, he was struck by the contrast between his current life and the environment into which he was born. “I walked around the orphanage and could see just outside how bleak and cold it was,” he recalled. The harsh conditions were a stark reminder of the life he might have led. “It was not a pleasant environment to be in personally, and I was not accustomed to it,” he added. The experience only deepened Alex’s appreciation for his adoptive family, with whom he shared a profound connection – a source of belonging and unwavering support throughout his life.

Marishka

In contrast, Marishka was adopted at the age of four and a half. Her story highlights the complexities of navigating institutional environments and the emotional impact of cultural disconnection. She was adopted from an orphanage in Russia, where she recalls the uniform and impersonal nature of her surroundings. She recalled, “All the orphanage clothes were similar, and our hair was typically shaved and styled in a bun. As a girl, you do not have long hair. All the clothing is shared. You have no personal belongings.” She remembered being expected to behave perfectly for potential adopters in exchange for treats, indicating a system where children’s actions were closely monitored and controlled, placing undue pressure on them to fulfil adult expectations deemed “desirable.” “I was told I had to have this cup of tea, drink this tea perfectly, and behave,” she relayed.

Marishka’s childhood narrative was her fond memories of playing outside and growing up in New Zealand alongside her adopted brother, who was also adopted from Russia but not biologically related. Marishka’s reflections on the orphanage were chilling, but they opened my eyes to another side of adoption I had not considered. She further noted:

I reflect on all the children who played in the same area as me. They may not have experienced growing up in a family and may not have had any help getting into the community or getting an education. The real issue with Russian orphanages is that if you are not a chosen child, you get put into place and stigmatised, but there are no chances for

them. Many children are straddled to a cot. They have no physical touch or anything. They are significantly disadvantaged to start with. It is sad because they do not get the help that they need. It is a sterile environment, and there is no learning. Toys were put aside so we could not play with them. It is a very bizarre type of environment.

Her reflections highlight the profound deprivation and isolation typical of many institutional settings. According to Kovalova and Varina (2023), human development relies on continuous, meaningful interactions within one's environment, and the absence of these interactions can leave lasting impacts. Marishka's account is echoed by studies such as McGuinness and Pallansch (2000), who investigated children adopted from former Soviet Union orphanages. Their findings demonstrate that extended time spent in orphanages can significantly impair children's cognitive and academic development. This study exemplifies how early institutionalisation shapes developmental trajectories in ways that often persist into adulthood (Sroufe, 2005).

Nelson et al. (2007), through the Bucharest Early Intervention Project (BEIP), researchers investigated early institutional care's severe and lasting impact on child development. Initiated in Romania in the early 2000s, this randomised control trial assessed how institutionalisation affects children's physical, mental, and cognitive development. The study's findings highlight the profound challenges faced by children raised in institutions, where the lack of nurturing environments can lead to significant developmental delays and long-term health issues.

Marishka's story provides a personal illustration of these issues. At the time of her adoption, her adoptive father was informed that the children in her orphanage routinely received sleeping aids and sedative medications to manage the enormous number of residents, often exceeding six hundred. Today, Marishka suffers from an undiagnosed neurological disorder and experiences ongoing nerve pain and seizures. She suspects these

health problems are lasting consequences of the medical practices she encountered in the orphanage.

JoJo

JoJo's narrative highlights the emotional toll of leaving behind close family ties and familiar surroundings, adding another dimension to the experiences of early adoptees. Her story begins in Hong Kong, where she was born and raised by her grandmother. Her early years were filled with warmth and a deep sense of belonging, creating memories that would later starkly contrast with her experiences in Aotearoa, New Zealand. JoJo's life dramatically changed at age five when she began her journey to New Zealand. Below, she reflects on the confusion, uncertainty, and emotional shift of being separated from the only family she had ever known:

One morning, I woke up in my apartment in Hong Kong, and everybody was hyping me up. I remember feeling like "everybody is acting strange." Everybody called me by my Chinese name and asked, "Are you excited? You are flying on an aeroplane! You are going on holiday." I was a very peculiar girl. I would think things through very thoroughly. I was sceptical. I still remember it, and I am still mad at them. I did not understand why they were acting strange until two months later. My grandma and I went to the airport and boarded the plane. When I arrived in New Zealand, a couple picked us up. We then went to their house, and I was under the pretence that this all was a holiday. It was a big house with a big garden, and we had 20 acres. I remember returning to the airport with my grandma, this time going to say goodbye to her; it was hard.

She recalled the moment her grandma departed for Hong Kong, marking the beginning of her adoptive journey filled with both challenges and self-discovery. As a child, she found it hard to grasp that her closest companion and source of comfort, her grandma, had suddenly disappeared from her life. Without any explanation, JoJo found herself placed with extended relatives, who were strangers to her. These individuals would eventually become her new family but were unfamiliar faces. She noted, "I started the relationships not trusting them. I

was deceived into going on holiday, and then my grandma disappeared, and everyone was playing house as if this were normal. I was like, ‘These people are insane!’

When JoJo was ten years old, her family formally adopted her in family court. On the surface, this adoption appeared to offer stability and opportunity, but beneath that facade, JoJo’s adoptive family harboured dark secrets. Despite their affluent status, which JoJo believes contributed to a lack of accountability, she suffered mental, emotional, and physical abuse at the hands of her adoptive family. The abuse was reported to Child Youth and Family (CYF), now known as Oranga Tamariki, a branch of the Ministry of Social Development. “They let the abuse slide when I reported it,” she reflected, highlighting a painful reality where her cries for help went ignored. The system’s failure to intervene or provide support was deeply damaging. This abuse, along with the denial and cover-up that ensued, left a profound emotional scar that she is still in the process of healing from.

JoJo’s experiences not only exposed the trauma she endured within her adoptive family but also highlighted the systemic failures of the very institutions meant to safeguard her well-being. Following the abuse she suffered – and the lack of response from Child Youth and Family, as an adult, was later invited to speak on a panel hosted by the agency. During the discussion, she courageously confronted the emotional cost of intercountry adoption and the institutional indifference she faced. “If I were to pull you away from your spouse and then give you a brand-new spouse and then go to a new country, what makes you think a child can comprehend that?” she asked. In her view, her words cut through the policy jargon and laid bare the unacknowledged pain many adoptees carry – pain that the systems designed to protect them too often ignore.

JoJo's analogy was deeply visceral and confrontational, not for provocation but to provoke reflection. What she was expressing, in essence, was that the rupture of attachment is not neutral, nor is it something that can be "repaired" through placement alone. By likening the adoption experience to being suddenly removed from an intimate partner and reassigned to a new one in a foreign country, she was making the emotional stakes visible to those whose policies are often drafted from abstract ideals. Her words challenged the panel and readers to consider what it means to be severed from one's primary attachments without agency, explanation, or cultural continuity. JoJo reframed the conversation away from assimilation or gratitude, calling instead the need to recognise trauma, loss, and the enduring psychological labour required to make sense of dislocation.

JoJo's experience of adoption sharply contrasted with the loving narratives she observed in other adoptive families. "Most of the adoptees I knew were Māori, and it was evident that these families genuinely wanted a child, not out of obligation, but purely out of love," she reflected. Her story underscores the emotional toll of separation and unmet expectations, offering a stark contrast to the more affirming experiences of adoptees like Maria and Santiago who I introduce next, whose culturally attuned adoptive environments helped foster a stronger sense of identity and belonging.

Maria

Maria struck me as a bright, bubbly, confident and passionate person. The core of her life revolves around family, and she speaks proudly about the deep connections she has forged. Born in Ecuador, Maria was adopted as an infant by a Pākehā couple living in Ecuador at the time of her birth. Her upbringing was somewhat unique, even within the context of intercountry adoption.

Her adoptive parents were bilingual and lived in her birthplace long enough to understand the complexities of the culture. As an ‘interracial’ adoptee, Maria was raised by parents who, despite their European roots, were deeply connected to Ecuador. This connection and their understanding of identity and belonging made Maria feel deeply rooted in her family. “Yes, I had a really good overall experience. I suppose, in some sense, I felt I was not even adopted,” Maria relayed.

Maria’s adoptive family was large, including five adopted children, two of whom were adopted from Ecuador, though not biologically related. Maria’s home life was always a place to belong growing up. The only challenge she faced was society’s inability to see and accept differences. She often felt the weight of looking completely different in New Zealand when diversity was less accepted and seen. Her parents counteracted this stigma by instilling a strong sense of identity into her, emphasising “the importance of the beauty in being herself and fully embracing her life in New Zealand”.

Maria’s adoption story is rooted in the difficult circumstances faced by her birth mother, who was just sixteen years old when she decided to place Maria for adoption; growing up in rural areas of Ecuador, Maria’s birth mother faced immense poverty and a lack of education opportunities-challenges that are all too common in that region. “My birth mother was sixteen and wanted me to have a better life,” Maria shared, reflecting on the sacrifice her mother made. This decision was driven by a desire to break the cycle of poverty and give Maria the opportunities unattainable within her biological family’s circumstances.

Santiago

Santiago was also adopted from Ecuador through a closed adoption. Santiago’s adoption story began just weeks after his birth. His adoptive parents received a letter sent by his birth mother that mentioned a boy in Ecuador who was waiting to be adopted, leading to

Santiago's adoption when he was just a few weeks old. His birth mother's decision to place Santiago for adoption was driven by the economic hardships that made it nearly impossible to provide for another child. Santiago noted,

I guess the reasoning behind the adoption was that my birth mum already had three sons. From my understanding, she sold salt at the local market and was very poor, so the reasoning for my adoption was that she could not afford to feed or clothe me.

While growing up in Aotearoa, New Zealand, in the 1980s and 1990s, Santiago encountered subtle but persistent challenges related to his identity, particularly in communities where ethnic diversity was limited or not widely embraced. These predominantly Pākehā schools and social environments sometimes left him feeling like an outsider, a feeling common among many transracial adoptees navigating cultural and racial differences within their adoptive countries (Lee, 2003).

Despite these challenges, Santiago's relationship with his adoptive parents remained a strong anchor. They offered him stability, love, and security, never pressuring him to conform to a particular identity. "Right throughout primary school, secondary school, and bursary, I never felt that pressure to be a certain kind of person," Santiago reflected, emphasising the importance of his freedom to explore and define himself and his identity on his terms.

Although Santiago's early years were marked by uncertainty about his identity, this began to shift as he grew older. His identity development deepened over time, prompting him to reflect critically on the implications of his closed adoption. "The fact that I was adopted from poverty is the most significantly influential thing in my life. It has changed everything," he explained, describing how this knowledge became a powerful lens through which he understood his past and present.

Santiago described his evolution as shaped not only by the circumstances of his adoption but also by the values instilled in him by his adoptive parents. They emphasised the importance of relationships from early childhood, teaching him to value learning and to understand that life is about connecting with others. “It was the beliefs that changed how I viewed the world,” Santiago explained, noting his parents’ teaching that all people matter and should be treated with dignity and respect. His journey reflects the complex interplay of transracial adoption, belonging, and the lasting impact of positive, nurturing environments on identity formation.

Maria and Santiago’s stories illuminate how cultural diversity within their adoptive families significantly shaped their perception of identity. Both adoptees were exposed to unfamiliar cultural values, which provided enrichment opportunities but posed challenges as they sought to understand their place in the world. Their adoptive parents emphasised the importance of heritage, offering them ways to connect with their birth cultures (despite being in closed adoptions) while embracing the traditions of their new environment.

Mike

Although Maria and Santiago’s also navigated cultural shifts through adoption, Mike’s early years reflect a more pronounced rupture between his birth environment and adoptive world—revealing the depth of contrast some adoptees must reconcile. Mike reflected on a life that began in an orphanage in Hong Kong. His life took a turn when a Pākehā couple adopted him at the age of six. As an older adoptee, Mike’s experience of intercountry adoption was shaped by the profound cultural, linguistic, and emotional shifts he encountered when his life was uprooted from his foundations.

Mike’s earliest memories are rooted in the orphanage where he was raised. His Chinese birth mother, who had come from a problematic and possibly fractured home life, ended up in the girl’s section of a charitable organisation based in Hong Kong that was

initially established in the late 19th century to protect and care for women and children who were vulnerable to exploitation, abandonment, or trafficking. According to Mike, he and his mother were placed in different parts of the establishment. The details surrounding their placement remain unclear, and Mike's account, like many adoptee narratives, is shaped by partial memories and second-hand information. Mike was in the orphanage, while his mother was in a separate wash house. She was eighteen then and could not care for him due to her circumstances.

Though the organisation operated as a broader social care facility, for Mike, it functioned as an orphanage – a place he remembers vividly and fondly. “I grew up in the orphanage; it was the happiest time of my life,” he noted. For Mike, the orphanage was not simply a place of residence; it was a true home where he felt connected and embraced by those around him, forming bonds he regarded as familial.

Mike's love of nature and animals was nurtured in the small garden and park in the orphanage, where he would spend hours talking to the birds and frogs. Beyond this experience, what Mike cherished most the belonging and community he felt in the orphanage. He saw himself as a big brother figure, often looking out for the other children, and thrived in the orphanage's nurturing environment. Mike did not comprehend what adoption meant at the time: “It did not mean too much at the time, but supposedly, I was going to a better place,” Mike recalled, emphasising the mixed emotions that began to surface. This is just the first of many losses Mike has experienced, each chipping away at the stability and community he knew in the orphanage.

The most profound and haunting memory for Mike was the day before he was taken to New Zealand. His birth mother visited him during playtime, but according to Mike, he did not recognise her. He believed his lack of recognition may have disappointed her and

influenced her decision to proceed with adoption. While Mike did not elaborate further – and I chose not to press—his reflection suggests that their separation had likely begun well before the visit, possibly due to institutional care arrangements that limited contact between mother and child. He noted:

I blamed myself a lot throughout all those years of anger, hurt, and sadness, depression, suicidal thoughts. How things might have been different if I recognised her, and she might have kept me and not allowed me to be adopted.

This encounter, followed by his adoption, triggered a lasting struggle with feelings of loss, abandonment, and self-blame. The transition from the orphanage to life in New Zealand was anything but smooth. The communal, nurturing environment he had known was replaced by a structured and emotionally distant family setting. “It was difficult to move from the loving family/communal environment of the orphanage to a structured, disciplined family,” he recalled. Mike found it difficult to adapt to the rigidity of his new home. “I did not realise that I was stuck in this environment and not returning to the orphanage,” he reflected. This realisation deepened his sense of displacement, making his early years in Aotearoa, New Zealand, ones of emotional isolation and grief.

Mike’s early years were marked by a sense of survival rather than belonging as he struggled to adjust to the expectations and norms of his new family. He recalls a turbulent environment that often left him feeling isolated and misunderstood. His story demonstrates how early experiences of instability emanating from age of adoption and both pre-and post-adoption, can complicate the formation of identity and attachment, especially when an adoptee’s sense of security is continually challenged. While some adoptees formed strong or secure bonds with their adoptive family, which positively influenced their emotional and cultural journeys, in the following section social, cultural, and personal dislocation has also impacted their evolving identities.

5.3 Displacement and Cultural and Emotional Adjustments

Adoptee's experiences of cultural displacement, emotional upheaval, and the challenges of adjusting to unfamiliar environments following their intercountry adoption are explored here. I highlight how cultural loss, racial difference, and the absence of shared language or traditions affected their emotional well-being and identity development. Their narratives reflect how these early experiences shaped their sense of self, often complicating feelings of belonging and cultural continuity.

Each adoptee grappled with one or more effects of cultural dislocation, displacement, and emotional turmoil in some way, shape, or form, some more so than others. This may be due to the endeavour to reconcile the cultures of both the adoptive and birth families (Baden et al., 2012; Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1980, 1990; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2005). While much of the literature has focused on developmental adjustment, it often overlooks the deeper emotional and relational complexity that can arise from early adversity—such as dysfunction, but reflections of disrupted beginning, shifting identities, and the embodied work of belonging (Baden et al., 2012; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2005).

The adoptee's cultural experiences, however, were shaped by their adoptive environments and the age at which they were adopted. For instance, Mike, adopted at six, had issues assimilating and experienced displacement and confusion, challenges that are typical of older adoptees. Cultural adjustment is challenging for the average person. For intercountry adoptees, a sense of loss and confusion can further compound the experience as they navigate their new cultural settings, Mike explained:

I was interracially adopted and brought to New Zealand, and I lost a lot of my sense of identity, belonging and language. A Pākehā couple adopted me, but they could not understand the trauma it caused me, which led to behavioural problems like stealing and lying.

As explored in the literature review, the early stages of adjusting to a new adoptive environment are described as a “honeymoon” period (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2005). During this phase, children may appear to settle quickly; however, this calm often masks feelings of disorientation or emotional overwhelm. Once this phase passes, behavioural and emotional challenges may surface as the adoptee begins to process the losses associated with their transition (Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1980, 1990). Mike further explains:

Many people saw me as a bad kid and that I did not need to misbehave because my family provided for my needs. I remember crying on special occasions, and I had no idea why I was doing that. There was a psychological factor at play. There was not enough education about those behavioural problems, so I was deemed a naughty kid.

The pressure to assimilate into his adoptive parents’ culture was facilitated by a sense of loss, leading to identity conflicts and behavioural issues. Bohman (1970) studied 624 adopted children in Sweden, tracking their development over time (as cited in Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1980, 1990). At age 11, interviews conducted with teachers found that adopted children exhibited more behavioural issues than their peers. Although the study demonstrated that adoptees successfully adjusted over time, early assessments highlighted their higher vulnerability to emotional and behavioural difficulties, reinforcing the need for greater understanding and support in adoption transitions.

