

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.

***Belonging and Whakapapa:***

**The Closed Stranger Adoption of  
Māori Children into Pākehā Families**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Social Work

School of Health and Social Sciences  
Massey University  
Aotearoa New Zealand

Maria Haenga Collins

2011

## Abstract

Between 1955 and 1985, approximately forty-five thousand closed stranger adoptions took place in Aotearoa New Zealand, with adoption directly affecting twenty-five per cent of the total population. A significant proportion of closed stranger adoptions involved children who could claim Māori ancestry through at least one of their birth parents. The majority of these Māori children were placed within Pākehā families.

This research explored the narratives of six self-identified Māori adults who were adopted into Pākehā families by way of closed stranger adoption. The study utilised a Māori-centred research approach, and a thematic narrative analysis of the participants' accounts was undertaken.

The study found that adoption is not a one off event, but is an on-going life experience. The multiple and complex ways the participants narrated their cross-cultural adoption experience reflected the diverse and contradictory narratives Māori adopted into Pākehā families navigate. The narratives clustered around the idea of 'walking between worlds', with two major themes of 'belonging' and 'whakapapa' emerging from the analysis process.

Participants told stories on a continuum between 'belonging' and 'not belonging' within their birth and adoptive families, and in Māori and non-Māori worlds. Specific to Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand is 'belonging' through whakapapa. Whakapapa is essential to a Māori identity and to whānau inclusion. This study found that without knowledge of whakapapa, Māori become socially and culturally invisible within te ao Māori.

In the telling of these narratives, participants have sought to repair the rupture in their lives when the dominant familial narrative of growing up in a birth family with a shared cultural heritage was not possible.

For Māori adopted into Pākehā families, their identities as Māori and as adopted people are inseparable.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank the six amazingly brave and honest participants who took part in this study and who so generously gave of themselves. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. Without your stories this thesis, in this form, would not have been possible. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou.

Thank you to the informants: Ann Nation, Donna Hall and Eddie Taihakurei Durie; for the generosity of your time and the sharing of your knowledge of adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ngā mihi ki a koutou.

There are so many other people whose on-going support, interest, and generosity contributed to this study:

My supervisors, Professor Robyn Munford and Dr Allanah Ryan, your unwavering support and clear, concise, and timely feedback was much appreciated. Our meetings always left me challenged. I trusted you knew what you were doing and that gave me confidence in my times of doubt;

My cultural advisors and support, Aunty Francis (Rangihuna) and Aunty Maria (Viseur), you are both dynamic examples of wāhine toa. I have so much respect for both of you;

My academic peer support, Rachael Selby, your interest and commitment was invaluable. Thank you for organising times to meet and always encouraging me;

My friend, Dr Lesley Patterson, you have been a great friend and mentor to me. Thank you for getting me back into the writing saddle. I learnt so much from your wealth of knowledge;

My friends, Wendy, Heather, Gesine and Murray, for all the various ways you showed me love, provided practical support, and helped me to stay on top of my workload;

Ray McEnhill for graciously extending my leave from paid work – again, and again, and again! You're a great Team Leader;

Massey University, for the support of administrative staff and funding through the Graduate Research Fund and a Masterate Scholarship. Special thanks to the whānau o Te Rau Puawai, the financial and personal assistance provided made all the difference! Sarah, Whaea Val and Fee - thank you for your technical support and encouragement. I so enjoyed all our informal chats.

And lastly thank you to my four incredibly talented children who have always encouraged and inspired me, Kahurangi, 'Opeti, Phillip and Liletina. Ka nui te aroha ki a koutou.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Chapter One: Untold Stories</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Introduction .....	8
Aims of the study.....	9
The research question.....	10
Locating myself .....	10
The participants.....	11
Thesis overview .....	11
Conclusion .....	12
<b>Chapter Two: The Socio-Historical Context of Closed Stranger Adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Introduction .....	13
Closed stranger adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand.....	14
European settlement and social innovation.....	14
The moral context of adoption.....	16
The changing role of women.....	17
Rights of the adopted person .....	18
The Adult Information Act .....	18
Adoption and Māori .....	19
Traditional Māori adoptions.....	19
Assimilationist policies .....	20
Closed stranger adoption and Māori.....	21
Stigmatising of Māori .....	23
Matching for marginalisation .....	24
Race, ethnicity and a Māori identity.....	25
Māori ethnicity .....	25
Blood quantum .....	26
Māori renaissance .....	27
An authentic Māori identity.....	27
Whakapapa .....	28
Race and cross-cultural adoption.....	29
The trauma of adoption .....	30
Conclusion .....	31

<b>Chapter Three: Gathering Narratives .....</b>	<b>32</b>
Introduction .....	32
The conceptual framework: Māori-centred research with a kaupapa Māori understanding	33
My insider status.....	36
A narrative approach .....	37
Research design .....	38
Participant recruitment.....	38
The interview process and ethical considerations .....	39
The interview guide.....	41
Analysing the data .....	42
Conclusion .....	44
<b>Chapter Four: The Participants.....</b>	<b>45</b>
Introduction .....	45
Ana .....	45
Carole.....	46
Cordelia .....	47
Elizabeth.....	48
Kaare.....	49
Marion .....	50
Conclusion .....	51
<b>Chapter Five: Belonging.....</b>	<b>52</b>
Introduction .....	52
How you came to belong to us .....	53
The gratitude story - I was saved.....	55
The same yet different.....	58
Breaking out of the pretence .....	61
The physicality of belonging .....	63
Belonging through sight .....	63
Belonging through touch.....	65
Death and Dying .....	67
Navigating the unfamiliar.....	68
Navigating the taboo .....	69
I was remembered – there was a place waiting for me .....	71
Walking between worlds.....	72
Conclusion .....	72

<b>Chapter Six: Whakapapa</b> .....	<b>74</b>
Introduction .....	74
Stories of the unknown whakapapa.....	75
How the unknown has been navigated .....	77
Whakapapa Tauivi .....	77
Stories of the known whakapapa.....	79
How the known has been navigated .....	79
My descendants take me .....	80
Claiming whakapapa for my children – to have what I never had.....	80
The politics of being Māori – ‘a given right’ .....	81
Spiritual connection - the ancestors with me .....	83
Conclusion .....	84
<b>Chapter Seven: Listening to the Silenced</b> .....	<b>86</b>
Introduction .....	86
The research reviewed .....	86
The historical and social context .....	87
Māori and closed stranger adoption .....	87
Summary of findings.....	88
The research processes .....	90
Future research and recommendations .....	91
Limitations of the study.....	92
My reflections .....	92
Concluding statement.....	93
<b>Glossary</b> .....	<b>94</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>96</b>
<b>List of References</b> .....	<b>103</b>

*Over the past fifty years, white adoptive parents, academics, psychiatrists and social workers have dominated the literature on transracial adoption. These “experts” have been the ones to tell the public – including adoptees – “what it’s like” and “how we turn out” ... the voices of adult transracial adoptees remain largely unheard ... transracial adoption is fundamentally an isolating experience ... fear that expressing our opinions will estrange us from our white families, friends and colleagues. We have become accustomed to protecting our loved ones ... others of us have been silenced through assimilation into white environments, and only in middle age do we reach a point when we can acknowledge and heal from the pain of isolation and alienation (Oparah, Shin & Trenka, 2006, p. 1).*