JoJo spoke poignantly about her life before her adoption, discussing the losses of established practices and her cultural identity that she felt were already ingrained. She reflected on how these losses created a deep sense of disconnection as the cultural traditions and daily practices that once anchored her identity were suddenly stripped away, noting:

In Hong Kong, my community was like taking minibuses and trains everywhere and walking everywhere: skyscrapers, street food, markets, groceries, wet markets, and traditional holidays. Chinese traditions are very embedded, not just in the language. It was a complete 180 when I came to New Zealand. It is very different, and food is a massive thing in my

culture. I grew up on fish bowls and Congee. I deeply missed my steam fish and stuff like that, as I grew up on British or white food.

JoJo's narratives reveal that her cultural identity is not inherited but lived, deeply embedded in her everyday experiences of food, movement, celebration, and language. The sudden loss of this cultural grounding created a lasting sense of detachment in her adoptive life. This rupture, both emotional and cultural, coincided with a critical stage of development. Between the ages of six and preadolescence, children's ability to self-reflect, reason, and problem-solve increases their awareness of personal differences and enhances their capacity for identity formation (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). Brodzinsky et al. (1993) note that during this developmental window, adoptees often begin to wrestle more consciously with questions of difference, loss and belonging.

During this developmental stage, children's understanding of adoption evolves significantly, making them more conscious of their adoptive status and the implications for their identity (Brodzinsky et al., 2014). Children adopted during this critical stage often interpret adoption through the lens of relinquishment, which can lead to a heightened awareness of physical and racial differences (Brodzinsky et al., 1998).

This disconnection was further complicated for JoJo by the absence of genetic mirroring – a psychological phenomenon where individuals seek resemblance in family members to affirm their sense of self. The lack of visible biological connection within her adoptive family heightened feelings of alienation. This reflects what Sants (1964) termed genealogical bewilderment—a form of identity confusion experienced by individuals who grow up without knowledge or recognition of their biological ancestry. JoJo described the emotional dissonance she experienced:

I was in a situation where I felt out of place to begin with, which added a component of being abducted. It was not a biological child dynamic. I wanted to fit in anywhere. It did not

make sense to me. I wanted to go back; I wanted to feel a sense of belonging. At the same time, I am denying that because it denied me. It is all very conflicting. Where do I even turn to? I am not a white person; everybody assumes I am half-white. It was weird because everybody was white apart from that woman (adoptive mother). There is genetic mirroring, but it is more prominent when you are of a different race.

Similarly, Marishka reflected on how growing up in a multicultural family amplified her sense of difference. At times, the contrast between her adoptive family's cultural background and her own created a feeling of not belonging. McRoy and Zurcher (1983), in their study of transracial adoptees, found that many children became aware of racial differences between themselves and their adoptive parents as early as ages four to five. This early awareness can lead to dissonance as adoptees question their identity as they navigate societal perceptions of family and belonging.

To address this dissonance, some adoptees may seek to reconnect with their birth culture, a process that can play a significant role in shaping identity (McRoy & Zurcher, 1983). Baden et al. (2012) describe this as 'reculturation,' whereby adoptees actively engage with their cultural origins to integrate their racial and ethnic identity into their self-concept.

Marishka elaborated on her experience of physical dissonance, noting:

As a kid, I would look at other kids with their parents and think they have this lovely synergy and look like each other. Our family looked like they did not belong. Moreover, I think I held anger also. Why am I adopted? I am treated differently. I think it was the treatment, not so much about being adopted; it is how other people perceive it or perceive you because of it.

Understanding their minority status and identity is just one aspect of adoptees' lived experience. Identity formation during childhood was deeply influenced by adoption, and for many adoptees, their life trajectories would have looked markedly different had they remained in their birth countries. Pinderhughes (2005) and Pinderhughes & Harden (2005) note that society's stigmatisation of minority groups can compromise the development of healthy biracial or bicultural identities. However, identity challenges may arise from

navigating the cultural expectations of both birth and adoptive environments. Much like Marishka, Maria only looked at the ‘difference’ when it was pointed out to her by peers. She noted:

I was fine with the adoption and everything until people questioned it. Like, oh, that is not normal. Why do your parents look like that, or does your brother not quite look like you, but you can tell you are from the same country? You know? Having to justify the story is like, maybe I am different.

Maria presented a different perspective on culture. From the very beginning, Maria was encouraged to embrace her cultural background. She spoke positively about the cultural differences in her home and the broader societal challenges that intercountry adoptees face, including ‘racial’ and cultural misunderstandings (Baden et al., 2012).

Santiago spoke about facing ‘racial’ and cultural misunderstandings in his early years while struggling to connect to his heritage as encouraged by his adoptive parents. He lived in New Zealand when the cultural climate was less diverse. Santiago’s parents encouraged him to have a positive identity despite living in a primarily different culture (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). “I have two parents who are very Kiwi European, so there was no way they were going to hide that I was adopted or the fact that I was different,” he noted.

Santiago shared his understanding of culture as a diverse and flexible concept that extends beyond tangible elements like food, clothing, music, and rituals. From an early age, he recognised that culture was not merely something inherited, but something lived and shaped through experiences. Childhood memories of family traditions, storytelling, and the values instilled in him by his parents played a foundational role in shaping his perspective. Over time, these early experiences evolved, deepening his belief that culture encompasses the cultivation of the heart, mind, and soul. His sense of self is not solely based on genetics or nationality but on the relationships and values that define his place in the world. He reflected:

I invite people to understand this idea that we talk about in terms of culture, which is a very diverse and flexible term. This invitation is not just about different rituals, clothing, music, or even foods. However, culture talks about cultivating the heart, mind, and soul and how they are nurtured and grown. So, when it comes to challenging and helping people understand stereotypes, I have had to do work in looking at my culture and understanding its diversity and flexibility. The value of people in relationships. That is where I belong or who I am. It is not that I would not like to go back and would not want to meet people from the same area or have similar genetics. I guess myself who I am is far more than genetics.

Santiago's view of cultural identity as a holistic and multifaceted concept aligns with 'cultural hybridity,' as theorised in postcolonial and global studies. Appadurai (1996) describes how global flows enable the fusion of cultural elements, producing new, interconnected identities that transcend singular national or ethnic frameworks. Blake et al. (2011) extend this concept in the adoption context, showing how adoptees' narratives resist colonial binaries and reformulate cultural belonging through hybrid expressions of identity.

Iyall-Smith and Leavy (2018) similarly argue that hybrid identities merge cultural fragments to form new spaces for subjectivity and meaning-making. Santiago's understanding reflects this interconnectedness, as he rejects the idea of pure, bounded cultures and embraces the creative possibilities that emerge from cultural convergence. In Alex's childhood, his adoptive parents played a significant role in fostering an understanding of his birthplace in Arkhangelsk, Russia. Although he had no personal memories of his early years there, they encouraged him to connect with his cultural heritage, allowing him to explore his roots openly without guilt. Reflecting on his experience, Alex explains:

They said it is always a big part of you because it affects your identity if you do not know it. My parents said, "Hey, this is part of your identity. You may have been raised here in New Zealand, where you live, and this is your upbringing, but you also have this other side of you, which is also so important."

The adoptees' narratives illuminate how early experiences shape their sense of identity and belonging. From the warmth of familial bonds to the challenges of cultural dislocation, each story reflects the importance of nurturing environments in fostering emotional security and

connection. Their experiences remind us of the complexities of intercountry adoption, where identity is not just inherited but also constructed through relationships, environments, and the values imparted along the way.

5.4 The Intersection of Language and Age in Intercountry Adoption

In this section, I bring together aspects of the previous two discussions to examine how language loss intersects with age at adoption, shaping adoptees' emotional, cultural, and identity development. Language is more than a communication tool—it is a vessel for cultural memory, familial connection, and self-expression. For adoptees, particularly those who were older at the time of adoption, losing their native language often marked a more profound loss of cultural continuity and belonging.

Intercountry adoptions of older children frequently lead to the loss of their native language, severing a key connection to identity and belonging. This loss, coupled with the demands of adjusting to unfamiliar cultural environments, can significantly disrupt emotional and social development (Friedlander, 1999). However, the impact of language loss is not limited to older children alone; according to Long (2017), younger adoptees may struggle to articulate these experiences due to a lack of language development during transition.

This disconnection that results from language loss extends beyond communication -it involves the loss of a fundamental aspect of one's identity (Guardado, 2002; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). For older adoptees, these challenges are incredibly profound, as they often have a stronger pre-existing connection to their native language and culture, which becomes intertwined with their sense of self (Schmid, 2012).

Three participants in my study were adopted at older ages and had already developed strong connections to their native languages, which made transitioning into a new cultural environment particularly challenging. Mike, adopted at age six, experienced profound

linguistic and cultural displacement. “I lost my language and could speak Cantonese; I became whitewashed in a way. I was forced to assimilate,” he stated. This language loss severed key cultural and emotional ties, intensifying his sense of disconnection and identity confusion. Scholars such as Brodzinsky et al.(1998) have highlighted how language loss can compound the emotional and psychological challenges faced by adoptees, particularly when forced assimilation leaves little room to maintain ties to their cultural and linguistic heritage.

Similarly, Marishka was four and a half years old when she was adopted. After moving to New Zealand, she experienced a rapid erosion of her native language skills, noting, “When I came to New Zealand, I did not speak English and only spoke Russian. I was fluent in it. I could only talk to my brother. Gradually, we had to adapt to the Kiwi lifestyle.” Marishka described her disconnection from Russian culture and the challenges of integrating into her new multicultural environment. She explained, “I felt very disconnected from my birth culture, mainly because I lost my language, and I was essentially told at four or five that I am a Kiwi now and should not speak Russian.”

Forced cultural assimilation can leave adoptees in a state of limbo, where they struggle to belong to either culture or their adoptive family (Blair & Liu, 2020). This experience often leads to an enduring sense of not belonging anywhere; individuals are caught between two worlds. Like Mike and Marishka, JoJo experienced language loss, integral to her early childhood. She recounts, “I was muted because I did not speak English. I could not communicate, it was isolating.” The sudden loss of her native language hindered her ability to communicate, contributing to a profound sense of cultural and personal dislocation during a formative period. The abrupt necessity to adapt to a new linguistic environment often leads to the attrition of their native tongue, further isolating them from their cultural roots (Montrul, 2015).

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored the early childhood experiences of intercountry adoptees, focusing on how attachment, cultural disruption, and identity formation are shaped in those foundational years. Through their stories, it became clear that these early moments – often overlooked in policy – carry lasting weight. They mark the beginning of how adoptees understand who they are, their place of belonging, and what they can hold onto.

Attachment emerged as a central influence. Participants who formed strong emotional bonds with their adoptive families were often more able to navigate later identity challenges. However, when those bonds were weakened by inconsistent care, early trauma, or emotionally unavailable environments, the effects were lasting. These early fractures showed up later in how participants understood relationships, self-worth, and trust. The research echoes: stable, secure care is a buffer, while adult-centred systems often amplify harm.

Alongside emotional bonds, cultural dislocation shaped early identity. Many participants experienced pressure to assimilate – to adopt their new environments' language, customs; and values while letting go of their birth culture. Some recalled a silence around difference; others described active discouragement. In both cases, the loss of language, cultural memory, and visibility created an ongoing struggle for coherence. Yoon (2004) warns that when adoptees are not supported in integrating their heritage, identity development can become fractured, and emotional well-being suffers.

The stories highlight the gap between policy ideals and practice. Frameworks like the Hague Convention on the Rights of the Child (1993) promote cultural preservation and child-centred care, yet lived experiences often reflect a different reality. Researchers such as Breuning (2013) and Masson (2001) show how institutional and adoptive interests can

override the needs of the child, especially when “best interests” are interpreted through adult perspectives.

Looking ahead, these early years form the emotional and cultural terrain that adoptees will carry into adolescence. The groundwork of attachment and belonging – or the absence of it – shapes how they encounter identity, difference, and self-recognition in the following years. What begins in early childhood is not resolved there. It continues, deepens and returns.

Chapter Six: Identity Factors in The Years Post-Adoption

6.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on previous – pre-adoptive and early childhood experiences by focusing on adolescence and early adulthood, which are critical development periods for identity formation, cultural integration, and social belonging. Erikson’s (1968, Chapter Five) psychosocial theory identifies adolescence as a time for “identity vs. role confusion,” a challenge magnified for intercountry adoptees navigating racial differences, cultural loss, and societal exclusion.

The chapter is structured around three interrelated but distinct themes. The first theme discusses external belonging and disruption. I explore how the social and familial environments of New Zealand shape adoptees’ experiences of inclusion and rejection within families, schools, and communities. The second theme turns inward, exploring how adoptees make meaning of their cultural, spiritual, and personal identities by drawing on narratives of fluid identity, cultural hybridity, and selective integration. It illustrates identity as a complex, ongoing negotiation.

The concluding section examines the significant impact that adoptive families have on fostering resilience and emotional well-being development. Rather than treating resilience as a universal trait, it is framed as a context-dependent process that arises from intersections of familial support, early trauma, and opportunities for emotional reconstruction. The narratives presented here emphasise how adoptive environments can either nurture or impede an adoptee’s ability to adapt, cope, and develop (or not) a cohesive sense of self. Collectively, these sections portray adolescence and early adulthood as a pivotal period that reflects the legacy of early adoption experiences and establishes the groundwork for future identity integration, emotional resilience, and psychological well-being.

6.2 Navigating Familial and Social Belonging in New Zealand

Social belonging and exclusion among intercountry adoptees are mediated by their relationships within the family, school, and wider social settings. Here, I consider how racialised differences, stereotyping, and systemic discrimination construct barriers to belonging, particularly during adolescence. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and lived narratives, the discussion foregrounds how identity is shaped in these external environments, often through processes of alienation, othering and the pressure to “fit in.”

Dominant public portrayals of adoption frequently echo “broken” narratives associated with diasporic communities, emphasising themes of displacement and disruption (Yngvesson & Mahoney, 2000). These portrayals often reflect broader societal anxieties around identity and belonging, unintentionally reinforcing the stereotype of adoptees as fragmented or incomplete (Howell, 2006). In doing so, such narratives can obscure the diversity of adoptee experiences, further marginalising those whose lives do not conform to idealised social scripts of family and integration (Dorow, 2006; Kim, 2010).

For adolescent adoptees, experiences of displacement significantly complicate identity development and social integration, and can lead to intense feelings of alienation and internal fragmentation (Bhabha, 1994). Research by Hübnette & Tigervall (2009) and Lee (2003) underscores the connection between disrupted belonging and compromised adolescent identity outcomes. Adoptees may struggle to reconcile dual identities and navigate cross-cultural transitions when they face cultural dislocation. These challenges are often heightened by experiences of discrimination and stereotyping in familial, educational and/or social contexts, which further exacerbate identity conflicts and exclusion.

Mike's adolescent experiences illustrate these challenges. Facing racism both at home and school, he dealt with a dual sense of alienation – racially in his predominantly white schooling and social environments and relationally within his adoptive family. He recalled:

You are Chinese, and you look different from your adopted parents. You do not understand it yourself. Why am I different from everybody else? Then there was racism; I was the only Asian in school. Then you go home, and then you get racism from your parents. They did not understand; they accepted it as a part of whatever. Pretty much from the start, you do not see that you are adopted; you know you are different from everyone else and that you do not have a normal family life.

Mikes experience reveals how exclusion can operate across familial, and institutional layers – particularly when schools—where racialisation intersect with both, converging during adolescence to destabilise self-understanding. His experience affirms that identity formation for intercountry adoptees cannot be separated from the quality of relational and cultural belonging available to them during critical developmental periods.

When I asked Maria whether she had encountered any stereotypes or misconceptions about adoption, she reflected on her experiences during adolescence and early adulthood:

Well, I encountered a lot, especially in my teens and twenties, and even now, to be honest, negative connotations to being adopted, you know. When they get to know you and hear a bit about your adoption story, they are like, “I guess you are kind of adopted, like, you know, “Oh, how does it make you feel?” I do not know. That is an automatic kind of negative stereotype straight away.

Similar to Maria, Marishka spoke about the social difficulties of being adopted, particularly regarding feelings of belonging. She expressed: “You are seen as ‘the other’, making you more susceptible to bullying. In my experience, the stigma is real. I guess some adopted people do what they can to fit in; I have seen it.” Experiences like Maria's and Marishka's reveal how stereotypes during adolescence, whether rooted in “racial” differences or assumptions about adoption, can heighten vulnerability to social exclusion, and internalised stigma (Friedlander, 1999; Lee, 2003; McGinnis et al., 2009). Sociologist David Kirk (1964)

introduced the “rejection of difference” concept to explain how adoptive families and broader society often struggle to view adoptive relationships as entirely legitimate. For adolescent intercountry adoptees, this rejection can undermine the perceived authenticity of family bonds, intensifying their sense of alienation and emotional dissonance during a formative period of identity development.

The idea that adoptive families lack ‘real’ bonds can intensify feelings of exclusion during adolescence (Morgan & Langrehr, 2019). The stigma affects not only adoptees but also their adoptive parents, especially in cases where ‘racial’ or cultural differences are visible (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Morgan & Langrehr, 2019). In some cases, society views adoptive families as incomplete or unnatural, which can further isolate both the child and parents from dominant cultural narratives of family legitimacy and belonging (Jerng, 2010; Katz & Hunt, 2014).

These dynamics are powerfully reflected in JoJo’s narrative, illuminating the emotional toll of invalidation experienced throughout her life, particularly during adolescence. This period, already critical for identity development, was marked for JoJo by an enduring sense of being silenced and “othered.” She explains:

I will always need people to overcompensate and validate how I feel. To give me a moment when I feel sad or unheard and ousted, any feelings that are attributed to the adoption experience. I have felt unheard, ousted, singled out. People are going to be triggered by whatever the experience is. Especially when I am triggered, and my feelings are upset about something, people are like, “You are overreacting,” and I am like “No, people have different experiences.” That sense of invalidation is going to stick with me. I know it. It will always be there for those points that hit home and my experience.

JoJo’s account illustrates how adolescence often amplifies earlier wounds. The lack of emotional recognition during this pivotal stage not only compounded her trauma but shaped how she navigated attachment, anger and identity.

Her account starkly illustrates the conditions under which resilience may be severely obstructed, particularly in the absence of emotional validation, safety and acknowledgment of trauma. Her experience contrasts with narratives shaped by supportive relational structures, underscoring that resilience cannot be presumed but must be actively cultivated. JoJo's reflections also reveal the emotional complexity many adoptees face during adolescence when the need for social and familial validation intensifies. Linehan (1993) argues that emotional invalidation during key developmental periods can lead to lasting emotional dysregulation, especially for individuals with complex histories. In JoJo's case, the lack of emotional attunement from those around her – meaning their inability to perceive, respond to, and validate her internal experience – compounded her sense of alienation, echoing Grotevant's (1997) view that adolescent identity formation is deeply tied to experiences of acceptance and emotional mirroring.

Santiago also spoke about his struggle to fit in, emphasising the feeling of being an outsider:

I found myself in a place where the European children made it clear that I did not belong with them, and the Māori children did not believe I belonged with them either. So, it was kind of this really awkward in-between space.

Santiago's experience of occupying an "awkward in-between space" during adolescence, caught between conflicting cultural expectations of Pākehā peers, and Māori peers, for whom belonging – aligns with Bhabha's (1994) "third space," highlighting adolescence as a critical period for navigating hybrid identities. Santiago's reflection highlights the challenge of cultural in-betweenness, a common experience for transracial adoptees who feel they do not fully belong to either birth or adoptive cultures. This sense of in-between identity often intensifies during adolescence, a developmental stage marked by a search for coherence and belonging. According to Ballard (2013), who references Yngvesson and Mohoney, adoptees'

narratives illuminate a “tension” inherent in their “in-betweenness,” propelling them toward an enduring authenticity and rootedness, including a coherent sense of belonging (pp.235).

In contrast, Alex offers a more resilient narrative. While acknowledging the challenges of being adopted, he resists deficit-based assumptions about adoptee identity. His story positions adolescence not solely as a site of struggle and social attitudes, but one of (Grotevant, 1997). He shared:

I think many people assume that adoptees struggle with everything. I do not believe that is true. Even a normal child in a normal family may have problems growing up. It happens everywhere. I have come across many stereotypical views from many people. So, it is not a good thing how society views things. If you are adopted at a later age, it can be a struggle. You may have more challenges and complexities, but we are all people at the end of the day, and we learn to overcome a lot. Moreover, building resilience is important, rather than knocking yourself back down and saying, “Look, okay, it is because I am adopted.” The other side is having positivity, understanding where you come from and your identity roots, and knowing you are strong and can push through things. It is a better feeling than feeling down all the time.

Alex’s perspective challenges universalised narratives of adoptee vulnerability. Instead, it foregrounds the importance of resilience, agency, and supportive environments in shaping identity outcomes. Viewed through an ecological lens, human development unfolds within interconnected systems, family, school, community, and broader society – all influencing how adoptees construct and negotiate their identities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These external systems can stabilise or destabilise identity development and adjustment challenges. While many adoptees face complex challenges related to cultural integration, social-relational support and open communication can foster emotional security and self-understanding. His story reinforces a central theme of this chapter: that identity development in adoption is not linear, and that resilience can emerge not despite complexity but through it.

At the same time, it is essential to recognise that adoptee experiences vary widely. Some grow up with strong familial and community support, while others face systemic

disadvantage, trauma, or emotional isolation. These diverse trajectories highlight the need for inclusive, context-sensitive support structures that equip adoptees, regardless of background, with the tools to navigate identity development, healing, and belonging. As these stories show, adolescence can be marked by significant external pressures to conform, suppress differences, or navigate systemic invalidation. However, adoptees do not merely respond to external forces – they actively shape their identities by drawing on personal beliefs, cultural influences, and inner resilience. The following section explores the internal dimension, focusing on how adoptees internalise and construct selfhood over time.

6.3 Influences and Experiences of Identity

The previous section focused on the external influences shaping adoptees' sense of belonging; here, I move inward to explore how participants constructed meaning from within. Identity is a fluid and evolving process, shaped by personal values, spirituality, cultural interaction, and agency. The following narratives illustrate how adoptees construct their identity selectively integrating or resisting different elements as they mature. Rather than viewing identity as reactive or fixed, participants describe it as an ongoing negotiation shaped by reflection, experience, and emotional development. This aligns with Gray's (2009) finding that adoptees often develop comprehensive, multi-layered identity narratives in response to their complex life histories.

Some narratives presented here speak from a reflective, adult standpoint. However, the identities described are deeply rooted in adolescence and early adulthood. Participants' current understandings usually emerge from events and insights encountered during their teenage years. Where possible, I demonstrate the adolescent origins of these identity dynamics while recognising the evolving nature of narrative meaning-making.

Maria's Christian faith significantly shaped her identity. She states, "My relationship with Christ defines me." Religion and racial identity significantly influenced her experience, providing grounding and purpose (Patel et al., 2004). Maria also described navigating institutional pressures from organisations such as Oranga Tamariki, which questioned her Ecuadorian identity due to her inability to speak Spanish:

I have embraced my culture, but I do not have to deal with the negative stuff that comes with it. About two years ago, when I spoke to Oranga Tamariki, they came at me saying, "You say you are Ecuadorian, but you do not speak the language?" I had to justify myself, and I was like, "Flippin heck, do you want me to take a DNA?" It is because I cannot speak the language. You can say everything you want; I am Ecuadorian, Kiwi, and Christian. So, the most challenging thing about the last couple of years was that those conversations I had to justify my culture.

While the incident with Oranga Tamariki occurred recently, Maria identifies its emotional roots as forming during adolescence, when her cultural belonging was most tenuous and socially questioned. Her perspective reveals a process of selective cultural integration, affirming the empowering aspects of her heritage while consciously stepping away from deficit-based narratives imposed from the outside, such as poverty or cultural inadequacy (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Phinney et al., 2001). This integration reflects her agency, weaving in factors like gender, class, and occupation to shape how she defines herself. Selective integration aligns with bicultural identity integration (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005), where individuals merge different cultural identities into a coherent self-concept, often strengthening cultural competence (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Maria's story illustrates how her spiritual identity, cultural values, and the demand for external approval are interpreted through her own sense of meaning. This illustrates how adoptees utilise narrative agency to define their identity across time.

Mike's adolescent experiences underscore the complexities of forming cultural identity, especially for intercountry adoptees moving between multiple cultural frameworks.

During his early teens, he faced challenges in establishing a sense of belonging, turning to Pasifika⁸ and Māori communities that emphasise collective identity and close family ties, especially in a time frequently characterised by identity uncertainty and exploration. His connection to collectivist cultural values stands in contrast to the individualistic orientation prevalent in Western cultures, potentially alienating adoptees who desire more profound relational connections (Durie, 1994). These values provided Mike with emotional resonance and social grounding during a period often marked by identity uncertainty.

This search for connection illustrates how shared cultural values can help mitigate the dislocation often felt by adoptees during adolescence, offering a more coherent and supported sense of self. Mike's story reveals that identity construction is profoundly relational and emotional, formed not only through cultural conflict but also through chosen cultural affinities, self-reflection, and the development of coherent self-concepts under pressure. As Mike moved through adolescence, he became increasingly open about his adoption with others and the adversities he faced, allowing him to gain self-awareness and emotional strength. He reflected:

I guess going through all the mental health, physical and emotional abuse made me stronger. I would not have survived in the sports field and the gang scene without that. It was a positive effect. It was self-learning. I learned a lot about myself.

Mike noted that he identifies as a “Kiwi Asian,” a label that reflects the fluid nature of identity formation during adolescence, a process that often intensifies during adolescence but continues across the lifespan (Grotevant, 1997), particularly as adoptees navigate evolving understandings of self-concerning cultural heritage, community, and life transitions. Mike

⁸ Pasifika is a term used in Aotearoa New Zealand to refer to peoples of Pacific Island descent, including communities from Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau, and others. It acknowledges shared Pacific heritage while recognising the distinct cultures within the region.

moved through a layered cultural landscape. He blended parts of his background in ways that felt true to himself. Mike's identification as a "Kiwi Asian" became a way to hold two worlds simultaneously. His story reminds us that resilience often does not come from certainty but adaptation and external and internal exploration.

Marishka's reflections take a different shape. For her, identity wasn't about culture – it was rooted in stability. What mattered most was the steady influence of her family. Her adoptive mother's words often repeated – "Never change" – became an anchor. Identity wasn't found by integrating but by holding onto who she felt she already was.

Growing up, my mother said, "Never change." So, I feel pretty rooted in who I am as a personality. I would not say it relates to culture; I feel firm in who I am. That is all I can say. I do not change.

Though framed through her current self-understanding, Marishka's clarity around her personality and her resistance to externally imposed identities took root during adolescence, supported by messages of consistency from her adoptive mother. Her perspective aligns with Schwartz et al.'s (2006) cultural identity theory, distinguishing personal characteristics from labels such as ethnicity or nationality. Her emphasis on personality as central to her sense of self also reflects Marcia's (1980) concept of identity achievement, where individuals commit to a stable self-definition following a period of exploration.

In contrast, Santiago emphasised a 'hybrid' model of identity. He integrates the values of love, respect, and integrity with elements of his Ecuadorian heritage. For Santiago, spirituality is central to grounding his identity, offering a deeper anchor beyond race or nationality. He reflects thoughtfully:

Much of my identity and how I understand who I have come from Christianity and that spiritual aspect of my life. Identity has some rigidity and flexibility regarding ethnicity, which comes down to nationality, which is interesting. I think it does not have so much to do with race. It has more to do with my roots and background in Ecuador; I think I put that on the Census. It might be on my passport, but I believe ethnicity, out of the three of them

[culture, identity, ethnicity and spirituality], ethnicity is the least important for me. However, identity and culture have a greater presence. By culture, I mean my parents in terms of values and attitudes -the value of love, respect, and integrity. Those are all important aspects of my culture.

While Santiago's reflections are influenced by adulthood, the values that shape him – love, respect, and integrity- were passed down to him through steady, affirming messages that began in childhood and deepened through adolescence. His identity didn't "arrive" all at once—it wasn't a fixed event, but a gradual and relational process. It formed quietly, without dramatic shifts, and deliberately, through intentional engagement with the people and cultural cues around him. This slow emergence reflects an identity rooted not just in self-perception, but in lived, evolving relationships.

He describes himself as a "hybrid,". His narrative embodies cultural hybridity: the weaving of beliefs and values drawn from his Ecuadorian roots and the world he grew up in (Bhabha, 1994; Bhatia & Ram, 2001). This blending of narratives is not surface-level – it is selective from what he has been exposed to, reflective, and shaped by what feels real and emotionally resonant. While scholars theorise hybridity in academic terms such as cultural liminality or third space, Santiago lives it – holding it in his narratives of family, spirituality, and the ground he stands on.

Santiago's reflections reveal that, for him, spirituality emerged as a more enduring anchor of identity – one that offered grounding beyond cultural labels, while ethnicity, though still present, held less personal significance in his sense of self. His sense of what defines him is fluid, guided by what feels meaningful, not what is expected. This speaks to how personal and context-dependent adoptee identity is. Santiago's focus on internal meaning aligns with Grotevant's (1997) view of adoptive identity as something built from within – shaped over time, rather than inherited whole.

JoJo offers a parallel kind of complexity. Raised in New Zealand by a British family, she draws from Chinese, British, and New Zealand cultures to form a layered, integrated identity. She reflects:

I identify as a Chinese person, and I am from both Hong Kong and New Zealand. I grew up doing Kapa Haka; I also grew up doing very New Zealand things. I also identify with my birth culture. Both cultures are intertwined. I also identify with British culture because I was raised in a British family. It is weird; I was adopted into New Zealand culture, eating fish and chips, as well as rhubarb pie and Yorkshire pudding. It is what we know. I do not know what else to say.

JoJo's identity holds multiple cultural influences—Chinese, New Zealand, and British, each rooted in different parts of her life. She allows them to merge into a unique cultural hybrid identity, each carrying its own meaning and weight. While her story reflects aspects of Berry's (2005) acculturation model—particularly the ability to hold more than one cultural influence, it also complicates the model by revealing how identities can become emotionally and experientially intertwined, rather than remaining clearly distinct.

JoJo's experience also reflects Sam and Berry's (2010) view that integrating cultural backgrounds can support psychological well-being and build adaptability and confidence. Her ability to move between cultural spaces reflects Hall's (1996) idea that identity is not fixed but shaped through ongoing interaction. Her narrative is another reminder that for adoptees, identity is not discovered in a single moment, but is continually returned to, reshaped through experiences of loss, connection, and cultural dislocation. Unlike those within their birth families, adoptees often navigate identity without access to foundation context – making itself part of the identity.

Alex's journey shows another facet of this process. For him, adolescence became a key moment in which to reflect, question, and integrate two cultural identities. During those

years, he embraced his Russian roots while continuing to feel strongly connected to his life in New Zealand. Reflecting on his sense of belonging, he shared:

I see myself as a Kiwi kid and a New Zealander, but I also see myself with my bloodline as a Russian, so I feel more comfortable when I go to Russia. I feel comfortable here, but I feel fine going to Russia.

Language barriers and unfamiliar social dynamics shaped Alex's first visit to Russia. Still, over time, he found ways to connect with his cultural roots abroad and through friendships with Russian peers in New Zealand. His story reflects how cultural integration unfolds slowly through relationships and real encounters. This adaptability, often sparked in adolescence and refined across life, mirrors what Brodzinsky & Palacios (2005) described as cultural competence: the ability to move between cultural worlds with insight, flexibility, and growing self-awareness.

While the stories highlight the agency adoptees bring to shaping identity, they also reveal how deeply the emotional tone of adoptive life shapes those journeys. The following section explores how those family dynamics can nurture or challenge, compromise, resilience and emotional regulation, especially during adolescence and beyond.

6.4 The Role of Family in Resilience, Cultural Identity and Emotional Development

Here I explore the role of adoptive family environments in shaping identity, emotional development, and the capacity for resilience. While some participant narratives detail nurturing, stable, and culturally inclusive homes, others reflect stories of neglect, abuse, and ongoing emotional invalidation. Resilience here is not a universal outcome but a dynamic process: sometimes emerging from hardship, other times stifled by trauma. The section also draws on resilience theory to contextualise how adoptive families can support or inhibit identity development, emotional regulation, and long-term well-being.

The participants' responses reveal diverse perspectives on how their adoptive families shaped their perceptions of adoption and identity, highlighting both positive and challenging experiences across various cultural contexts. During adolescence, these influences become particularly significant as intercountry adoptees navigate the complexities of self-concept and identity formation.

The adoptive family environment is a fundamental component in shaping the developmental trajectory of intercountry adoptees (Brodzinsky & Palacios, 2005). As adoptees move into adolescence, a key stage for exploring identity and belonging, this environment's emotional and relational quality becomes even more consequential. It influences core aspects of psychological well-being, including emotional regulation, internalised security, and evolving self-conceptualisation (Brodzinsky et al., 1993; Claridge & Denlinger, 2020).

When early attachment is disrupted, adoptive parents hold a responsibility to create a stable, nurturing environment that encourages trust and emotional safety. Their openness, consistency, and emotional availability help mitigate attachment ruptures and lay the groundwork for healthy identity exploration (Cassidy & Shaver, 2018). Research shows that adoptees with a history of early maltreatment face a higher risk of emotional dysregulation and behavioural difficulties, which may contribute to mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005).

Alex reflects with maturity on his cultural journey; however, his struggle to engage with his Russian identity first emerged during adolescence, when he sought to align with dominant Kiwi norms and distance himself from perceived differences. Reflecting on his experience, Alex noted:

I just wanted a normal Kiwi childhood. I just wanted to focus on that, but then I looked back and regretted saying no (to learning about his origins and language) because I am always about connecting with my roots. However, I respect how open and honest they (his adoptive parents) were about where my brother and I came from. They always told me that they were

not our birth parents; they did not bring us into this world. They went over to another country to get us. However, my relationship with my parents has always been quite strong, and they are incredibly supportive of everything I do. With those connections in tracking down my birth family, they have always been extremely supportive of me and have always wanted me to understand my birth family and learn about my roots and culture.

While Alex initially resisted engaging with his Russian heritage—wanting instead to focus on a “normal Kiwi childhood” – this reluctance did not foreclose later growth. In early years, the desire to fit in muted the pull of cultural exploration. But in late adolescence and early adulthood, a quiet curiosity emerged. It was a stretch of tension: the need to belong alongside a distant pull toward something deeper, something cultural he couldn’t yet name.

His adoptive family helped make space for that. They didn’t hide his origins. They talked about it. They owned their role as adoptive parents and supported him when he wanted to search. Their approach reflects David Kirk’s (1964) family integration theory – the idea that when adoptive families include a child’s birth story as part of the family’s own, identity has room to take root.

Maria’s viewpoint provides a contrasting yet equally significant perspective on cultural integration. The adoptive family nurtured a strong, intentional connection to her cultural heritage from early childhood through adolescence. She reflected on this with profound appreciation:

One of the beautiful things about being adopted is that my parents, my grandma, grandpa, and my dad’s parents worked in my birth country with my people. So, getting together with all of them, they share stories about my heritage and photos.

Maria’s reflection reveals a powerful sense of familial connection to her heritage – not only through stories and photographs, but through her family’s direct involvement in her birth culture. Her words express a rare integration: one where cultural identity was not something

to be reclaimed later, but something nurtured in everyday life. This experience offered her more than understanding – it gave her permission to belong from the very beginning.

Cultural engagement was woven into the fabric of family life, creating a sense of pride, belonging, and continuity. Maria’s story, alongside Alex’s, illustrates how meaning and consistent family support can shape the ways adopted come to understand themselves. When families actively engage with a child’s cultural roots—not as a token gesture but as part of everyday life – it creates a foundation of belonging. This sense of rootedness fosters not only pride in identity, but also in confidence, emotional security, and the freedom to grow into complex evolving selves. Maria’s experience thus further exemplifies sociologist Kirk’s family integration theory, highlighting how the ongoing, deliberate incorporation of the child’s cultural heritage into the family narrative actively supports positive identity formation.

Similarly, Santiago reflected on the emotional security and strong relationships he found in his adoptive family. His sense of emotional grounding was rooted in childhood but continued to deepen through adolescence, where he experienced a consistent reinforcement of core spiritual and relational values. Santiago’s experience illustrates how his adoptive parents' reflective and communicative approach created a stable and nurturing environment.

Santiago recounted:

My overall relationship with my adoptive family has been good. We shared a strong spiritual connection. I could turn inward to the family, where I found much support, love, and care. They supported me in every way and gave me helpful guidance, not commands or directives, but based on my character, temperament, personality, and interests. My parents taught me to value learning, of course, going to school and engaging in education; it was the beliefs that changed the way I viewed the world, that life is really about making meaningful relationships with people and that all people matter, so make sure you treat them like it. Their central beliefs were centred around relationships, which they continue to show in my relationship with them. I have never really felt like I am adopted. I have always felt like I belonged to them. That is my view of intercountry adoption, which is a beautiful story.

Santiago described a profoundly positive relationship with his adoptive family, marked by strong spiritual and personal support. His nurturing upbringing supported Santiago's sense of belonging, never doubting his place within his family. While spirituality was a clear thread in his narrative, it appeared rooted in relational and internal sources rather than institutions – reflecting a more personal integrated expression of faith.

While many adoptees report positive experiences – including some participants in this study—others faced significant difficulties within their adoptive families, particularly during adolescence. These challenges, when compounded by adverse relational dynamics, can leave enduring imprints on how adoptees understand themselves, their families, and the meaning of adoption. Yet across both difficulty and connection, participants revealed forms of quiet resilience – expressed through reflection, cultural reclamation, and a continued search for belonging.

The narratives of Mike and JoJo reveal a darker side of adoptee experiences, both marked by abuse and neglect during these formative years. In Mike's case, domestic violence and alcoholism were prevalent in his adoptive household, profoundly affecting his emotional well-being and shaping his long-term development. He recalls:

My Adoptive mother never wanted to adopt me. They had two foster kids in there as well. I was like the black sheep. Those kids were their favourites, so there was that. Later in life, I became more mature. I mended things with my adoptive Dad. I could not be with my adoptive mum because she never took responsibility for anything; she just pretty much blamed everything on my adoptive Dad. My adoptive Dad still has his issues, mental issues. He told me that he did his best for me, but I had to remind him that you are telling five-year-olds how to behave, but, on the same note, they had psychological issues and were abusive. So, I would bring him back to reality. Make him take ownership of that kind of stuff. I told him I was a product of my environment. They ended up divorcing when I was fifteen or sixteen.

Despite the instability, trauma, and identity confusion he experienced, and the breakdown of the adoptive parents' relationship, Mike's story is not solely defined by fragmentation. These

intersecting challenges made his path toward identity cohesion more difficult (Brodzinsky et al., 1998), yet it is within this turbulence that his resilience becomes most visible. His ability to reflect critically, hold his adoptive father accountable, and continue seeking clarity illustrates a form of inner strength – not outwardly declared, but quietly embodied through perseverance, self-awareness, and emotional insight. Mike’s story offers a compelling example of how adoptees may reconstruct meaning and pursue healing even after relationship harm.

Throughout JoJo’s childhood and adolescence, she faced both emotional neglect and physical abuse within her adoptive family. She reflected:

The relationship was not good from the onset. They were not ready for a child who had their life erased before their eyes. They were not aware of the trauma that would bring upon them; they are still not. The relationship was not great with me; I called the adopters “abductors,” which goes to show what my relationship was like with them; it was not close. They were abusive. I had reported the abuse when I was thirteen. That did not go down very well. They were abusive physically, psychologically, emotionally, and verbally. They did not abuse their biological child. They never acknowledged themselves as my parents, and I never acknowledged them as my parents. It is like there were no titles, like Mum, Dad, and daughter. It was very bizarre. This is an outlier of an adoptee story. There was no love, no warmth; there was just emotional neglect. There was nothing. I grew up with a sense of a poor understanding of identity because everyone around me was white. I was just this outsider.

JoJo’s experience is characterised by deep trauma and emotional disconnection. Her adoptive parents were unprepared to recognise the psychological needs stemming from her early life experiences, instead responding with ongoing abuse that was reported during her adolescence. Notably, this abuse was not directed at their biological child, highlighting the unequal treatment and lack of attachment that defined their relationship.

The absence of acknowledgement, familial roles, and emotional warmth left JoJo in a chronic state of alienation. Her environment, devoid of cultural mirroring and emotional safety, exacerbated her sense of not belonging, both within her adoptive family and in the

broader racial context of her community. Her words reflect the cumulative impact of neglect, emotional invalidation, and racial isolation on her developing identity.

The long-term consequences of such trauma are consistent with what Brodzinsky et al. (2022, p. 3) describe as “interpersonal traumas and dysregulation to the emotional, relational, and self-systems.” For JoJo, it was not a time for exploration but survival. Her story represents a critical reminder of how adoption, without the necessary support and accountability, can perpetuate rather than resolve trauma. And yet, her ability to reflect on her experience and articulate its impact speaks to a form of resilience that is often overlooked – the kind born not from overcoming, but from enduring. Together with Mike’s experiences, JoJo’s narrative underscores the urgent need for rigorous screening, trauma-informed support, and systemic oversight within intercountry adoption practices (Barth, 1994).

Marishka speaks from a reflective adult stance; her grief and emotional dislocation emerged during adolescence when she felt unable to process loss or find legitimacy in her emotional experience. Her account of her adoptive family is emotionally layered and conflicted. Reflecting on her relationships, she shared:

I get on with my dad intellectually, but my mum and I... well, we see each other all the time; we are not on the same wavelength. We are just two quite different people. She is lovely and has a good heart, but we do not see eye to eye. My Dad was uninvolved growing up once they separated. I did not feel I knew where I came from—an inner void in its truest form. I felt much grief. I felt like I could not process that grief. It is not recognised. I did not know if it was appropriate to talk about it. Should I be feeling this way? Am I authorised to feel this way? I brought it up with my adopted family, who responded, "You should be grateful" and "Be quiet". So, I put it back there somewhere and did not address it.

Marishka’s narrative reveals the inner conflict adoptees may face when their grief and questions are met with silence or suppression. Her experience of emotional invalidation within her adoptive family reflects what Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharne (2019) and Wegar (2000) describe as the ‘gratitude paradox,’ a social expectation that adoptees should feel

thankful rather than express loss. This expectation leads to internalised shame and emotional suppression, particularly when adoptees feel uncertain about whether grief is legitimate or welcome.

Marishka's account also gestures toward emotional stability and attuned caregiving in adoptive families. Her father's absence and her emotionally misaligned relationship with her adoptive mother created a relational environment where grief had no container. While neither parents were overtly harmful, the absence of resonance and validation left her navigating complex feelings without support. How I understand this is stability in adoptive families is not structural material, but deeply emotional shaped by caregivers' capacity to respond to loss, difference, and identity with openness rather than silence. Although not explored as primary theme, a subtle pattern emerged in several narratives – including Marishka's—where adoptive mothers were described in more emotionally conflicted or distant terms than fathers. This may reflect the gendered expectations of maternal caregiving or the adoptee's search for validation and belonging in maternal relationships, both of which merit further exploration.

These insights highlight the urgent need for more robust support systems for adoptive families in the initial placement and developmental lifespan. While foundational research has focused on attachment security and long-term outcomes (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005), more recent studies call for post-adoption services that address grief, identity work, and emotional complexity as ongoing aspects of the adoptee journey (Ocasio et al., 2024; Shelton & Bridges, 2022). Marishka's story exemplifies this need, underscoring the importance of safe spaces where adoptees feel heard, validated, and empowered to explore the parts of themselves that were once silenced.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored adolescence and early adulthood as vital periods for intercountry adoptees navigating identity formation, emotional integration, and the unfolding of resilience. Through participants' narratives, it is clear that identity is not a fixed destination, but an evolving negotiation shaped by social surroundings, internal meaning-making, and complex dynamics within adoptive families.

While some spoke from the reflective vantage point of adulthood, their recalled experiences often took root in adolescence or even earlier. These memories speak to the fluid nature of identity development, where emotional ruptures and meaning-making do not follow tidy developmental phases but move across time and place, revisited and reinterpreted. For intercountry adoptees, identity work is recursive – re-entered through memory, encounter, and shifting relationships. Past, present, and future often blur, with earlier experiences reframed and in a new emotional light as life unfolds. Time, place and culture for many, is not linear and binary but layered – a weaving that continues to shape belonging, loss, and self-understanding.

Resilience, too, emerged as a central but fragile thread. It was expressed through the negotiation of identity and displacement, the forging of belonging in the face of exclusion, and the reinterpretation of grief as part of a broader survival story. For some, resilience was more fragile – easily undone without emotional safety, cultural roots, or support. Resilience did not mark an endpoint; resilience appeared as a dynamic and evolving movement. Rather than viewing resilience as a static trait, this chapter frames it as deeply responsive to relational and environmental context, not guaranteed but cultivated.

These findings push back on linear or idealised models of adoptee belonging, identity, resilience and personal development and growth. Instead, they reveal a spectrum of lived

experiences marked by hybridity, ambiguity, and introspection – shaped by both external and internal worlds. Belonging and emotional coherence depend on having space to explore identity and on the presence of genuine support systems. As illustrated here, adoptee identity is not formed in sealed-off phases, places or cultures. Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are interconnected – each stage folding into the next as new encounters are experienced. Whether adoptees confront cultural differences, heal early wounds, or rediscover buried aspects of self, their identities remain fluid, layered, and responsive to relational context.

Chapter Seven: Navigating Identity, Resilience, and Reconnection in Adulthood

7.1 Introduction

In exploring participants' adult lives, I trace how earlier experiences, identity shifts, and emotional developments contribute to their evolving sense of wellbeing – psychologically, socially and holistically. Building on previous chapters that explored pre-adoption, childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, this chapter shifts focus to moments in adulthood where identity and belonging continue to evolve.

Adulthood represents a pivotal stage in the lives of adoptees, offering a unique opportunity to revisit, integrate, and make meaning of earlier adoption experiences. During this phase, many cultivate a coherent sense of self, an essential component for long-term psychological well-being (Baden & Steward, 2000). The first section explores the role of community involvement in shaping identity formation. I draw on Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT), to examine how adoptees develop a sense of self through their memberships in various social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the challenges that arise when their ethnic background contrasts with their adoptive environment. Using Mike and Alex's stories, I illustrate how community engagement provides a framework for navigating cultural identity and fostering belonging.

Research suggests that stable environments foster resilience—defined as an individual's capacity to sustain or recover mental well-being in the face of adversity (Masten, 2001). For adoptees who such structures, the presence or absence of consistent emotional support, cultural validation, and relational security significantly shapes this capacity (Werner & Smith, 2001). For many adoptees, professional and personal achievements are not simply markers of success, but expressions of resilience – reflecting their capacity to navigate the

complex emotional, cultural, and relational challenges shaped by their adoption experiences. In the second section, I draw on the narratives of Alex, Maria, Santiago, Mike, and JoJo, to explore how these achievements can reflect different forms of resilience. These stories demonstrate that while some adoptees flourish through strong support systems and stable identities, others cultivate resilience through adversity, self-discovery, and transformation. Importantly, I also engage with critical perspectives that question society's overemphasis on resilience as a universal or expected outcome. At the same time, recognising that not all adoptees have equal access to the supports that make such adaptation possible.

In the final section I draw upon the narratives of Mike, Alex, JoJo and Marishka to discuss the complex and personal experience of reconnecting with birth families. While some participants chose to pursue reconnection, others did not, reflecting the broad spectrum of emotional realities that adoptees face. For this reason, I speak to adoptee stories, examining how reunion – or its absence- affects identity, cultural continuity, and the integration of adoptive and biological selves. These stories reveal diverse outcomes: some are marked by healing and connection, while others are characterised by uncertainty and emotional complexity.

7.2 Community as a Source of Identity Formation

Like earlier stages in a person's life, adulthood represents a pivotal stage in the lives of adoptees, specifically offering a unique opportunity to revisit, integrate, and make meaning of earlier adoption experiences. During this phase, many cultivate a coherent sense of self, an essential component for long-term well-being (Baden & Steward, 2000). Tajfel and Turner (1979) define social identity as the aspect of a person's self-concept that stems from group identification and affiliations with nationality, ethnicity, religion, or even sports. One's sense of self-worth and identity coherence is greatly enhanced by belonging to one or more of these groups.

SIT suggests that once individuals internalise their group affiliations, they adopt the associated values, norms, and behaviours, shaping their worldview and sense of self. This process is particularly complex for intercountry adoptees, who must navigate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, cultural identities. A Korean-born adoptee raised in a white adoptive family, for example, may seek connection with their birth culture while adapting to the expectations of their adoptive environment. While they may internalise aspects of Korean identity, their full integration into that cultural group can be complicated by the absence of cultural mirroring in their upbringing.

The conflict between cultural affiliation and societal perception is not just a theoretical concept; it is lived. Mike's experience offers a poignant example of how intercountry adoptees negotiate identity in real-world contexts. Confronted with feelings of cultural displacement and an ongoing struggle for belonging, he found resonance and recognition through community engagement. Rugby became more than just a sport; it became a relational and embodied space where identity could be explored and affirmed.

Despite ongoing struggles with cultural identity and a feeling he describes as being “whitewashed” and disconnected from his Chinese heritage and New Zealand culture. Mike found a sense of belonging within the rugby scene. This environment provided him with a space where identity could be partially negotiated through shared physicality, camaraderie, and cultural resonance. As noted previously, he felt a natural pull towards his Māori and Pasifika friends and their sense of community and shared values. Reflecting on these dynamics, Mike shared:

Even though it was subtle, you are one Asian amongst 30 to 40 Islanders (Pacific Islanders). I gravitated more to the Pasifika and Māori culture, but as an Asian, you must prove that you are worth being in rugby league groups. I got into rugby and then rugby league, and then from there, I felt like I had found part of my identity. However, there was still that Asian connection I needed to identify with, and that is when I got into the gang scene. Even though I played league and stuff, I still faced racism on and off the field, even

within my team. I got to represent Hong Kong in rugby league. I got to go to Sydney for a tournament. I represented Tokelau in rugby league. I have represented a lot of different countries with different sports. My identity, I guess, is multicultural.

Playing rugby became a crucial location for identity exploration for Mike. It was space where cultural affiliations, community dynamics, and personal agency converged. Despite the covert racism and pressure to prove his worth as the sole Asian player among predominantly Pasifika and Māori teammates, rugby gave him moments of connection and recognition. Through sport, he was able to embody a layered cultural identity, one not inherited through ancestry alone but shaped by lived experience. Representing Hong Kong and Tokelau, demonstrating the adaptability and tenacity of cosmopolitan identity created via experience rather than ancestry. Despite its cracks, rugby offered a sense of mobility, a place to develop, change and bond. Mike's experience shows how being part of a community can transform feelings of cultural disconnection into a deeper, more layered understanding of self – one that is shaped in relationship with others, rather than held as something fixed.

Alex also sought out group affiliation and connection and his journey as an intercountry adoptee compelled him to seek his identity and sense of belonging while actively contributing to both the intercountry adoption and broader adoptee community. Recognising the challenges many adoptees face in terms of identity confusion, feelings of isolation, and the need for connection, Alex established an organisation to support adoptees. This organisation provides a safe space where adoptees can come together, share their experiences, and find solace in the shared understanding that arises from everyday struggles. He noted:

I needed a platform where adoptees could connect and support each other. Many of us go through similar challenges but often feel alone in them. Creating this organisation was my way of giving back and helping others find the community I wished I had earlier in my journey.

Through this organisation, Alex has facilitated numerous workshops, support groups, and online forums that cater to adoptees' unique needs. These initiatives help adoptees explore their identities, navigate the complexities of their adoption experiences, build resilience, and, most importantly, find a sense of belonging. The organisation emphasises the importance of cultural connection, encouraging adoptees to learn about and embrace their birth cultures to enrich their identities. In addition to this organisation, Alex has strongly advocated for using social media to bring adoptees together.

Social media platforms have also become vital in connecting adoptees worldwide, enabling them to share stories, seek advice, and offer support to one another. Although not all participants discussed their engagement within these groups, many had some affiliation with adoption support groups and these platforms. For many adoptees, online communities serve as a crucial lifeline, providing validation and understanding that may be lacking in their immediate environments. Alex further noted:

Social media adoption groups have been a game-changer. They allow us to connect with adoptees worldwide, people who understand what we are going through. It is often a healing experience because you realise you are not alone—you have a community that gets you.

These experiences underscore the importance of community and shared experience in shaping resilience – specifically, resilience against isolation, identity confusion, and emotion invalidation that many intercountry adoptees face. For those navigating complex cultural and familial dynamics, connection with other adoptees provides not only affirmation but also the emotional tools to endure and grow. In addition to fostering belonging, these communities help adoptees reclaim authorship over their stories. For adoptees like Alex, contributing to these spaces reinforces identity and purpose. This reciprocal relationship between engagement and growth highlights how intercountry adoptees cultivate resilience through

connection, building the capacity to withstand emotional dislocation and to integrate complex aspects of selfhood.

7.3 Professional and Personal Life Achievements as Aspects of Resilience

Personal resilience is a factor in determining how intercountry adoptees navigate the challenges of identity formation and cultural integration. Masten (2001) states that resilience is a person's ability to sustain or recover mental well-being despite adversity. Research suggests that resilience often arises from normative adaptive supports, which include supportive relationships, stable environments, and access to necessary resources (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Masten, 2001). These systems are fundamental in helping individuals build and maintain resilience in the face of hardship. The development of resilience is not the result of extraordinary processes but rather the everyday experiences that provide individuals with a sense of stability, security, and belonging. According to Masten (2001), resilience emerges from "ordinary magic" – the routine interactions and stable environments, such as supportive family structures and caring relationships, that foster adaptability and strength.

Similarly, Werner and Smith (2001) found that children with access to consistent emotional support and a reliable community environment are more likely to develop resilience, even when facing adversity. Although Luther et al. (2000) do not focus specifically on adoptees, their research underscores how the absence of stable and supportive environments can hinder resilience development—an insight especially pertinent in the context of intercountry adoption. These studies underscore that resilience is deeply rooted in everyday experiences and that its absence can create lasting challenges, particularly for those who experience early disruptions in their formative years.

Maria's journey exemplifies the cultivation of resilience through personal and professional accomplishment. Her academic success, culminating in a master's degree, and

her commitment to giving back to others underscore the role of a supportive family environment in fostering resilience. Masten's (2001) theory of resilience further posits that stable environments and access to resources are fundamental in developing resilience. Maria reflects on her experience, noting:

When I was younger, I was not huge on having kids. I wanted to adopt or foster, and because of our environment, I have seen many good, fruitful things happen. And then, as I have gotten older, because of my positive experience with adoption, we are now looking into fostering and adoption. That journey has been so positive, challenging times, too, but overall, positive; it has led my husband and me to do well. How can we help others, you know?

Maria's resilience is reflected not only in accomplishments but also in intention to extend her positive intercountry adoption experience to others. While she and her husband have not yet adopted or fostered, her reflections reveal a strong desire to do so, rooted in her belief in the power of supportive, nurturing environments. Her narratives speak to the dynamic nature of resilience, where personal growth inspires aspiration to contribute meaningfully to others' lives. In this way, Maria exemplifies resilience not as a fixed outcome, but as a living process of transformation – where positive early experiences are carried forward as a commitment to care empathy, and social contribution (Luthar et al., 2000).

Santiago also reflected on his educational journey and how it was marked by perseverance, especially in transitioning from a struggling student to one achieving academic success. He reflects: "I have always struggled with education; then suddenly, I started getting A's. That was quite exciting!" This shift in academic performance, which led to a postgraduate diploma and eventually a master's degree with first-class honours, attests to his resilience and determination. Most importantly, this resilience strongly reflects the steadfast support from his adoptive parents throughout his life. Here, we return to how early support is crucial in fostering a successful and coherent sense of self.

Santiago currently works in counselling, applying his knowledge and experience to help young people. He reflected, “I have worked as a teacher for many years and loved that. I loved working with young people; it was about relationships and helping them find themselves in the world.” His transition from teaching to counselling represents another step in his journey of self-discovery and personal growth, highlighting his ability to adapt and thrive.

Individuals who have experienced significant adversity often develop a heightened sense of empathy and a deep motivation to support others navigating similar challenges (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Research on posttraumatic growth and resilience indicates that these individuals frequently cultivate a profound desire to help others, leading many to pursue careers in counselling, social work, or psychology (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This intrinsic vocational drive becomes a source of insight and relational depth. These career paths offer an avenue for transforming personal pain into purposeful engagement, allowing adversity to catalyse meaningful social contribution (Richardson, 2002).

Mike’s career in social work also exemplifies how professional achievements can serve as indicators of resilience. Despite a challenging upbringing and limited support from his adoptive family, Mike transformed his experiences into a powerful motivator for assisting others. Mike’s work with at-risk youth, many of whom come from similar backgrounds to his own, highlights his ability to turn personal adversity into meaningful social contributions, demonstrating the positive outcomes that can emerge from overcoming trauma (Bonanno, 2004; Luthar et al., 2000). He noted, “Studying helped me much more than psychologists, counsellors, and mentors. It was self-learning. I learned a lot about myself. Then, my learning went on to help the youth of today.”

JoJo's journey through the complexities of intercountry adoption highlighted a profound form of resilience and achievement that did not emerge from stability but from enduring and navigating significant adversity. The cumulative weight of life's challenges created a snowball effect, making identity development an ongoing struggle. Nevertheless, despite the neglect and abuse, JoJo's resilience came into focus through her professional achievements. "I have dedicated a decade of my life to studying," she reflects. Her academic pursuits became a pathway to self-discovery, offering validation and insight, particularly through learning about early brain development and attachment theory. These milestones reflect JoJo's determination to transform personal pain into meaningful work, are further examples of resilience as a dynamic process (Bonanno, 2004; Luthar et al., 2000) and post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that each adoptee demonstrates a unique manifestation of resilience through academic achievements, professional success, and personal growth. Their stories collectively highlight that resilience can manifest from and be harnessed through individual circumstances, support systems, and personal determination shape it. For some, like Santiago and Maria, resilience is evident in their academic and career successes. In contrast, for others, like Mike and JoJo, it is reflected in their ability to transform personal pain into meaningful contributions to society. This diversity in experiences underscores the multifaceted nature of resilience and the various ways intercountry adoptees navigate their complex identities and life challenges.

However, it is important to acknowledge that these findings do not necessarily reflect the broader population of intercountry adoptees. How resilience manifests – and whether it is achievable – can vary widely based on individual circumstances. In many Western contexts, resilience is often emphasised as a benchmark for success in the face of adversity, yet this framing can overlook individual differences and structural inequalities. Not all adoptees have

the same capacity to access the support systems that foster such adaptability (Brodzinsky et al., 2022). Societies overemphasise resilience as an ideal outcome, assuming it should be achieved in every problematic situation. While resilience plays a role in adoptees' professional and personal achievements, another aspect of their identity involves reconnecting with birth families. For many, this process represents both a search for closure and an attempt to integrate fragmented aspects of their self-concept.

7.4 The Search for Birth Parents: A Journey of Identity and Closure

Beyond personal and professional accomplishments, participants' journeys often involved deeper questions of cultural reconnection with their cultural origins including reconnecting with their birth parents. The search for birth parents represents a significant and often emotionally charged journey for many intercountry adoptees. The process is driven by a deep-seated desire to understand one's origins, fill in the gaps of personal history, and resolve lingering questions of identity, as they often have the maturity and life experience to confront these complex emotions. During adulthood many adoptees embark on the journey to find their birth parents, a process described by Brodzinsky et al. (1993) as an attempt to integrate fragmented aspects of identity and achieve closure. However, not all adoptees feel compelled to search for biological parents, as some may find contentment and a sense of self within their adoptive families.

This variance in behaviour highlights the diverse ways adoptees navigate their identity and the importance of individual experiences in shaping these decisions (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). For some, this process includes seeking out parents as a way to deepen self-understanding and reconcile fragmented aspects of identity. Grotevant and Von Korff (2011, p. 811) observe, "The process of meaning-making is observed in adoptive identity exploration, as adopted persons reflect on the meaning of adoption in their lives, take active

steps to gather information that will enhance this understanding, and construct a meaningful narrative.”

While much research on reunion focuses on domestic adoption, the emotional dynamics are also relevant to intercountry adoptees. Relationships with adoptive parents are crucial, but birth parents or other relatives can also influence an adoptee’s emotional and psychological adjustment. As laws increasingly allow adoptees to access identifying information, more adoptees seek reunions with their birth families (Affleck & Steed, 2001; Howe & Feast, 2001). The outcomes, however, are mixed. Some adoptees find comfort and connection while experiencing feelings of loss, rejection or unresolved grief (Passmore & Feeney, 2009).

The decision to search—or not to search—often reflects an adoptee’s ongoing journey of self-discovery, where the ultimate goal is a sense of inner peace and acceptance of their complex life story (Feeney et al., 2007). For many adoptees who do attempt to the search for birth relatives, it represents a pivotal moment in self-concept development, allowing them to integrate new information about their heritage into a more cohesive identity.

Feeney et al. (2007) found that adoptees who were dissatisfied with their initial reunions with birth mothers tended to exhibit higher levels of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, suggesting that unfulfilled expectations may exacerbate pre-existing insecurities. Some reunions fail to extend beyond the initial contact. In contrast, others, even when maintained, may not significantly alter an adoptee’s attachment framework, particularly if these relationships lack the consistency and emotional depth associated with early primary caregivers.

Mike’s experience highlights the profound impact that reconnecting with a birth parent can have on an adoptee’s sense of identity. His reunion with his birth mother,

occurring after decades of uncertainty, became a pivotal moment in his lifelong search for answers. For much of his life, Mike had carried an underlying curiosity about his origins – an unresolved question that subtly shaped his sense of self. As he matured, this curiosity deepened into a need for clarity regarding his biological origins and the circumstances surrounding his adoption.

Unlike many adoptees who initiate the search for their birth families, however, Mike's mother was the one who reached out. He recalled the unexpected contact: "I was in shock, and my heart raced a million times a minute when she reached out. It was overwhelming. I did not know where to begin, but I needed to know why she gave me up." The initial contact triggered excitement, fear and uncertainty about what this reconnection would mean for his life. However, despite their renewed communication, Mike never pursued a face-to-face meeting. He described his hesitation: "We wrote a few letters, and she called a few times, but I never felt ready to meet her face-to-face. I think the idea of the meeting was too much—it stirred up too many unresolved feelings."

The emotional weight of the situation, combined with the physical distance, prevented their relationship from developing beyond these initial interactions. While the correspondence did not lead to a full reunion, it nonetheless gave Mike long-sought answers. He reflected on the mixed impact of learning his birth mother's story: "In some ways, knowing her story filled a gap in mine, but it also made me question things I had accepted about myself. It was both a relief and a new kind of confusion." Although their exchange did not offer the closure he had hoped for, it became a transformative step in his journey of self-discovery. Mike recognised that understanding his biological past helped him integrate previously missing identity pieces. However, as he acknowledges, "It changed me. I have a more complete picture of who I am, but it was not the closure I thought it would be. It is something I am still working through."

For Marishka, a natural curiosity about her cultural and medical history began to stir. Through a Russian intercountry adoptee support group she had joined, Marishka connected with individuals who specialised in helping adoptees locate and reunite with their birth families. With their assistance, an unexpected opportunity arose to meet her birth mother in Russia. However, the proposed reunion was set to be televised in Russia—an element that introduced discomfort and emotional complexity. Her adoptive family expressed concern that reconnecting with her birth mother might influence her to stay in Russia, adding further weight to an already challenging decision. Ultimately, Marishka declined the offer, hoping for a more private and meaningful encounter—one that, unfortunately never materialised.

Unfortunately, shortly after, the announcement of Mariska's birth mother's death deepened a void she had long carried, as it marked the loss of any remaining chance to understand her origins fully. However, she sought peace in acceptance, recognising that her path now required looking forward rather than remaining tethered to the unanswered questions of her past. In reflecting on this experience, she shared:

I was very upset when I heard my birth mother died. To me, that was – the bridge is gone. There is no way to hear from her directly about what happened or understand her cultural history or health history, my health history, and what happened back in the 1990s.

Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development emphasises that forming a cohesive identity is a central task during adolescence and young adulthood. Marishka's experience reflects this challenge as she struggles to reconcile her biological and adoptive identities. The unfulfilled reunion with her birth mother created unresolved emotional distress, complicating her ability to fully understand and integrate her origins into her sense of self.

JoJo sought to reconnect with her birth culture and family as an adult. She returned to Hong Kong to live, hoping to regain some of the cultural and familial ties severed during her childhood. This reconnection brought both comfort and complexity. On one hand, it allowed

her to re-engage with her roots, learn the language, and participate in the cultural traditions lost to her in New Zealand. On the other hand, it also reopened old wounds, as some family members still justified the decisions that led to her adoption, perpetuating the sense of alienation she felt throughout life. JoJo's experience aligns with research indicating that reconnecting with birth culture can be a double-edged sword, providing both a sense of belonging and new emotional difficulties (Grotevant et al., 2000); she noted:

Yes, I did reconnect with my birth family when I was an adult. I am currently living in Hong Kong. I did reconnect with them. It is harder because I have a way to reach my roots and know them. It is also worse because you are always in the environment that perpetuates the situation in the first place. Some of them still think they are right.

JoJo's experience further illustrates the complexities of searching for birth parents/relatives. Her journey was driven by a need to understand her identity and find a sense of belonging. However, the process was fraught with emotional difficulty, marked by resistance and unresolved tensions. It also offered moments of clarity and rootedness. Living in Hong Kong brought her closer to the cultural environment she came from, offering her new insights and a direct link to her heritage. However, it also meant being immersed in the very context that shaped her early separation, where some family members continued to uphold the same beliefs that contributed to her adoption. Research suggests, and JoJo's experience supports this, that when adoptees' expectations of reunions do not align with reality, it can result in significant emotional distress, impacting their overall psychological adjustment (Affleck & Steed, 2001; Passmore & Feeney, 2009).

Alex travelled back to Russia multiple times, seeking to understand his roots and connect with his birth parents. His first trip to Russia was filled with mixed emotions- while it offered a sense of connection to his cultural heritage, it also highlighted the challenge of bridging two distinct identities. Alex's relationship with his birth mother was particularly

complex. He struggled to establish a close connection with her due to her challenges.

However, Alex remained committed to understanding her life circumstances, taking small steps to maintain contact and integrate this relationship into his broader sense of self.

Alex's connection with his biological father was a significant aspect of his journey to understand his roots. Unlike his relationship with his birth mother, which remained distant and challenging at times, Alex's relationship with his biological father was emotionally fulfilling, noting: "He was quite emotional when I talked to him, and the similarities were all there." Alex reached out to his biological father when he was an adult. His father had not known about Alex's existence, so their initial contact was emotional and somewhat surprising. He notes:

He is such a nice person. He welcomed me into his home and his family. When we were there, he also met my parents. So, he understands and has a lot of love and respect for my parents, who raised me.

One notable aspect of their relationship was Alex's father's pride in him. He was proud of his accomplishments and how Alex turned out, and he respected Alex's adoptive parents for raising him well. This mutual respect helped bridge the gap between Alex's two worlds—his life in New Zealand and his Russian heritage.

7.5 Conclusion

Together, these reflections reveal that identity for intercountry adoptees is neither fixed nor fully recoverable, but an ongoing navigation across community, personal resilience, cultural reconnection, and the tender work of healing. The experiences explored in this chapter show that adulthood is not a final destination in the adoptee journey – it is a continuation of the complex identity work that begins in infancy and evolves across every stage of life. The challenges and victories in community engagement, career development, and reconnection

with family are not isolated events. They reflect years of adaptation and reflection that echo the adoptee's earliest experiences of culture rupture, relational ambiguity, and the search for belonging.

The adoptees' stories reveal that building identity and finding belonging is ongoing, driven by the spirit of individual resilience and the communities that support them. This journey challenges society to move beyond reductionist views of adoption and to embrace the complexities of adoptees' lives. Reductionist views of adoption oversimplify the experience, often portraying it as uniformly positive or that all adoptees have similar outcomes. Such perspectives overlook the complexities of adoption, including adoptees' struggles with identity, the lasting impact of birth culture, and the challenges that arise from individuals' backgrounds, support systems, and cultural differences. By recognising their multifaceted identities, adoptees bring resilience that reflects their ability to survive and thrive as they embrace their unique identities and contribute to a richer, more inclusive understanding of family and belonging.

Each life stage carries forward the imprint of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. The emotional textures of early separation, racial difference, and societal expectations do not simply fade with time; instead, they reappear in adult relationships, the stories they tell (or cannot tell), and the quiet daily negotiations of identity. These narratives remind us that identity is not resolved once and for all; instead, it is revisited and continually reshaped.

At the same time, adulthood offers opportunities for reclamation. Through the stories of JoJo, Mike, Santiago, Alex, and others, we see adoptees re-authoring their narratives in ways that push back against dominant tropes of gratitude or assimilation. They find meaning not in closure but in complexity. Digital or physical spaces become essential for exploration

and self-validation. Career paths, acts of advocacy, and decisions to reconnect or not reconnect with birth families all become expressions of agency shaped by lifelong negotiation.

The transition to adulthood becomes a stage for rewriting and resisting imposed identities, where adoptees reclaim their voice, redefine their identity, and begin to make peace with uncertainty. When it occurs, reconnection reveals both the emotional labour of hope and the complexity of reconciling multiple family systems. For others, choosing not to reconnect is an equally valid act of boundary-making.

These findings underscore the significance of perceiving adoption not merely as a childhood event but as a lifelong journey with profound psychological and relational effects. They raise important questions regarding how systems can address adoption as an enduring experience and what post-adoption care should involve after childhood concludes. While overarching theories of identity formation provide essential insights, adoptee identity develops within their own unique emotional, cultural, and structural contexts. These realms are shaped by personal growth and disruptions in origin, language, and kinship connections.

Chapter Eight – Gathering the Whole: Truth, Belonging, and What Remains

8.1 Introduction

“Gathering the Whole” is not about finality or resolution. It gestures instead to a kind of wholeness formed through fragmentation—a piecing together of loss, language, memory, and meaning. The subtitle—truth, belonging, and what remains, threads through the stories told here. Truth reflects the raw, often uncomfortable realities that participants dared to voice. Belonging, as it emerged, was not a destination but a dynamic orientation with the emotional, cultural, and spiritual, all of which was anchored by connection. And what remains, after rupture, is not emptiness but the traces of courage, kinship, and reclamation that refuse to disappear. In this chapter, I bring together the strands of truth reclaimed, the ongoing search for belonging, and the quiet resilience found in what remains. Each participant’s story offers not a complete resolution, but glimpses of meaning forged in the aftermath—what they carried, what they let go, and what they chose to gather back into themselves.

8.2 Revisiting Identity

Across the research, identity has been framed as not a fixed endpoint but as an unfolding journey shaped by loss, rupture, cultural complexity, and acts of meaning-making. The concept of identity rupture—the dislocation caused by cultural severance, lost kinship, and fractured origins stories, appeared consistently in the participants’ narratives. Yet alongside rupture, many undertook acts of repair that point toward relational justice: not reforming systems, but restoring the relationships, histories, and cultural links severed through intercountry adoption.

8.3 Age, Memory, and Relational Environments

Early identity formation was deeply shaped by age at adoption, the level of openness in adoptive families, and the degree of support provided. Although all participants knew they were adopted, the age of which this occurred shaped how their experiences were internalised and understood. Those adopted at older ages often described memories of separation, institutional care, disrupted attachment, and loss of language and culture—which resurfaced as emotional complexity later in life. These early memories laid the groundwork for later negotiations of identity and belonging.

In adolescence, identity work did not resolve but intensified. Participants described experiences of social exclusion, racialisation, and cultural dissonance. Their identity as intercountry adoptees became not only a private experience but a public identity—often questioned or misunderstood. During this time, adoptive and birth families took on shifting significance—sometimes deepening grief, sometimes offering clarity, and often remaining in suspended in ambiguity. Whether relationships reinforced belonging or mirrored estrangement depended on a complex array of factors, including racial awareness, cultural validation, and emotional attunement.

Adulthood brought with it deeper opportunities for integration. Participants described reuniting with birth families, forming relationships with other adoptees, or crafting meaning through professional identities and cultural exploration. Reconnection, when it occurred, was rarely simple. It brought with it both healing and new layers of complexity. The idea of ‘home’ surface in these stories not as a place but as feeling: a moment of resonance, a community of understanding, a relationship that reflected back to themselves.

8.4 Systemic Frames and Individual Consequences

Adoption decisions are often framed as individual acts of responsibility or sacrifice. Yet these so called ‘choices’ frequently emerge within constrained contexts—poverty, stigma, inadequate state support, or colonially shaped norms about who is ‘fit’ to parent. When systemic inequality is present, so-called ‘choice’ can become compliance under pressure. While individuals participate in adoption systems, it is institutions—through policy, language, and regulation—that shape what options are available, desirable or even unthinkable. The burden of consequence often falls heaviest on adoptees and birth families, even though they held the least power in structuring the terms of adoption. The question is not whether individual decisions occur—but what conditions make some decisions inevitable, and for whom.

8.5 Epistemic Injustice and Narrative Power

As explored earlier, I provide a direct response to epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007)—the dismissal of adoptees as credible knowers of their own experience. The stories shared here resist the dismissal by reclaiming narrative authority, allowing adoptees to speak their truth in their own words. These are not simply accounts of identity, but testimonies that disrupt silencing and affirm lived knowledge. Where testimonial smothering (Dotson, 2011) once muted emotional honesty, this research amplifies voices that have long been misread or misunderstood. This injustice is not abstract—it lives in adoption fields, assumptions, laws and the subtle exclusions that deny adoptees the full complexity of their experience.

8.6 A Life Beyond the Page

This research opens pathways for further exploration. While grounded in intercountry adoption, the findings suggest important insights into broader adoption contexts. In particular, it calls for greater attention to relationships, peer communities, and professional networks, all of which reflect and shape a sense of identity and belonging. These spaces deserve deeper inquiry, they may assist in understanding how adoptees form emotional safety and visibility outside of traditional family structures.

I am particularly interested in exploring how Western societies, including Aotearoa New Zealand, shape adoptees' experiences of belonging within systems embedded with racial hierarchy. While my research is largely grounded in identity, cultural dislocation and relational repair, it also gestures toward a larger question: What does it mean to seek belonging in a society structured by racialised norms that consistently marginalise those deemed 'other'?

In Aotearoa, New Zealand, structural and interpersonal racism continue to shape the social terrain within which intercountry adoptees live. The persistence of racial stereotyping, unconscious bias, the Eurocentric ideals of family, beauty, and success form an invisible architecture that many adoptees must navigate from childhood into adulthood. It is worth investigating whether such conditions constitute a barrier to full belonging, and whether the current social landscape unintentionally sets some adoptees up for systemic exclusion—despite narratives of inclusion or multiculturalism. This inquiry would be about understanding the deeper mechanisms of exclusion—how colonial histories, national identity narratives, and whiteness as normativity may obstruct the possibility of belonging for those who live across cultural, racial and familial boundaries.

Finally, more research is needed into how support frameworks—counselling, social services, and post-adoption care, can be redesigned to truly reflect the lived needs and cultural contexts of adoptees themselves.

8.7 Closing.

In the end, there is no singular return, no perfect belonging. But there is language. There is memory. There are stories that defy forgetting. What remains is not the closure of identity, but the courage to speak from its openings. The adoptees who shared their lives did not offer neat conclusions—they offered what is most powerful: truth without apology. It stands besides those questions and says: we were here. We still are. And in that presence—in the truths told, in the belonging reclaimed – we gathered the whole.

Beyond identity and belonging, this work calls for change in law or policy and how adoptees are understood, heard, and valued. It asks us to hold the complexity, reject binaries, and resist the urge to simplify what simply cannot be reduced. It seeks not to condemn adoption but to expand the frame in which it is viewed. It is a gesture toward narrative justice. It is a reclamation of voice.

References

- Aburn, A. (2014). Twenty-five years of adult adoption in New Zealand 1985-2010: An overview of adult adoption since the implementation of the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 26(4), 65–74.
<https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol26iss4id28>
- Adoptees for Justice. (2023). Adoptees for Justice. <https://www.adopteesforjustice.org/>
- Adoption Action. (n.d.). Adoption Action Inc. <https://adoptionaction.co.nz/>
- Adoption Action Inc. (2021). *Submission on adoption law reform to Ministry of Justice*. Adoption Action. <https://adoptionaction.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2021-Adoption-Action-Submission-to-MoJ-Adoption-Law-Reform.pdf>
- Affleck, M. K., & Steed, L. G. (2001). Expectations and experiences of participants in ongoing adoption reunion relationships: A qualitative study. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 71(1), 38–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.71.1.38>
- Ahmed, S. (2013). *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. Routledge.
- Ahuriri-Driscoll, A. (2020). *Ka tū te whare, ka ora: The constructed and constructive identities of the Māori adoptee* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Canterbury]. University of Canterbury Respository.
<https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/101208>
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://archive.org/details/modernityatlarge0000appa>

- Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies. *Social Research Update*, 33, University of Surrey.
<https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU33.html>
- Baden, A. L. (2002). The psychological adjustment of transracial adoptees: An application of the cultural-racial identity model. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homelessness*, 11(2), 167–191. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1014316018637>
- Baden, A. L., Gibbons, J. L., Wilson, S. L., & McGinnis, H. (2013). International adoption: Counseling and the adoption triad. *Adoption Quarterly*, 16(3–4), 218–237.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2013.794440>
- Baden, A. L., & Steward, R. J. (2000). A framework for use with racially and culturally integrated families: The cultural-racial identity model as applied to transracial adoption. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, 9(4), 309–337.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1009493827019>
- Baden, A. L., Treweeke, L. M., & Ahluwalia, M. K. (2012). Reclaiming culture: Reculturation of transracial and international adoptees. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 90(4), 387–399. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2012.00049.x>
- Ballard, R. L. (2013). Narrative burden: A qualitative investigation of transnational, transracial adoptee identity. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 2(3), 229–254. <https://doi.org/10.1525/QCR.2013.2.3.229>
- Barriball, K. L., & While, A. (1994). Collecting data using a semi-structured interview: A discussion paper. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19, 328–335.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.1994.tb01088.x>

- Barroso, R., & Barbosa-Ducharne, M. (2019). Adoption-related feelings, loss, and curiosity about origins in adopted adolescents. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 24(4), 876–891. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104519858117>
- Barth, R. P. (1994). Adoption research: Building blocks for the next decade. *Child Welfare*, 73(5), 625–638. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45399015>
- Benet-Martínez, V., & Haritatos, J. (2005). Bicultural identity integration (BII): Components and psychosocial antecedents. *Journal of Personality*, 73(4), 1015–1050. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00337.x>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor.
- Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697–712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013>
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Bhatia, S., & Ram, A. (2001). Rethinking ‘acculturation’ in relation to diasporic cultures and postcolonial identities. *Human Development*, 44(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000057036>
- Blair, M., & Liu, M. (2020). Ethnically Chinese and culturally American: Exploring bicultural identity negotiation and co-cultural communication of Chinese-American female adoptees. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 13(4), 347–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2019.1649710>
- Blake, D., Ahuriri-Driscoll, A., & Sumner, B. (2023). Adoptee activism: I am not your ‘child for all purposes.’ *Counterfutures*, 14, 83–111. <https://doi.org/10.11157/cf.v14.243>

- Blake, D., Coombes, L., & Morgan, M. (2011). "Wade in the Water...": Re-thinking Adoptees' Stories of Reunion. In R. Busch & A. Rogerson (Eds.), *Refereed proceedings of Doing Psychology: Manawatu Doctoral Research Symposium* (pp. 5–10). Massey University School of Psychology. <http://hdl.handle.net/10179/3380>
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Prentice Hall.
- Bohman, M., & Sigvardsson, S. (1980). A prospective, longitudinal study of children registered for adoption. A 15-year follow-up. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *61*(4), 339–355. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0447.1980.tb00586.x>
- Bohman, M., & Sigvardsson, S. (1990). Outcome in adoption: Lessons from longitudinal studies. In D. Brodzinsky & M. Schechter (Eds.), *The psychology of adoption* (pp. 93–106). Oxford University Press.
- Bonanno, G. A. (2004). Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *The American Psychologist*, *59*(1), 20–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.20>
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Breuning, M. (2013). Samaritans, family builders, and the politics of intercountry adoption. *International Studies Perspectives*, *14*(4), 417-435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/insp.12016>

- Briggs, L. (2009). *International adoption: Global inequalities and the circulation of children*. New York University Press.
- Briggs, L. (2012). *Somebody's children: The politics of transracial and transnational adoption*. Duke University Press.
- Brodzinsky, D. M. (2011). Children's understanding of adoption: Developmental and clinical implications. *Professional Psychology, Research and Practice*, 42(2), 200–207.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022415>
- Brodzinsky, D. M., Gunnar, M., & Palacios, J. (2022). Adoption and trauma: Risks, recovery, and the lived experience of adoption. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 130(Pt 2), 1–13.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105309>
- Brodzinsky, D. M., & Palacios, J. (2005). *Psychological issues in adoption: Research and practice*. Praeger.
- Brodzinsky, D. M., & Pinderhughes, E. (2005). Parenting and child development in adoptive families. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting* (Vol. 1, pp. 279–311). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brodzinsky, D. M., Schechter, M. D., & Brodzinsky, A. B. (2014). Children's knowledge of adoption: Developmental changes and implications for adjustment. In D. M. Brodzinsky & J. Palacios (Eds.), *Thinking about family* (pp. 225–252). Routledge.
- Brodzinsky, D. M., Schechter, M. D., & Henig, R. M. (1993). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self*. Anchor Books.
- Brodzinsky, D. M., Smith, D. W., & Brodzinsky, A. B. (1998). *Children's adjustment to adoption: Developmental and clinical issues*. SAGE Publications.

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2009). *Identity theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of attachment, third edition: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. SAGE Publications.
- Cicchetti, D., & Rogosch, F. A. (1997). The role of self-organization in the promotion of resilience in maltreated children. *Development and Psychopathology*, 9(4), 797–815.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954579497001442>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Claridge, A. M., & Denlinger, M. M. (2020). Complicated adoption. In K. F. Saba, A. Rambo, S. R. Hovestadt, & D. L. Wood (Eds.), *The Handbook of systemic family therapy* (Vol. 2, pp. 429–456). Wiley.
- Crittenden, P. M., & Ainsworth, M. D. (1989). Child maltreatment and attachment theory. In D. Cicchetti & V. Carlson (Eds.), *Child maltreatment: Theory and research on the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect* (pp. 432–463). Cambridge University Press.
- Dalley, B. (1998). *Family matters: Child welfare in twentieth-century New Zealand*. Auckland University Press.
- Danieli, Y. (Ed.). (1998). *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma*. Plenum Press.

- de Rosnay, M., Luu, B., & Wright, A. C. (2016). *Young children's identity formation in the context of open adoption in NSW: An examination of optimal conditions for child wellbeing*. University of Sydney. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/4511/>
- Demi, A. S., & Warren, N. A. (1995). Issues in conducting research with vulnerable families. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 17(2), 188–202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019394599501700206>
- Denzin, N. K. (2001). *Interpretive Interactionism* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Docan-Morgan, S. (2011). “They don’t know what it’s like to be in my shoes”: Topic avoidance about race in transracially adoptive families. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 28(3), 336–355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510382177>
- Dorow, S. K. (2006). *Transnational adoption: A cultural economy of race, gender, and kinship*. New York University Press.
- Dotson, K. (2011). Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing. *Hypatia*, 26(2), 236–257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x>
- Dubinsky, K. (2010). *Babies without borders: Adoption and migration across the Americas*. University of Toronto Press.
- Durie, M. H. (1994). *Whaiora: Māori health development*. Oxford University Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1897/1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology* (J. A. Spaulding, Ed.; G. Simpson, Trans.). Free Press. (Original work published 1897).
- Else, A. (1991). *A question of adoption: Closed stranger adoption in New Zealand, 1944-1974*. Bridget Williams Books.

- Eng, D. L., & Han, S. (2000). A dialogue on racial melancholia. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10(4), 667–700. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481881009348576>
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth, and crisis*. W. W. Norton.
- Feeney, J. A., Passmore, N. L., & Peterson, C. C. (2007). Adoption, attachment, and relationship concerns: A study of adult adoptees. *Personal Relationships*, 14(1), 129–147. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2006.00145.x>
- Feigelman, W. (2000). Adjustments of transracially and inracially adopted young adults. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17, 165–184. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1007531829378>
- Ferrari, L., Manzi, C., Benet-Martinez, V., & Rosnati, R. (2019). Social and family factors related to intercountry adoptees and immigrants' bicultural identity integration. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 50(6), 789–805. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022119850339>
- Field, J. M. A. (2024). *Interwoven narratives: A qualitative exploration of adult adoptees parenting their biological children across the lifespan* [Doctoral dissertation, Auckland University of Technology]. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5fa0a19b983cb347c545a3b2/t/67881b717b8f0f6fb7c82667/1736973225199/Interwoven+Narratives+Julia+Field+2024.pdf>
- Fine, M. (1992). *Disruptive voices: The possibilities of feminist research*. University of Michigan Press.
- Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research*, 2(2), 209–230. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205>

- Fisher, A. P. (2003). Still “not quite as good as having your own”? Toward a sociology of adoption. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 335–361.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100209>
- Fitzmaurice, L. (2022). *Te Rito o Te Harakeke: Decolonising child protection and children's participation* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Otago]. University of Otago Research Repository. <https://ourarchive.otago.ac.nz/esploro/outputs/doctoral/Te-Rito-o-Te-Harakeke-Decolonising/9926479572901891>
- Fonagy, P., & Target, M. (1997). Attachment and reflective function: their role in self-organization. *Development and Psychopathology*, 9(4), 679–700.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954579497001399>
- Fouka, G., & Mantzorou, M. (2011). What are the major ethical issues in conducting research? Is there a conflict between the research ethics and the nature of nursing? *Health Science Journal*, 5(1), 3–14.
https://www.academia.edu/download/45319889/What_are_the_major_ethical_issues.pdf
- Freud, S. (1940). *An outline of psycho-analysis*. Imago Publishing Company.
- Freud, S. (1923/1961). *The ego and the id* (J. Riviere, Trans.). W. W. Norton.
- Fricke, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Friedlander, M. L. (1999). Ethnic identity development of internationally adopted children and adolescents: Implications for family therapists. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 25(1), 43–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.1999.tb01109.x>

- Galvin, K. (2003). International and transracial adoption: A communication research agenda. *Journal of Family Communication*, 3(4), 237–253.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327698jfc0304_5
- GOAL. (2023). *Global Overseas Adoptees' Link*. <https://goal.or.kr/>
- Goode, E. S. (2019). *"It's a complicated thing": Exploration of the experiences intercountry adoptees in Australia* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Newcastle]. NOVA: The University of Newcastle Digital Repository.
<https://nova.newcastle.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/uon:36171>
- Graff, E. J. (2008, November/December). *The lie we love*. 169, 58–66.
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/06/the-lie-we-love/>
- Gray, K. (2009). *"Bananas, bastards and victims"?: Australian intercountry adoptees and cultural belonging*. VDM Publishing.
- Greene, M. L., Way, N., & Pahl, K. (2006). Trajectories of perceived adult and peer discrimination among Black, Latino, and Asian American adolescents: Patterns and psychological correlates. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(2), 218–236.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.2.218>
- Griffith, K. C. (1997). *New Zealand adoption: History and practice, social and legal, 1840-1996: Process and practice, special issues, records and access, Māori adoption, statutes and rules, bibliography, case law indexes*. KC Griffith.
- Grotevant, H. D. (1997). Coming to terms with adoption: The construction of identity from adolescence into adulthood. *Adoption Quarterly*, 1(1), 3–27.
https://doi.org/10.1300/j145v01n01_02

- Grotevant, H. D., & Cooper, C. R. (1986). Individuation in family relationships: A perspective on individual differences in the development of identity and role-taking skill in adolescence. *Human Development*, 29(2), 82–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1159/000273025>
- Grotevant, H. D., Dunbar, N., Kohler, J. K., & Esau, A. M. L. (2000). Adoptive identity: How contexts within and beyond the family shape developmental pathways. *Family Relations*, 49(4), 379–387. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2000.00379.x>
- Grotevant, H. D., & McDermott, J. M. (2014). Adoption: Biological and social processes linked to adaptation. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65(1), 235–265.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115020>
- Grotevant, H. D., & McRoy, R. G. (1998). *Openness in adoption: Exploring family connections*. SAGE Publications.
- Grotevant, H. D., & Von Korff, L. (2011). Adoptive Identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (pp. 585–601). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_24
- Guardado, M. (2002). Loss and maintenance of first language skills: Case studies of Hispanic families in Vancouver. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58(3), 341–363.
<https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.58.3.341>
- Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2018). *Applied Thematic Analysis*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384436>
- Haenga-Collins, M. (2017). *Closed stranger adoption, Māori and race relations in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1955–1985* [Doctoral dissertation, Australian National University].

https://www.academia.edu/download/81197167/Haenga-Collins_20Thesis_202017_20final.pdf

Hague Conference on Private International Law. (1993). *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption*. Hague Conference on Private International Law. <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.

Hall, S. (1996). Questions of cultural identity. In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Introduction: Who needs identity?* (pp. 1–17). SAGE Publications.

Hjern, A., Lindblad, F., & Vinnerljung, B. (2002). Suicide, psychiatric illness, and social maladjustment in intercountry adoptees in Sweden: A cohort study. *Lancet*, *360*(9331), 443–448. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(02\)09674-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(02)09674-5)

Howe, D., & Fearnley, S. (1999). Disorders of attachment and attachment therapy. *Adoption & Fostering*, *23*(2), 19–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857599902300205>

Howe, D., & Feast, J. (2001). The long-term outcome of reunions between adult adopted people and their birth mothers. *British Journal of Social Work*, *31*(3), 351–368. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/31.3.351>

Howell, S. (2006). *The kinning of foreigners: Transnational adoption in a global perspective*. Berghahn Books.

Hu, A. W., Anderson, K. N., & Lee, R. M. (2015). Let's talk about race and ethnicity: Cultural socialization, parenting quality, and ethnic identity development. *Family Science*, *6*(1), 87–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19424620.2015.1081007>

- Hübinette, T. (2004). Adopted Koreans and the development of identity in the ‘third space.’ *Adoption & Fostering*, 28(1), 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590402800104>
- Hübinette, T. (2015). *Comforting an orphaned nation: Representations of international adoption and adopted Koreans in Korean popular culture* [Doctoral dissertation, Stockholm University]. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:197367/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Hübinette, T., & Tigervall, C. (2009). To be non-white in a colour-blind society: Conversations with adoptees and adoptive parents in Sweden on everyday racism. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 30(4), 335–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860903213620>
- Hughes, D., Rodriguez, J., Smith, E. P., Johnson, D. J., Stevenson, H. C., & Spicer, P. (2006). Parents’ ethnic-racial socialization practices: a review of research and directions for future study. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(5), 747–770. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.747>
- Human Rights Commission. (2020). *PRISM: Human Rights issues relating to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) in Aotearoa New Zealand*. <https://tikatangata.org.nz/our-work/prism-human-rights-issues-relating-to-sexual-orientation-gender-identity-and-expression-and-sex-characteristics-sogiesc-in-aotearoa-new-zealand>
- InterCountry Adoptee Voices. (2023). InterCountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV). <https://intercountryadopteevoices.com/>
- Iyall-Smith, K. A., & Leavy, P. (2018). *Hybrid identities: Theoretical and empirical examinations*. Brill.

- Jenkins, R. (2014). *Social Identity* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Jerng, M. C. (2010). *Claiming others: Transracial adoption and national belonging*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Jia, X., & Lei, Y. (2011). Qualitative study of self-identity development of university students who were adopted during early years. *Journal of Beijing Institute of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 3, 151–156.
<https://journal.bit.edu.cn/sk/en/article/id/20110329>
- Johnson, K. A. (2004). *Wanting a daughter, needing a son: Abandonment, adoption, and orphanage care in China*. Yeong & Yeong Book Company.
- Josselson, R. (1995). Imagining the real: Empathy, narrative, and the dialogic self. In R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Interpreting experience: The narrative study of lives* (Vol. 23, pp. 27–44). SAGE Publications. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1995-97769-002>
- Juffer, F., & van Ijzendoorn, M. H. (2005). Behavior problems and mental health referrals of international adoptees: a meta-analysis: A meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 293(20), 2501–2515.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.293.20.2501>
- Katz, J., & Hunt, E. (2014). Adoptive mothers-mothering. In A. O'Reilly (Ed.), *Mothers, Mothering, and Motherhood Across Cultural Differences* (pp. 41–63). Demeter Press.
- Kim, A. H. (2010). *Adopted territory: Transnational Korean adoptees and the politics of belonging*. Duke University Press.
- Kim, E. J. (2003). Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean adoptees and the global family of Korea. *Social Text*, 21(1), 57–81. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-21-1_74-57
- Kirk, H. D. (1964). *Shared fate: A theory of adoption and mental health*. Free Press.

- Kirk, H. D. (1981). *Adoptive kinship: A modern institution in need of reform*. Free Press.
- Kirsch, M., & Buchholz, M. B. (2020). On the nature of the mother-infant tie and its interaction with Freudian drives. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 317.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00317>
- Kovalova, O. V., & Varina, H. B. (2023). Peculiarities of the study of psychological characteristics of children with mental deprivation. In *Psychological patterns of social processes and personality development in modern society* (pp. 165–172). Baltija Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-362-0-9>
- LaFromboise, T., Coleman, H. L. K., & Gerton, J. (1993). Psychological impact of biculturalism: evidence and theory. *Psychological Bulletin, 114*(3), 395–412.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.114.3.395>
- Lee, R. M. (2003). The transracial adoption paradox: History, research, and counseling implications of cultural socialization. *The Counseling Psychologist, 31*(6), 711–744.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000003258087>
- Liamputtong, P. (2006). *Researching the vulnerable: A guide to sensitive research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Lifton, B. J. (2008). *Journey of the adopted self: A quest for wholeness*. Basic Books.
- Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Cognitive-behavioral treatment of borderline personality disorder*. *Diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders series*. Guilford Publications.
- Livingston-Smith, S., & Howard, J. A. (1999). *Promoting Successful Adoptions*. SAGE Publications.

- Long, L. (2017, February 19). *Trauma of transition for older aged adoptees*. InterCountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV). <https://intercountryadopteevoices.com/2017/02/19/trauma-at-transition-for-older-aged-adoptees/>
- Love, C. (2015). *A psycho-social exploration of trans-racial adoptive subjectivity* [Doctoral dissertation, Cardiff University]. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/71632/>
- Lovelock, K. (2000). Intercountry adoption as a migratory practice: A comparative analysis of intercountry adoption and immigration policy and practice in the United States, Canada and New Zealand in the post-WWII period. *The International Migration Review*, 34(3), 907–949. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019791830003400310>
- Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71(3), 543–562. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00164>
- Luyten, P., Campbell, C., Allison, E., & Fonagy, P. (2020). The mentalizing approach to psychopathology: State of the art and future directions. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 16, 297–325. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-071919-015355>
- March, K. (1995). *The stranger who bore me: Adoptee-birth mother relationships*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487578114>
- Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 159–187). Wiley.
- Masson, J. (2001). Intercountry adoption: a global problem or a global solution? *Journal of International Affairs Editorial Board*, 55(1), 141–116. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24357675>

- Masten, A. (2001). Ordinary magic. Resilience processes in development. *The American Psychologist*, 56(3), 227–238. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.227>
- McGinnis, H., Smith, S. L., Ryan, S. D., & Howard, J. A. (2009). *Beyond culture camp: Promoting healthy identity formation in adoption*. Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. <https://www.ncap-us.org/post/beyond-culture-camp-promoting-healthy-identity-formation-in-adoption>
- McGregor, D. G. (2017). Adoption law reform – Will it finally happen? *Adoption News and Views*, 17, 1–4. <http://adoptionaction.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ANV17-1.pdf>
- McGuinness, T., & Pallansch, L. (2000). Competence of children adopted from the former Soviet Union. *Family Relations*, 49(4), 457-464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2000.00457>
- McRoy, R. G., & Zurcher, L. A. (1983). *Transracial and inracial adoptees: The adolescent years*. Charles C. Thomas.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist* (C. W. Morris, Ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Ministry of Justice. (2021). *Adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand: Discussion document*. Te Tāhū o te Ture – Ministry of Justice. <https://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector-policy/key-initiatives/adoption-law-reform/first-round-of-engagement-in-2021/>
- Montrul, S. (2015). *The acquisition of heritage languages*. Cambridge University Press.
- Morgan, S. K., & Langrehr, K. J. (2019). Transracially adoptive parents’ colorblindness and discrimination recognition: Adoption stigma as moderator. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 25(2), 242–252. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000219>

- Nakray, K. (2023). Disability policies, transnationalism and policy diffusion: ‘Asocial’ models of inclusion for children and youth in low and middle-income countries (LMICs). *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 31(2), 254–270.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/07916035231169865>
- Nelson., C. A., Zeanah, C. H., Fox, N. A., Marshall, P. J., Smyke, A. T., & Guthrie, D. (2007). Cognitive recovery in socially deprived young children: the Bucharest Early Intervention Project. *Science*, 318(5858), 1937–1940.
<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1143921>
- Nelson, L. R. (2020). Discourses and themes in adoption and child welfare policies and practices in the U.S. throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. *Adoption Quarterly*, 23(4), 312–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2020.1790450>
- New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse. (2024, July 3). *Submission on the Oranga Tamariki (Repeal of Section 7AA) Amendment Bill*. <https://library.nzfvc.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=8842>
- New Zealand Law Commission. (2000). *Adoption and its alternatives: A different approach and a new framework* (NZLC R65). Law Commission.
<https://www.lawcom.govt.nz/assets/Publications/Reports/NZLC-R65.pdf>
- New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (1998). *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption*.
<https://www.treaties.mfat.govt.nz/search/details/t/2022/2040>
- Newman, E. (2020). Practice of adoption in Aotearoa before the 1881 Adoption of Children Act. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 32(3), 45–53.
<https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol32iss3id768>

- Nuttgens, S. (2013). Stories of Aboriginal transracial adoption. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(3), 1–17. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1004997.pdf>
- Ocasio, K., Rolock, N., Blakey, J., Diamant-Wilson, R., Bass, F., Brom, J., Budzinski, A., Hermes, R., Karnopp, D., Sepnieski, K., Zhang, L., Fong, R., Faulkner, M., & Marra, L. (2024). A pilot study of the adoption and guardianship enhanced support (AGES) program: Preventing discontinuity by walking alongside adoptive and guardianship families who are struggling. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 21(1), 50–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26408066.2023.2259905>
- Office of the Children’s Commissioner. (2021, September). *Adoption law reform: Submission to the Ministry of Justice*. <https://www.manamokopuna.org.nz/documents/508/OCC-Adoption-Law-reform-submission-Sept-2021.pdf>
- Oranga Tamariki-Ministry for Children. (2023, August 18). *Adopting a child from overseas*. Oranga Tamariki. https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/site-search/?a1608_q=Adopting+a+child+from+overseas#search
- Palacios, J., & Brodzinsky, D. M. (2010). Review: Adoption research: Trends, topics, outcomes. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 34(3), 270–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025410362837>
- Palmer, G. R. (1991). *Birth mothers: adoption in New Zealand and the social control of women, 1881-1985* [Master’s thesis, University of Canterbury]. University of Canterbury Repository. http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/10092/4826/1/Palmer_thesis.pdf
- Park, N. K. (2016). *Invisible Asians: Korean American adoptees, Asian American experiences, and racial exceptionalism*. Rutgers University Press.

- Passmore, N. L., & Feeney, J. A. (2009). Reunions of adoptees who have met both birth parents: Post-reunion relationships and factors that facilitate and hinder the reunion process. *Adoption Quarterly*, *12*(2), 100–119.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10926750902978865>
- Passmore, N. L., Feeney, J. A., & Foulstone, A. (2007). Secrecy within adoptive families and its impact on adult adoptees. *Family Relationships Quarterly*, *5*, 3–5.
<https://research.usq.edu.au/item/q06x9/secrecy-within-adoptive-families-and-its-impact-on-adult-adoptees>
- Patel, T., Williams, C., & Marsh, P. (2004). Identity, race, religion and adoption: The public and legal view. *Adoption & Fostering*, *28*(1), 6–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590402800103>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Patton, S. (2000). *Birthmarks: Transracial adoption in contemporary America*. New York University Press.
- Peters, H. (2020). *Going up north: Unmarried mothers and the New Zealand state, 1950-1980* [Master's thesis, Massey University].
<https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/15968>
- Phillips, D. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development* (D. A. Phillips & J. P. Shonkoff, Eds.). National Academies Press.
- Phinney, J. S., Horenczyk, G., Liebkind, K., & Vedder, P. (2001). Ethnic identity, immigration, and well-being: An interactional perspective. *The Journal of Social Issues*, *57*(3), 493–510. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00225>

- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *16*(2), 175–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635>
- Pinderhughes, E. (2005). Biracial identity—asset or handicap? In H. W. Harris, H. Blue, & E. E. H. Griffith (Eds.), *Racial and ethnic identity: Psychological development and creative expression* (pp. 73–93). Taylor & Francis/Routledge.
- Pinderhughes, E. E., & Harden, B. J. (2005). Beyond the birth family: African American children reared by alternative caregivers. In H. W. Harris, H. C. Blue, & E. E. H. Griffith (Eds.), *African American family life: Ecological and cultural diversity* (pp. 285–310). The Guilford Press. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-00945-014>
- Richardson, G. E. (2002). The metatheory of resilience and resiliency. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *58*(3), 307–321. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.10020>
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. SAGE Publications.
- Rotabi, K. S., & Gibbons, J. L. (2012). Does the Hague Convention on intercountry adoption adequately protect orphaned and vulnerable children and their families? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *21*(1), 106–119. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-011-9508-6>
- Rotabi, K. S., & Smith, K. (Eds.). (2016). *Intercountry adoption: Policies, practices, and outcomes*. Routledge.
- Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J., Pott, M., Miyake, K., & Morelli, G. (2000). Attachment and culture: Security in the United States and Japan. *The American Psychologist*, *55*(10), 1093–1104. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.10.1093>

- Sam, D. L., & Berry, J. W. (2010). Acculturation: When individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds meet: When individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds meet. *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 5(4), 472–481.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610373075>
- Samuels, G. M. (2009). “Being raised by White people”: Navigating racial difference among adopted multiracial adults. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 71(1), 80–94.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00581.x>
- Sants, H. J. (1964). Genealogical bewilderment in children with substitute parents. *The British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 37(2), 133–141.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8341.1964.tb01981.x>
- Schmid, M. S. (2012). The impact of age and exposure on bilingual development in international adoptees and family migrants: A perspective from Holocaust survivors. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 2(2), 177–208.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/lab.2.2.03sch>
- Schwartz, S. J., Montgomery, M. J., & Briones, E. (2006). The role of identity in acculturation among immigrant people: Theoretical propositions, empirical questions, and applied recommendations. *Human Development*, 49(1), 1–30.
<https://doi.org/10.1159/000090300>
- Selman, P. (2012). Global trends in intercountry adoption 2000-2010. *Adoption Advocate*, 44, 1–17.
<https://www.academia.edu/download/30921593/NCFA%20ADOPTION%20ADOCATE%20NO44.pdf>

- Shelton, D., & Bridges, C. W. (2022). A phenomenological exploration of adoptive parent experiences of support during the adoption process. *Adoption Quarterly*, 25(3), 212–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2021.1976336>
- Shotwell, A. (2016). *Against Purity: Living ethically in compromised times*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Silverstein, D., & Kaplan, S. (1982). Lifelong issues in adoption. In L. Coleman, H. Hornby, & C. Boggis (Eds.), *Working with older adoptees: A source book of innovative models* (pp. 45–53). University of Southern Maine. <https://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Lifelong-Issues-in-Adoption.pdf>
- Simon, R. J., & Altstein, H. (2000). *Adoption across borders: Serving the children in transracial and intercountry adoptions*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
- Smolin. (2004). Intercountry adoption as child trafficking. *Valparaiso University Law Review*, 39(2), 281–325. <https://scholar.valpo.edu/vulr/vol39/iss2/1>
- Smolin, D. (2005). Child laundering: How the intercountry adoption system legitimizes and incentivizes the practices of buying, trafficking, kidnapping, and stealing children. *Wayne Law Review*, 52, 113–200. https://heinonline.org/hol-cgi-bin/get_pdf.cgi?handle=hein.journals/waynlr52§ion=10
- Soon Huh, N., & Reid, W. J. (2000). Intercountry, transracial adoption and ethnic identity: A Korean example. *International Social Work*, 43(1), 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/a010522>

- Sroufe, L. A. (2005). Attachment and development: A prospective, longitudinal study from birth to adulthood. *Attachment & Human Development*, 7(4), 349–367.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616730500365928>
- Stoddart, J., Wright, A. C., Spencer, M., & van Wichelen, S. (2021). ‘I’m the centre part of a Venn diagram’: Belonging and identity for Taiwanese-Australian intercountry adoptees. *Adoption & Fostering*, 45(1), 71–89.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575921989825>
- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version*. Benjamin-Cummings Publishing Company.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- Tatlıhoğlu, K. (2022). The unconscious in early childhood: An overview in the context of psychoanalytic theory. *Actual Problems in the System of Education: General Secondary Education Institution – Pre-University Training – Higher Education Institution*, 1(2), 98–105. <https://doi.org/10.18372/2786-5487.1.16586>
- Te Puna Aonui. (2021). *Te Aorerekura: The national strategy to eliminate family violence and sexual violence*. Te Puna Aonui. <https://tepunaaonui.govt.nz/assets/National-strategy/Finals-translations-alt-formats/Te-Aorerekura-National-Strategy-final.pdf>
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1–18.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01

- Tervalon, M., & Murray-García, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 9(2), 117–125.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.2010.0233>
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *The American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>
- Trenka, J. J., Oparah, J. C., & Shin, S. Y. (Eds.). (2021). *Outsiders within: Writing on transracial adoption* (2nd ed.). University of Minnesota Press.
<https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1j13xzx>
- Triseliotis, J. (1993). Inter-country adoption: In whose best interest? In M. Humphrey & H. Humphrey (Eds.), *Inter-country adoption: Practical experiences* (pp. 19–32). Routledge.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2014). R-words: Refusing research. In D. Paris & M. T. Winn (Eds.), *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities* (pp. 223–248). SAGE Publications.
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2016). *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of New Zealand (CRC/C/NZL/CO/5)*.
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC/C/NZL/CO/5&Lang=En
- United Nations General Assembly. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child (A/RES/44/25)*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

- van Ijzendoorn, M. H., & Juffer, F. (2006). The Emanuel Miller Memorial Lecture 2006: Adoption as intervention. Meta-analytic evidence for massive catch-up and plasticity in physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive development. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47(12), 1228–1245. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2006.01675.x>
- Verhulst, F. C., Althaus, M., & Versluis-den Bieman, H. J. (1990). Problem behavior in international adoptees: I. An epidemiological study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 29(1), 94–103. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-199001000-00015>
- Vicedo, M. (2011). The social nature of the mother's tie to her child: John Bowlby's theory of attachment in post-war America. *British Journal for the History of Science*, 44(3), 401–426. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007087411000318>
- Volkman, T. A. (2005). Cultures of transnational adoption. In T. A. Volkman (Ed.), *Introduction: New geographies of kinship* (pp. 1–22). Duke University Press.
- Walford, G. (2005). Research ethical guidelines and anonymity. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 28(1), 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01406720500036786>
- Wegar, K. (1997). *Adoption, identity, and kinship: The debate over sealed birth records*. Yale University Press.
- Wegar, K. (2000). Adoption, family ideology, and social stigma: Bias in community attitudes, adoption research, and practice. *Family Relations*, 49(4), 363–369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2000.00363.x>

- Welsh, J. A., Viana, A. G., Petrill, S. A., & Mathias, M. D. (2007). Interventions for internationally adopted children and families: A review of the literature. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 24, 285–311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-007-0085-x>
- Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (2001). *Journeys from childhood to midlife: Risk, resilience, and recovery*. Cornell University Press.
- Willing, I., Fronek, P., & Cuthbert, D. (2012). Review of sociological literature on intercountry adoption. *Social Policy and Society: A Journal of the Social Policy Association*, 11(3), 465–479. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1474746412000140>
- World Health Organization. (1995). *Constitution of the World Health Organization*. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/121457/em_rc42_cwho_en.pdf
- Wrobel, G. M., & Dillon, K. (2012). Adopted adolescents: Who and what are they curious about? In M. W. Gretchin & N. Elsbeth (Eds.), *International advances in adoption research for practice* (pp. 217–244). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470741276.CH10>
- Yngvesson, B. (2003). Going “home”: Adoption, loss of bearings, and the mythology of roots. *Social Text*, 21(1), 7–27. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-21-1_74-7
- Yngvesson, B., & Mahoney, M. A. (2000). “As one should, ought and wants to be”: Belonging and authenticity in identity narratives. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17(6), 77–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632760022051509>
- Yoon, D. P. (2000). Causal modeling predicting psychological adjustment of Korean-born adolescent adoptees. *Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 3(3–4), 65–82. https://doi.org/10.1300/J137v03n03_06

- Yoon, D. P. (2004). Intercountry adoption: The importance of ethnic socialization and subjective well-being for Korean-born adopted children. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 13*(2), 71–89. https://doi.org/10.1300/j051v13n02_04
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice, 40*(3), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>
- Zeanah, C. H., & Gleason, M. M. (2009). Handbook of infant mental health. In Charles H. Zeanah (Ed.), *Reactive attachment disorder* (3rd ed, pp. 202–216). Guilford Publications.

Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form



Interview No. _____

Exploring Transnational Adoptees' Identity and Belonging Experiences
in Aotearoa, New Zealand

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – INTERVIEW

Name of interviewee:

(Please print clearly)

I have been given an information sheet outlining the research project. I have had an opportunity to ask any questions about the research and have them answered to my satisfaction. I understand that unless I advise otherwise, appropriate steps will be taken to maintain my confidentiality and those of others named during the research process. I also understand that I may refuse, without giving reasons, to answer any questions that cause me discomfort and withdraw my participation from or any information provided for the research, also without giving reasons, up to two weeks after my interview.

If you agree to participate in this research and agree with the conditions outlined below, please tick in the appropriate box. Similarly, if you wish to receive a summary of research results and analysis, please tick in the appropriate box.

I agree to the interview being audio-recorded

I wish to have a copy of the audio-recorded interview returned to me for review

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet

I would like to receive a transcript of my audio-recorded interview for review as outlined in the Information Sheet

I would like to receive a summary of the research results and analysis

Signature:

.....

Date:

.....

Email:

Phone:

Appendix B: Advertisement

Exploring Transnational Adoptees' Identity & Belonging Experiences in Aotearoa, New Zealand

📣 Calling all individuals born overseas, adopted, and raised here in New Zealand! 🌍



✦ Do you identify as a transnational adoptee who was adopted into a NZ-based family??

Introducing Tiffany Burton, I am a passionate researcher with a compelling story of my own, born in the United States and raised in a Māori family. My mission is to uncover the incredible narratives of fellow transnational adoptees of their stories of identity and belonging.

🙋 Do You Fit the Criteria? 🙋✅ Born overseas ✅ Adopted into a New Zealand based family ✅ Aged 25 years and older

📺 Join Me and Make Your Story Heard! 📺

✦ Your experiences matter; this is your chance to contribute to a deeper understanding of the transnational adoptee journey.

👉 Connect with Me and be part of a research project that shines a spotlight on your unique experiences, challenges, and triumphs. Together, we'll pave the way for a more empathetic and inclusive society.

Don't miss this opportunity to share your story and make a difference. Contact Tiffany Burton at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] to get started!

Appendix C: Interview Schedule (page 1)

Interview Schedule

Adoption experience

1. Can you tell me about your experience as a transnational adoptee born overseas and raised in New Zealand?
2. Tell me about your relationship with your adoptive family.
3. Could you share details about your birthplace and cultural or ethnic background?
4. Can you share your earliest memories or perceptions of your adoption? How did you first learn about it, and how did it impact you?
5. What was the adoption process like for you as a child or young person? Were there any challenges or positive experiences you can recall?
6. How has your understanding or feelings about your adoption evolved from childhood to the present? Can you describe any significant milestones or moments in this evolution?
7. Have you had the opportunity to connect with your birth culture or heritage as you grew older? How did this experience influence your sense of self and identity if so?
8. What role has your adoptive family played in your adoption experience? How did they support or shape your perceptions of adoption and identity?
9. Have you encountered any stereotypes or misconceptions about adoption, and how have you navigated or challenged them in your own life?

Interview Schedule

Identity and Belonging

13. What do you think are the main influences/experiences that have shaped your identity as a transnational adoptee?
14. Have any stories about your adoption been shared with you that have influenced your understanding of your adoption journey and identity?
15. Could you elaborate on your sense of belonging within your adoptive family and in the New Zealand context? How has this sense of belonging evolved or shifted over time?
16. How do you think your adoption experience has contributed to your sense of identity and belonging in Aotearoa?
17. Do you feel a sense of belonging to any other place, family, or society?
18. Reflecting on your experiences, do you find any challenges or moments of triumph in forming your identity and sense of belonging? How have these shaped your journey?
19. Can you reflect on any significant moments of self-discovery or personal growth related to your adoption experience?
20. How do you perceive the influence of your adoption experience on your sense of belonging within your family, community, or society at large?
21. Is there anything we have not discussed that you would like to share or explore further? Are there any aspects of your identity or experiences that you feel are important to address?

Appendix E: Participation Information Sheet (page 1)



Participant Information Sheet

Research Title: Exploring Intercountry Adoptees' Identity and Belonging Experiences in Aotearoa, New Zealand

Kia ora, my name is Tiffany Burton, and I am a master's student of Sociology at Massey University.

I am also an intercountry adoptee. I invite you to participate in a study aimed at comprehending the experiences of individuals like us—adoptees born overseas and raised in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This interview-based study will explore how your distinctive adoption journey has shaped your evolving sense of identity and belonging. Your valuable participation is essential in enriching our collective understanding of this topic and providing insights that resonate with intercountry adoptee's varied and shared experiences.

I am seeking participants who have experienced intercountry adoption, regardless of gender, social, cultural, or ethnic background. You should have been born in a foreign country, raised in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and be 25 years or older. Your adoption process could have been open or closed. As a small in-depth study, I aim to recruit around six to eight interviewees.

Interviews will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours and will be held at a time and place of your convenience. Ideally, this would be face-to-face; however, a virtual interview (via Zoom) is also possible. As a gesture of appreciation for your time, you will receive a \$50 Countdown voucher.

During the interview, you may discuss personal and potentially sensitive experiences related to adoption, which could be emotionally challenging. This may evoke discomforts or stresses, which I, as a fellow intercountry adoptee, will aim to minimize as much as possible empathetically. As noted below, you can pause the interview or decline to answer questions without explanation.

Data Confidentiality and Privacy Protection:

Protecting your privacy and confidentiality is of paramount importance in this research study. Rigorous procedures will be implemented to ensure that your identity and sensitive information remain safeguarded throughout the study. Here is how we will prioritise data confidentiality:

Anonymisation and identity protection:

Appendix F: Participant Information Sheet (page 2)



Personal identities will be anonymised in all research findings – including interview transcripts and academic or other publications. This means that your identity and those of anyone you mention will be replaced with pseudonyms, and all other potentially identifying information will be removed. Rigorous procedures will be implemented to avoid overly personal anecdotes that may lead to personal identification.

Secure Data Storage: Your data – including consent forms, interview recordings and interview transcripts – will be stored separately and securely, and access will be restricted to my supervisors and me only. All electronic recordings, notes and interview transcripts will be kept securely in a password-protected folder on my One Drive. All files are automatically synced and password-protected on my laptop to ensure information is backed up and secure. This rigorous approach to data confidentiality and security is a testament to our commitment to ensuring your privacy and safeguarding sensitive information.

Accessing Project Findings:

You will be sent a copy of the interview transcript shortly after your interview. You will have two weeks to amend, add and/or delete any information as you see fit. If you choose to make changes, my analysis will be based solely on your amended transcript.

You also have the right to withdraw from the research without explanation up to two weeks after receiving the interview transcripts for review.

Furthermore, to ensure transparency, we will provide participants with a summary of our research findings upon request. Don't hesitate to contact us if you want to receive a summary of the research findings once the project is completed.

Your Rights as a Participant:

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.
- Decline to answer any questions without explanation.

Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet (page 3)



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA PŪRENGA TANGATA

- Ask for the interview to be paused and the recording device switched off at any time during the interview. No data will be recorded during this time.
- Withdraw from the study without explanation up to two weeks after receiving the interview transcripts for review.
- You can amend your interview transcripts during this period if desired.
- Once your interview has been transcribed, the original audio recording will be destroyed under the direction of my supervisors – although interviewees may request a copy be sent to them for their possession.

Support and Resources:

Your well-being is of utmost importance to me. Below is a list of contact details for NZAC (New Zealand Association of Counsellors) Counsellors/Therapists who specialise in adoption. These professionals are equipped to provide specialised support and guidance to individuals who have experienced adoption and its related challenges. This also includes information about adoption support groups available within New Zealand. These groups offer a supportive community where you can connect with others who share similar experiences, providing a space for sharing stories, seeking advice, and finding camaraderie.

I have also included contact phone numbers for free mental health advice, such as Healthline, recognising the importance of mental well-being. Moreover, free counselling services via phone or text are listed, offering accessible support for any emotional or psychological concerns that may arise during or after participation in this study.

Your participation is greatly valued, and I look forward to learning from your experiences – ngā mihi nui, Tiffany.

Project Contacts

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact the researcher or my supervisors:

Researcher: Tiffany Burton, master's student, Sociology, Massey University at

[REDACTED]

Supervisors:

Dr Vicky Walters, Lecturer, Sociology, Massey University
(v.walters@massey.ac.nz)

Appendix H: Participant Information Sheet (page 3)



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA PŪRENGA TANGATA

Dr Peter J. Howland, Senior Lecturer, Sociology, Massey University (p.j.howland@massey.ac.nz).

Your participation is greatly valued, and I look forward to learning from your experiences.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 23/51. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Support Guide:

- **Need to talk?** Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor.
- **Lifeline** – 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) or free text 4357 (HELP).
- **Suicide Crisis Helpline** – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO).
- **Healthline** – 0800 611 116

You can also find more information on the following websites:

- Mental Health Foundation- **Email:** mentalhealth.org.nz **Ph:** 09 6234810
- Ministry of Health – **Email:** Health.govt.nz

Adoption Support Groups for Adopted People - Aotearoa New Zealand

WELLINGTON Adoptee's Support Group

The Wellington Adoptee Support Group meets monthly at [The Conch](#) space above the [Tugboat Cafe](#) by Freyberg Pool in Oriental Bay.

CHRISTCHURCH Adoptees' Support Group

[The support group for adopted people meets every 3rd Monday of the month from 7-9 p.m. at the Halswell Community Hub, 381 Halswell Road](#)

The support group is a **safe and confidential space for adopted people** to come together, give and get support. Please email Keri at adoptionchch@gmail.com for more information. Or call Julia (027) 3528 027 or Keri (027) 370 0344

Appendix I: Participant Information Sheet (page 4)



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA PŪRENGA TANGATA

AUCKLAND Adoptee's Support Group

On the 3rd Monday of each month at Jack Dickey Community Hall, 174 Green Lane West, Epsom, Auckland, 7-9 pm.

Facilitators: Pj Gill and Susan McDermott. For further details, contact Susan (022) 199 2094 or email adoptionauck@gmail.com

The New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) has added an adoption specialty to their IT system.

You can find their ethics, policies, and philosophy information at: <https://www.nzac.org.nz/site/about-us/nzac-policies?nav=sidebar>.

For a list of NZAC Counsellors/Therapists currently working in the specialist area of Adoption please visit <https://www.jowilliscoach.com/updates-resources/nzac-counsellortherapists-currently-working-in-the-specialist-area-of-adoption>.